

When disaster hits:

# Community response in the first 72 hours

*Each time a mass tragedy happens in the United States or beyond, those of us who responded to the shooting in 2015 at Umpqua Community College in Roseburg, Oregon, feel a shiver. We know the horror. We know the affected community is scrambling to respond. This detailed checklist is specifically for communities facing that scramble. It is very detailed because how a community responds in the first few days sets in motion the mechanics that later will aid or hinder recovery.*

## **1. The law enforcement and FBI crime scene investigations must proceed first.**

Caring community members need to let the officials do their work. Have community-response meetings far away from the scene; set up family support centers in a different and private location; create opportunities for people to mourn or help in other places. Keep the media occupied elsewhere.

## **2. No one is in charge of a community response, so determine how to help the community navigate.**

Ask your governor to send a team to take charge for the immediate emergency period (about four weeks), until the medium-term response is established. In a natural disaster, there are protocols for emergency response. We discovered there is no standard protocol for a human-caused disaster in Oregon. After the shooting at Umpqua Community College in Roseburg, we should have asked our governor to send an Incident Command and Control Team, empowered by the governor to organize our local efforts and our state/federal response teams.



A billboard in Roseburg, Oregon. October 2015.  
Photo: Nora Vitz Harrison

## **3. Victim Advocates in the District Attorney's office are key right now.**

- All victims should complete a Crime Victim's Compensation form as soon as possible. CVC pays for all urgent expenses, such as funerals, travel and immediate medical bills. Make sure that everyone understands that this resource exists; funds that come in from donations will not be needed for such immediate expenses.
- We had one Department of Justice victim advocate for nine deaths and nine injuries and that was inadequate. A better proportion would be one advocate for no more than ten victims.

## **4. Have a volunteer coordination center.**

This recommendation will sound callous, but a question that you will come to dread is: "What can I do?" (spoken by caring individuals from near and far). You won't have any capacity to answer that question, so get a volunteer coordinator immediately. Your community needs a way to coordinate all the offers of help and a way to say "no thank you" to those who are unqualified or not needed.

**5. For philanthropic organizations:** Get the approval right away from your Board of Directors to use some amount of flexible funds (\$10,000? 25,000? \$100,000?) at your discretion for anything that is needed in the moment. Most likely, the needs will be food, coordination and facilitation of meetings, use of space, and more. One helpful use

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of our Foundation funds was temporary agency administrative support for key organizations. We provided travel expenses to the director of the United Way of Blacksburg, Virginia, who helped us set up the donations fund, shared her application forms and advised us.

**6. When setting up the fund for victims, prioritize efficiency and transparency.** Existing foundations should guide the process, and their expertise and pre-existing charitable dollars are key to helping set up and manage the fund.

- Avoid multiple funds. Try to get everyone to agree on one fund that will receive donations from around the world. The Umpqua Community College fund (called UCC Strong) was created at the local United Way. (Southern Oregon does not have a local community foundation, only a statewide community foundation.)

- Come up with one name for all funds. Make sure that every relevant organization's web site has a button that allows people to access the central fund and contribute to it from its own web site. Pay for this fund integration if necessary.

- Make sure that the fund takes no administrative fees: One hundred percent of funds raised for the victims should be re-granted. Foundations should give grants to cover any administrative fees. Publicize that no fees will be taken off the top of donations.

- Endorse the fund loudly, and communicate it widely. Use your "good housekeeping seal of approval" to help direct everyone to the single fund.

- Set up the fund to give the maximum flexibility for disbursement. Try not to limit it to only support for the victims. Instead, allow for funding to support such things as: nonprofit organizations that are supporting the victims and families; other affected communities; underlying causes of the tragic event; and other needs that cannot be anticipated until they are faced.

- Develop a distribution committee from a cross section of relevant groups. In Roseburg, the committee chair is the head of local bank and the co-chair is the retired president of the largest local philanthropy (my predecessor). Be sure to include first responders. Foundations should staff or raise the funds to cover the costs of staffing this group. Make sure that legal and accounting expertise are present at the meetings.

- Decide quickly on flat distribution amounts that will be given right away and announce it publicly (as soon as you can). It took us about three weeks, which was too long. We'd recommend that these distributions be made according to category of victim — regardless of income need, level of severity of harm, and other sources of funding available to the victim. Any other way is too complicated. Understand there is no perfect way. Victims who do not need the assistance can choose to redirect their donations. We decided to treat three categories of people differently:

Families of victims who were killed

People who were injured

Those present at the scene but not injured (this can get tricky because some were at the scene but not physically present at the precise scene of the crime or in the building)

- You will have to make the most tortured decisions you have ever made: How much is a life worth? An injury? Is a physical injury worth more than a psychological injury? What's the perimeter of the crime scene?

- Prepare to be criticized about the use of funds. Everyone will have an opinion, and opinions will be conflicting. Criticism will mount, especially on social media where complaints can escalate.

- Encourage people not to give to Go Fund Me accounts. This advice is important because Go Fund Me accounts will pop up quickly. Here's why we discourage them:

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They charge high fees.  
The income is taxable for the recipient.  
Many scam accounts will be set up by unscrupulous people.

**7. Make sure that there is a centralized public information office (away from the crime scene and law enforcement).** All relevant organizations need to have experienced public information officers. A good use of foundation funds is to cover these costs. When vetting volunteers, accept all the qualified public information officers who come forward. Umpqua Community College benefited from the arrival of public information officers from other Oregon colleges.

**8. Set up web sites with emergency information and daily updates.** This is another good use of foundation funds.

**9. Arrange for locations for organizations to meet and plan their responses.** Meeting space becomes a huge need for social service providers, mental health counselors, victims' services, funders, and so on. Staff the meetings with administrative support. And most important, feed everyone. Volunteers and responders forget to eat, so make it easy for them. Accept food donations from local food suppliers. If you know of trusted local community meeting facilitators, link them with meetings and pay for their time, if needed.

**10. Create crisis mental health and family support drop-in locations for anyone who needs it.** Find places that are private and offer a comforting environment. Send the Red Cross emergency counselors and the U.S. Public Health Service to locations able to receive them. Publicize the locations and make sure those places are stocked with coffee, water and food. Arrange for security at these locations to protect the most vulnerable from the media.

**11. Engage the faith community right away.** They can organize quickly and provide key supports.

**12. Keep records of expenses.** Your community will have the opportunity in a few months to apply for a federal grant that will reimburse local organizations for additional expenses. Make sure that nonprofit organizations and public agencies track their additional expenses, such as overtime, materials, and other direct costs.

**13. Reach out repeatedly and intentionally to first responders.** They have their own mental-health counseling services and might resist additional supports. But continue to offer assistance, even if they protest. They have never seen anything like this event before.

**14. Make a 13-month plan.**

Emergency: 1-4 days

Immediate grieving and funerals: 2-10 days

First-phase response: 3-5 weeks

Medium-phase response: One-to-six months

How to prepare for the medium term: Make a 13-month plan, from date of tragedy through the first-year anniversary. This excellent advice was given to us by other communities, and we found it to be very helpful.

**15. Think long term; this is a marathon:**

Oklahoma City reports that they are still providing mental health/post-traumatic stress counseling 20 years after the event.

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[www.tfff.org/cv-ucc](http://www.tfff.org/cv-ucc)

