

After hurricane, faith-based groups mobilize relief teams

by [Paul Bennett](#)

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New York, August 29 (ENInews)--In the wake of Irene, a powerful hurricane that crossed the eastern United States on 27 and 28 August, faith-based groups have mobilized to bring relief efforts to hard-hit communities. The storm caused more than 20 deaths, an estimated \$3.1 billion in damages and knocked out electricity for more than five million homes and businesses.

"It's too early to gauge how bad the effect of Irene is," said Randy Ackley, coordinator at Presbyterian Disaster Assistance (PDA). "We're waiting to get word, but we know some damage has been done."

PDA, based in Louisville, Kentucky, was prepared for the storm, according to Ackley. It asked 25 of its presbyteries south of Delaware for information about their disaster preparation efforts, and sent out a general preparedness message to churches.

"PDA pre-positioned its national response team, which has about 80 members trained in disaster preparedness and recovery," said Ackley. "These teams help with spiritual and emotional care, but also help congregations understand how to get involved and engaged in disasters."

According to Ackley, PDA isn't only concerned with short-term relief. "We don't ignore the immediate response," he said, "but we think the long-term approach is just as important. Honest recovery takes longer than three to six months. If you've lost your house or your livelihood, you don't recover quickly."

Nechama, a Jewish volunteer organization providing cleanup and recovery assistance to homes and communities affected by natural disasters, is deploying a team with a truck and trailer from its headquarters in Minnesota. The

team will work in the New York-New Jersey area, according to Amy Cytron, a volunteer coordinator and development associate.

Unlike some relief organizations, Nechama will take unaffiliated volunteers who show up and want to help. "Our philosophy is that you can come work with us regardless," said Cytron. Nechama offers "just-in-time" training for whatever work is needed, and has supervisors on hand to monitor the effort.

Islamic Charities North America (ICNA) Relief, based in New York City, established distribution points across the metro area, to provide food, water, and other essentials, as well as shelter when needed. "In New York we started with ten," said assistant executive director Mohammed Arif. "But we reduced the number to four when it became clear the hurricane wasn't as bad as expected."

ICNA sees two phases to its efforts: response, in which the agency provides shelter and other immediate necessities; and recovery, which involves cleanup, debris removal, and spiritual care. "We expect the first phase to last two to three weeks," said Arif, "but we're unsure about how long the recovery phase will take."

The U.S. Disaster Program at Episcopal Relief & Development (ERD) has been in contact with Episcopal dioceses along the east coast in order to assess the damage from the hurricane, according to a news release. "I have a lot of confidence in the ability of dioceses to respond to the situation in their areas, and we will be standing by to offer support as needed," said Katie Mears, ERD program manager, in a press statement.