

## Faith Communities & Disaster Sheltering

Houses of worship are uniquely positioned to assist the American Red Cross and other partners with sheltering during evacuations or when disasters cause significant housing loss. While some traditional shelter locations (like schools) must revert to their original function early on, houses of worship can support long-term housing needs in culturally appropriate ways.

TIP SHEET

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Evacuation should be addressed as part of everyone's planning efforts. Through the media and direct warning systems, officials will tell you when to evacuate, and whether to leave the area or go to an Evacuation Center or Shelter. Evacuation shelters should be used as a last resort when you are unable to shelter with family or friends.

### TO BECOME A DISASTER SHELTER FOR CONGREGATIONS OR THE PUBLIC...

#### DO AN ALL-HAZARDS ASSESSMENT OF YOUR HOUSE OF WORSHIP & FACILITIES:

- **How much/many large space/s do you have?** The American Red Cross uses a guide of 20 to 40 square feet per person to estimate capacity. Also, check with your insurance carrier and local fire department—adhere to local building codes.
- **How many smaller areas/offices could be used?** Do you have specialized areas such as a day-care room and office?
- **How many restrooms and showers are available?**
- **What about kitchen facilities?** Do you have a commercial kitchen? How many meals can be prepared there? Are there restrictions on who can use the kitchen? Can you prepare meals according to religious dietary restrictions?
- Are your building and bathrooms **accessible for people with disabilities?**
- What type of **equipment/supplies** and services are available: public address systems, generators, recreation equipment?
- **All-hazards considerations.** Consider what hazards your facility may be vulnerable to, for instance:
  - **Is your building in a flood or storm surge zone?** Find out from your local emergency management office.
  - Does the designated dorm space have **exposed windows** (making it inappropriate as a hurricane or tornado shelter)?

#### CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING:

- **Under what circumstances would you like to offer your space?** For disasters in your neighborhood? For larger-scale community-wide disasters? Or as an evacuation staging area?
- **What other programs use your building?** How will an agreement to use your house of worship as a shelter affect them? Can you provide a **24-hour contact for access** to your house of worship?
- **Who from your staff will remain on-site during shelter operations?** Who is their back-up?
- Does your house of worship **insurance policy** cover shelter operations?

**DON'T FORGET:**  
Plan for the sheltering needs of household pets.

#### IF YOU DECIDE TO OFFER YOUR HOUSE OF WORSHIP AS A DISASTER SHELTER:

- **Contact your local American Red Cross chapter** to discuss specifics about your house of worship. You may be asked to fill out a site survey or host a walk-through. If you would like to apply to be a Red Cross shelter, there are a number of options including becoming a Red Cross Shelter, Partner Shelter, or Supported Shelter. These options vary in terms of Red Cross staff and resources provided. For more information, visit [www.redcross.org](http://www.redcross.org) or call 1.877.REDCROSS.
- **Sign an agreement that includes:**
  - Reimbursement for damages, liability issues, and a process for turning your facility over to you when it is deactivated.

#### SPONTANEOUS SHELTERING (RARELY A GOOD IDEA):

- **During a crisis, people may naturally come to your house of worship. Here are some tips on what to do:**
- **Make contact with the American Red Cross**, which will be able to help you get information regarding the disaster and possibly additional resources. If an overnight facility is needed, call the Red Cross or check their online National Shelter System to locate a more formal shelter facility that may be better suited.
- **If individuals must stay at your house of worship overnight:**
  - **Think of safety** and of meeting basic needs – food, water, blankets, comfort. Look to congregation members for help.
  - Make efforts to get **updated information** and share it with shelter residents. Seek news from TV, radio, internet, etc.
  - **Inventory and prioritize** use of your supplies.
  - **Be proactive in identifying needs** that may arise (baby supplies, e.g.), and tap into available community resources.

**OTHER WAYS YOU CAN SUPPORT DISASTER SHELTERING:**

- **Provide volunteers**
  - Encourage members of your **house of worship to get training to manage and staff other American Red Cross shelters**, or your own facility (see below). Encourage your congregants to become American Red Cross shelter volunteers. ([www.redcross.org](http://www.redcross.org).)
- **Provide support services**
  - Extend your existing services to shelter populations. Especially consider this if you have complementary expertise such as child care services, pregnancy services, recreation specialists, language and culture expertise, etc.
  - **Disaster Chaplains are often needed in shelters.** NDIN offers Disaster Chaplaincy training and services anywhere in the U.S. [www.n-din.org](http://www.n-din.org)
- **Provide expertise particular to your faith community**
  - Even if you are unable to offer your facility or provide volunteers, discuss sheltering in your neighborhood with your local American Red Cross. You can offer advice on how to offer services that are culturally appropriate and/or suggest other neighborhood resources to support sheltering.

**Know Your Limits:**

Be aware of your physical and location capabilities, even if you do not plan on using your facility as a shelter. People may come to your house of worship during a crisis. Check to see if your facility is in a tornado prone area, a flood plain or a hurricane evacuation zone.

**HURRICANE SHELTER PLANNING:**

- **Hurricane shelters are situated away from areas where storm surge (high water) is likely to occur.** They provide basic food and water. For large-scale events, cots and blankets and other supports are available only on a limited basis. Other supportive services are planned for disaster shelters that are open longer than a few days.
- **When an evacuation is ordered**, either in anticipation of a disaster or immediately after an unanticipated event happens, shelters will open to accommodate displaced residents who have no other place to go.
- **To learn more about Evacuation Zones** and where to find the Evacuation Center nearest to your house of worship, check with your local emergency management office.

**SHELTERING-IN-PLACE:**

Sometimes, officials may recommend that people “shelter-in-place” rather than evacuate. This is likely to occur if there is a release (intentionally or unintentionally) of biological, chemical, or radiological materials into the air. The idea behind sheltering-in-place is to put a physical barrier between yourself and the matter that is in the air. Some steps you can take if this occurs:

- **Listen for instructions** from officials.
- **Seal off any openings in your home**, such as windows and doors; use masking tape and/or plastic sheeting.
- **Move to an interior space** above the ground floor.

**To learn more about sheltering-in-place** and what you can do when this occurs, read the American Red Cross’ “Shelter-in-Place” fact sheet at [www.redcross.org](http://www.redcross.org): Go to Disaster Services, then navigate to Be Prepared, and click on “Shelter-in-Place.” Visit the your local emergency management office website for more information.

**Emergency Rest Centers** are houses of worship that train their members to provide for basic human needs, respite and urgent news during an evacuation or disaster.

**American Red Cross—National Shelter System**

The ARC National Shelter System has a new online locator for open shelters. This is a Google map that is automatically updated every 30 minutes with open shelter locations and population information from ARC chapters around the country. You can search for the nearest open shelter at any time, by address, city, state or zip code. ARC has thousands of possible shelter locations around the country and this map allows anyone to find shelters that are currently open because of an emergency situation, including evacuations.



**Search for Open American Red Cross Shelters Online at: <http://www.redcross.org/nss/>**

**OTHER RESOURCES**

- **AHA—Shelter Training:** <http://www.americanhumane.org/animals/professional-resources/>
- **ARC—Chemical/Radiation Shelter-in-Place:** [www.redcross.org/preparedness/cdc\\_english/Sheltering.asp](http://www.redcross.org/preparedness/cdc_english/Sheltering.asp)
- **FEMA—Ready American, Shelter-in-Place Resources:** <http://www.ready.gov/america/makeaplan/stayingput.html>
- **National Disaster Interfaiths Network — Emergency Rest Center Training:** [www.n-din.org](http://www.n-din.org)

See [www.prepare.org](http://www.prepare.org) and [www.ready.gov/america](http://www.ready.gov/america) to obtain shelter preparedness materials that address planning for people with disabilities and other special needs, seniors, children, schools, and pet owners.