

Disaster Services

CONNECTION

182

July 9, 2003

Content: Change in the Official Definition of “Disaster” and the Addition of a Definition of “Community Emergency”

PURPOSE

The purpose of this Connection is to provide a new definition of the word “disaster” and to define “community emergency.” These definitions should be used by all Red Cross staff when referring to these types of incidents. *The definition of disaster currently contained in ARC 3000, Foundations of Disaster Service, is now obsolete. The page containing the definition in ARC 3000 has been revised. Chapters may visit CrossNet and download either the single page or the entire document. Due to the impending restructure of national headquarters, the entire document will be revised in the near future.*

BACKGROUND

As part of the work of the Disaster Services Task Force, it was determined that the old definition of disaster lacked specificity and clarity for the general public, Red Cross paid and volunteer staff, and for government and other community leaders. In addition, the definition did not list a number of more recently occurring disaster events. The new definition provides a measure of consistency within the Red Cross, and serves as a point of reference for proactively addressing service delivery expectations directed toward the American Red Cross.

The definition of community emergency was developed to add further clarification for recurring local situations which, while not within the scope of the mission of the American Red Cross Disaster Services, nevertheless generate human need. This definition distinguishes these situations from disasters, and also seeks not to restrict chapters from joining community efforts to address such needs when possible through chapter-based resources and expertise. Community emergencies are beyond the mandated disaster responsibilities of the American Red Cross and its chapters. However, chapters should participate in their community’s efforts to help address the human needs that arise from such situation. Chapter participation should be in concert with other community organizations and must be in accordance with the Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross Movement and values of the American Red Cross. Each chapter must act in relation to its own expertise and resources, and by using any additional resources provided by the community. The chapter must also proceed in a manner that does not detract from its capability to appropriately prepare for and respond to disasters. Examples include —

- The inability of local utility and transportation enterprises to deliver service.
- Increased weather risks for the chronic homeless
- The abandonment or condemnation of residential structures due to health and safety concerns.
- Support to mobilized public safety personnel for search and rescue activities, for response to non-residential fires, and for public demonstrations, civil disorder incidents, and hostage situations.
- Crimes of mass violence, including injuries and deaths resulting from violence committed in either private or public settings such as homes, schools, workplaces, and public demonstrations.

Please ensure distribution to: Chapter Managers and chair and all paid and volunteer Disaster Services staff

American Red Cross

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Disaster Definition

A disaster is a threatening or occurring event of such destructive magnitude and force as to dislocate people, separate family members, damage or destroy homes, and injure or kill people. A disaster produces a range and level of immediate suffering and basic human needs that cannot be promptly or adequately addressed by the affected people, and impedes them from initiating and proceeding with their recovery efforts. Natural disasters include floods, tornadoes, hurricanes, typhoons, winter storms, tsunamis, hail storms, wildfires, windstorms, epidemics, and earthquakes. Human-caused disasters — whether intentional or unintentional — include residential fires, building collapses, transportation accidents, hazardous materials releases, explosions, and domestic acts of terrorism.

Community Emergency Definition

A community emergency is the development of human need to the degree that prompts action by community organizations and responsible local government officials. Often, this is accompanied by local government and citizen expectations for American Red Cross chapter participation.

FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

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