

Faith community leaders, Sarasota officials partner for hurricane relief

Leaders met to discuss a partnership between Sarasota County officials and local churches.

By PAM MCTEER
Staff Writer

Sarasota County administrators are seeking to link volunteers and resources in times of disaster by appealing to local faith leaders.

More than 80 community faith leaders met last Wednesday at the Friendship Volunteer Center to discuss teaming with local government and businesses for disaster response efforts.

"One of the things we saw last year was a need for more community involvement and coordination," said Stewart Stearns, president of Sarasota's Community Foundation and chair for the Sarasota Community Alliance. "We're talking about the relief effort afterward. It's going to take a massive amount of volunteers."

While last year's hurricane season prompted response from individuals and churches, there were still "missed opportunities," Stearns said. Efforts could have been more effective if the government, religious groups and businesses had worked together.

Chip Taylor, human resources manager for Sarasota County, said last year's hurricanes



Photo by Pam McTeer

The Rev. Dr. Tom Pfaff, chaplain for Goodwill Manasota, urges faith leaders to join local government and businesses in post-disaster relief efforts at a meeting last week.

revealed that the health desk at the Emergency Operations Center was well connected to hospitals, but not to human services agencies. Floods of volunteers came to help, but because there was no link with those agencies, the EOC didn't know where to send volunteers. Recently, the EOC assembled a community disaster preparedness committee with subcommittees to address volunteers, elderly, children at risk and individuals with mental health/substance abuse issues.

But the county doesn't have the resources for such massive relief efforts, he said. That's where faith organizations come in.

"We know that the faith community is very focused on helping, and we are going to need (them)," Stearns said.

Ideally, Stearns said, churches and synagogues would become N-pods, or neighborhood points of distribution, for supplies and volunteers. These pre-determined locations would be opened according to geographic need after a disaster.

The effort will be coordinated through the Sarasota County Health Department on Ringling Boulevard. It will serve as a second, miniature Emergency Operations Center, geared toward recovery, and will pull together

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er in times of disaster, Stearns said.

"By working with the Emergency Operations Center, each church will have the opportunity to know where to respond and if they have a need, they can (get help)," said the Rev. Dr. Tom Pfaff, a project coordinator and chaplain of Goodwill Manasota.

Individuals will lead the different parts of the recovery effort and work together to communicate where services and supplies need to go. Currently, those leaders are building their volunteer base and supply links.

"They have their teams in place and they are responsible for certain activities," Stearns said. "Somebody's got to know where the key to the lumberyard is besides the owner of the lumberyard."

When disaster response is necessary, those leaders will contact their groups, who contact their volunteers. Because there will be a chain already in place, which would, for example, connect the American Red Cross and its supplies, with a neighborhood distribution point, relief efforts will be more efficient, Stearns said. When a need is discovered, that communication chain will connect the need to the resources.

"During the floods (in Myakka two years

ago), I did not want to play with the rest of the people who came to help," said the Rev. Marion Sortore, disaster recovery director for Florida United Methodist Conference, at the meeting. "I wanted to do it myself. We could take care of them by ourselves, thank you very much. And I did that community a grave dis-service."

If during that disaster, she had worked with other efforts rather than being a "lone ranger," recovery would have come more quickly and easily she said. That's why faith organizations should saddle up with other groups in times of need, she said.

Churches and synagogues, Stearns said, will be critical because they provide not only emotional support but also large parking lots, ample space and facilities.

Stearn said the Alliance is still working on details of the chain and that groups should register as soon as possible so they can be trained. Pfaff said church and synagogue members should encourage their pastors and rabbis to get their churches involved.

For more information about getting involved, call the Friendship Volunteer Center at 953-5965 or visit www.1800volunteer.org.