

AIA DISASTER RESPONSE GUIDE

How Local Chapters Can Help Rebuild
More Resilient Communities





Prepared for:
American Institute of Architects
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Consultants to the AIA;
MOCK Studio, LLC



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Introduction

The American Institute of Architects (AIA) has a long-term commitment to the design and development of quality communities. As a group of architecture, urban design, and planning professionals, we have an inherent understanding of the built environment and its impact on society. When communities are damaged or destroyed, how we re-imagine and then rebuild them can be just as important as how they formed over the years, decades, and sometimes centuries.

This Disaster Response Guide outlines a generalized approach that any local AIA Chapter can use to engage its community after a disaster. Through the study of the grassroots efforts led by

the AIA Springfield in Southwest Missouri after the May 22, 2011 Joplin tornado, as well as AIA's disaster response and preparedness work in Illinois, Florida, Kansas, and California, this document is a case study on how chapters can be more prepared when disaster strikes their communities. America has consumed more land in the last 30 years than it has in its entire history. More often than not this land is prone to floods, fires, erosion, hurricanes, tsunamis, and yes, even tornados. The unfortunate truth is that we as a professional organization must be prepared to act and engage the public, not if, but when the next disaster strikes.



STEP 1

Local AIA Chapters should engage with local disaster response personnel during the critical time before a disaster occurs. When disaster does strike, the AIA will then have built the necessary relationships and be seen as a valuable resource to first responders. If this is not currently a discussion in your local Chapter, consider making it one of your ongoing work plans and/or committees, and become more involved with state, regional, and national AIA efforts on such issues. Your Chapter should also develop a disaster response protocol that outlines how your President, Executive Director and/or Board should respond in a post-disaster scenario.

Build contacts and relationships through disaster preparedness activities in your state. Call your State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA) and join their disaster response unit. If they do not have a unit that coordinates volunteer efforts or a structural evaluation program, then work with them to begin one and start training your members. In the interim, most SEMA's have online resources for the general public to develop disaster preparedness plans. It is always

a good idea to have a personal and/or family response plan in place. FEMA also offers an Incident Command System (ICS) course on-line, which it uses to train all levels of government and private sector employees to effectively ensure a coordinated response to a disaster. In short, follow the Boy Scout motto, and always be prepared. Even the exercise of developing a protocol or a plan can have ancillary benefits to local Chapters.

Many states, like Missouri's Structural and Visual Evaluation (SAVE) program or Kansas' Rapid Response Team train architects, engineers and building inspectors to assess the structural integrity of buildings after catastrophic events (mostly floods, earthquakes, hurricanes, and tornados). These programs provide liability coverage for volunteers and include a framework for activation through the State immediately after a disaster. However, these programs usually do not cross state lines. For example, Joplin's 50 mile radius includes three other states. Chapters should work within their AIA region to coordinate training sessions, volunteers, and legislative solutions for sharing

BE PREPARED

resources across borders. In Florida, local AIA leaders have been training architects and engineers across the entire Southeast and are now working with the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Region 4 to develop a training and transfer of certification program across state lines. A number of states are beginning to standardize this process by using the Cal E-M-A Safety Assessment Program training, administered by the California Emergency Management Agency.

Once your membership is engaged in disaster response training, encourage them to maintain their certifications by working with your SEMA to expand trainings. When the State or other authority calls after a disaster, you need to have certified volunteers ready to go, preferably those that live nearby. The volunteers engaged in disaster assessment may be your first contact with the affected municipality. These instances should be seen as opportunities to put our best foot forward with the impacted community.

STEP 2



RESPOND QUICKLY

When a disaster strikes, there are three simple actions to take before anyone is ready to move into the disaster recovery phase:

1. Take care of you and yours. Make sure your family and your business are safe and out of harm's way. Then reach out to your membership that may have been impacted by the disaster. Confirm their families and businesses are also safe and secure;
2. Contact a disaster agency and offer your immediate support. If your local Chapter has not developed relationships with government emergency management agencies, it is far better to reach out to a non-profit like the Red Cross to provide your immediate support and volunteer your time; and,
3. Contact your membership. Architects see the world differently. Our expertise in the built environment might be able to identify the need for the immediate evacuation of a building that others do not see. Tell your members everything that you know about the disaster, and ask them to provide any information to you so that your Chapter can speak with one voice to the appropriate authorities.

If you followed Step 1: Be Prepared, above, then you have an active relationship with local emergency response personnel, and a network of members to call for assistance. With the proper training to move your people into a disaster response situation, activate this network in partnership with emergency personnel (typically a statewide or national disaster must be declared by either the Governor or the President to activate such programs, and their liability coverage) to assist your community. This early response and engagement process is critical to developing credibility and trust with the affected community, and it is much more likely that the AIA will become a part of the visioning and rebuilding process to follow if we are engaged early on.



STEP 3

As with any initiative, it all comes down to leadership. Without leadership most organizations would not have the focus and drive to accomplish any defined task or address any immediate need. Local Chapters must guide the coordination of their members. While state, regional, and national AIA can help with funding and administration, it will and should be up to local Chapter leaders to determine what is best for their community. You are the experts on your community, and you should lead the way.

Like government hierarchy, the AIA local Chapters should look to the state chapters for assistance as needed, the state components should look to regional components (i.e. Central States Region), and the regional components should look to the national AIA. All the systems in place at the AIA are meant to empower local communities to respond first, and then identify and fill the gaps as needed. Therefore, the process is yours to design, develop and lead as needed on the ground. Similarly, the local AIA must know how to be asked for help from the very local governments they intend to serve.

LEAD BOLDLY

For non-staffed and all volunteer Chapters this is especially important to remember: Without an executive director or other staff, the responsibility falls on the President of the Chapter, who usually has his or her own practice to maintain, a personal life, and usually an agenda full of other volunteer work. To provide additional support for the Chapter, consider the creation of a committee, with a strong and committed chairperson that will both work to increase Chapter preparedness and be able to respond immediately.



STEP 4

ENGAGE THE COMMUNITY

The leaders and stakeholders of an affected community must know what you can deliver or provide before you become a part of any planning process. Reach out and set up meetings with the local government, Chamber of Commerce, non-profit organizations, state agencies, and federal response units. Use your contacts and the influence you have gained from disaster assessment efforts. If you cannot set up a meeting, attend a public forum and reach out directly. It is much better to do this legwork prior to a disaster as you will then be a critical part of the community as opposed to the white knight who rides in after the fact. Simply put, outreach and community engagement should be an ongoing, critical component of any local Chapter's disaster preparedness and response plan.

Most disasters of a certain size receive assistance from FEMA and the relevant SEMA. FEMA has a Long Term Community Recovery Program (LTCRP) that is on the ground shortly after any national disaster to help the local community organize and develop a consensus about how to rebuild. In the rush after any disaster, the focus is and should be search and rescue, health and safety, and clean-up. The sooner AIA members can engage in this process and provide their expertise, the better.

Depending on the size of the disaster and the amount of impact on the community, some critical roles might need to be filled immediately, while others may not. In Greensburg, Kansas, for example, AIA Kansas provided significant administrative support to the City, which did not have a Building Department. In Joplin, the City had sufficient capacity, but was engaged in disaster response and managing the clean up. Find out where your AIA membership can best plug into the process and contribute as needed.

Part of an architect's expertise is the ability to create and lead teams. We are trained to be project managers. Other professionals are also involved in the built environment, but what we may do better than others is coordinate these professionals. We do it on the job site, and we can and should do it in disaster response scenarios. Collaborate with city and regional planners, engineers, landscape architects, and the larger design community to assist in the process. What a community needs least after a disaster is to have a barrage of organizations offering their support independently. The design professions and their respective institutions (educational and professional) should work together to coordinate and then approach the community together whenever possible.

"We are up at 30,000 feet looking for a silver bullet, but what most communities need is for us to be there right on the ground", said Jerry Hagerman, the Infrastructure and Environment Group Leader. The process of design usually starts very broad and then becomes very specific. After a disaster, most communities just want to return to normal. In the often chaotic days, weeks, and months after a disaster, most people do not have the time or expertise to lift their heads up and look to the future. While it is a very delicate matter to frame a disaster in terms of an opportunity, that is exactly what it can be. As architects, we must deliver this message by educating the general public about our role and expertise. If the AIA can help a community think big about its future, then we can begin to work our way down to the details of their immediate needs, potentially prevent or mitigate future disasters, and make communities more livable and sustainable in the process.



STEP 5

PROVIDE YOUR EXPERTISE

In the rush of disaster recovery, most local communities and their governments are locked in meetings and have little time to breathe. What they need is for someone to help them create a vision of their city's future. Architects can help think comprehensively about a community's issues, and then go a step further and help its citizens visualize that future. With that vision, a community can rally behind a rebuilding process and steer elected officials and staff to work towards their identified goals.

Work with FEMA and the local community early and often, and help educate the public about how the design of their community can make their lives better. If you conduct a charrette, you should do it in coordination with the efforts of FEMA and others. By being actively involved in the community, you will have that initial seat at the table, and then you can engage the entire design community not just in the rebuilding of the city, but the rethinking of how the city should be built.

A disaster design charrette is messy. They are more processes than product. If you are there early on, you can help shape the goals

of the community. As a general rule of thumb, it is better to engage both the public and the decision-makers during this process. There may be opportunities for multiple, subject-specific charrettes. Regardless, let the public express their opinions to the decision-makers. The design community must be united and prepared before entering a charrette. Take the time to strategize and plan each event to maximize your efficiency and you will maximize everyone's productivity.

If you do something other than a charrette, including any type of design workshop, community outreach event, education program about architecture and urban design, or even disaster response training, it is important to coordinate with local officials. FEMA, SEMA, and others will be on the scene the day after or even the day of a disaster. Work within your capacity to help the community in its response. As cleanup begins, work with local officials to be involved in the recovery process. With so much going on, local officials want to ensure that everyone bolsters existing efforts and are not duplicative. Do not move forward without their consent and ideally their partnership and participation.

Before any community engagement event, conduct discussions with your team to better understand each other, your values, and the larger problems surrounding the disaster. Do not go into a disaster area uninformed and immediately start to work on solutions. Additionally, leaders of the event should be allowed to select the core of their teams to better coordinate during the design process. This will give leaders the support they need to keep conversations concise and have coordinated assistance to side bar with particular participants as needed.

Whether it is a prayer, a moment of silence, an inspiring testimonial, or just a few words from a local leader, the beginning of any disaster planning design event (charrette, workshop, meeting, etc...) must start with a moment of shared reflection so that everyone can take a deep breath, look around at all the participants, and understand that we are all here for a greater good. It is time to set aside egos and agendas, and work together.



STEP 6

DOCUMENT THE PROCESS

So that you can pass your experiences and knowledge on, AIA National encourages you to develop a report of your activities during a disaster response process. As these reports are collected, a catalog of various disasters that range in size, type and magnitude will be created for the future. While no two disasters are the same, eventually this catalog will have enough volumes that there will be comparable events. With lessons learned and various testimonials recorded for posterity, these reports will help local Chapter leaders understand where they should start and provide them with ideas on how to begin moving forward.

Having this documentation during the process is helpful. Keeping a record of the process helps local Chapters follow the work and engage their volunteer's time and efforts where they see fit. It also helps local Chapter leaders keep track of the myriad of pledges of support, ideas, and projects that occur after a disaster. Additionally, many grant programs require a synopsis of events in order to distribute the full grant amount after the fact. If part of the strategy is to seek outside resources, recording your efforts will help at the end of the process when your paperwork is due.



Conclusion

If you find yourself responding to a disaster, remember that every disaster and every community is different. The most consistent issue with disaster response is knowing the culture of the place. After a disaster a community is in shock. There is a psychological component to the recovery process to which the AIA must be sensitive. Become a part of the community now, before the disaster occurs. If you are looking to help an area outside of your sphere of influence, be patient, and always approach them with compassion and encouragement. Ask them “What can the AIA do to help your community?” and then sensitively point out any opportunities you discover.