

From the Rev. Sharon Alexander, rector, Trinity Episcopal Church, Baton Rouge, LA.

We learned a few things last year in Baton Rouge about how to help a flooded community that might help others know how to assist with damage from Hurricane Harvey:

1. Right now monetary donations are best. Both the Diocese of Texas and Diocese of West Texas have information on how to donate on their websites.
2. Don't try to deliver supplies right now. Wait until the roads are safe and clear. Make sure you have arranged with a reputable group (church, nonprofit, etc) ahead of time to drop off the items. Bring only what the group tells you they need rather than what your donors want to give. We had to turn away things we could not store, such as perishable food and used clothes. Don't donate used clothes at all. Don't use this as an opportunity to clean out closets and get rid of items you don't want (give those things to Goodwill, Salvation Army or a rummage sale when there is not an emergency). Also - donating a few toys is fine if they are requested. Please do not donate stuffed animals - way too many get thrown away and the flooded area will already have too much in its landfills.
3. Do not show up without making arrangements ahead of time. Accommodations will be hard to find for quite some time. There will be plenty of opportunities to help later and that help will be needed later as much as help from emergency responders is needed now. Cleanup and recovery is like a relay marathon - each leg of the marathon is important.
4. Gift cards are always a terrific way to help. It may be a couple of weeks before people can start using them (inventory will be erratic for a while and many stores will be closed), but if the churches and other organizations have them in hand they can give them out at the right time.
5. Before you try to send anything by mail, FedEx, UPS, etc, make sure they are making deliveries to the place to which you are trying to deliver. It took a while for FedEx, UPS, USPS etc to get to us last year. Once they did, however, we really appreciated the items that were sent to us from all over (via Amazon and other means). BUT, please make sure you are sending items that are need.
6. The needs of the community will change. At first people will need certain items: personal hygiene items such as soap, shampoo, toothpaste, deodorant, etc (normal sizes are actually better than the hotel/travel sizes in most cases); food that is easy to store and prepare; bottles of water; new towels; cleaning items; mosquito repellent. After they get back in their homes they will need: more personal hygiene items (normal size); more food; all types of cleaning items and something like Concrobium Mold Control (they will need this if their home took in water); rubber gloves; new clothes and underwear; new sheets; diapers and wipes (LOTS of them - all sizes); Depends; detergent; toilet paper; paper towels; more mosquito repellent; LOTS of gift cards. The huge Sams and Costco packages are not as helpful as smaller packaging unless the huge packaging can be taken apart. Later - some will need new furniture and appliances. Let the people coordinating the relief and recovery efforts tell you what they need.
7. Don't forget the animals. Pet food, kitty litter, etc will be needed, but make sure it is something the distribution center needs. Animal rescue centers will need lots of help - ask them what they need.
8. Don't take selfies with the people you are helping. Don't take a picture of them. Don't even ask to do this. Please respect their dignity.
9. Be kind to the people you meet - checkout clerks, restaurant workers, first responders, everyone. Many of them lost everything in the flood or were affected in some way. One of the checkout clerks at the grocery store this evening reminded me that many people were rude to him because the store did not have what they wanted last year.
10. Be patient. If a church or nonprofit does not respond to your request quickly, it is because they are taking care of immediate needs. Keep them in your prayers. Post uplifting things on social media. Pray.