

Churches integral in hurricane relief

RICHARD DYMOND

Herald Staff Writer

SARASOTA - The separation of church and state doesn't apply when it comes to hurricanes.

Both Sarasota and Manatee county governments are making pitches to faith-based groups for help during disaster recovery.

"With one phone call, I can now send a whole church's volunteers to an area that needs help," said Sarasota County Human Resources Manager Chip Taylor, who will have access to hundreds of Sarasota faith-based volunteers in a plan developed through the work of the Community Alliance of Sarasota County.

To help the church-based volunteers know where they should go in an emergency, Sarasota has created a mini emergency operation center located in several rooms at Sarasota County Health and Human Services, 2200 Ringling Blvd.

Manatee County also realizes the value of the faith-based groups when it comes to working together during a disaster. During a workshop Tuesday, Manatee County government will discuss how to best utilize faith-based groups in a hurricane.

The Manatee event was organized by Nancy Kenney, a member of Journey Assembly of God, located at 5019 37th St. E.

Kenney was a volunteer in four different counties last year and made some frustrating discoveries.

"I saw the real major holes," Kenney said Wednesday. "I saw that a huge answer to the immediate covering of the county was churches because there were churches every few blocks. A county can't cover the whole county."

Kenney founded Network of Hope, Disaster and Outreach Mobilization of Christian Churches in Manatee County. Under Kenney's plan, Manatee churches that sign up to volunteer will begin surveying their neighborhoods to find where elderly, single mothers and special needs people live so they can check on them in a hurricane.

"We will train church people to do advocacy work, to help people get through the system," Kenney said.

The need for the large, organized groups of volunteers that churches can provide was made clear from last year's storms, Taylor said.

"I remember being in our main emergency operations center during the hurricanes and the health desk was well connected, but what was missing was mental health and other human services," Taylor said, referring to the main emergency operations center on the sixth floor of the Sarasota County Government Administration Center, 1660 Ringling Blvd.

Faith-based groups can really make a difference after the storm has passed just by going door-to-door, said the Rev. Marion Sortore of the Florida United Methodist Conference.

Sortore was one of roughly 100 pastors, rabbis and other faith leaders who attended a breakfast Wednesday at the Community Foundation of Sarasota County to talk about working together during hurricane season.

Sortore told a story of a group of church volunteers going door-to-door in Polk County in May to see how people were doing 10 months after the hurricanes.

They nearly passed a house without knocking on the door.

"The house had trees down and looked abandoned," Sortore said.

The group knocked anyway and discovered a disabled elderly woman who had been crawling out of her house to her car since she couldn't get her wheelchair through the fallen trees.

When asked by volunteers who cleared the woman's yard why she waited 10 months for help, she replied: "Other people are hurting worse than I am," Sortore said.

It's these kind of missions that church volunteers can undertake if they are organized, Sortore said.

"We can't do it alone," Sortore said. "We need each other."

While Kenney hopes to create a network of Manatee churches as the distribution points for food, water, ice and tarps, Sarasota will create roughly 12 neighborhood points of distribution, each of which will be staffed by 26 volunteers from faith-based groups.

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Richard Dymond, Herald reporter, can be reached at 708-7917 or rdymond@HeraldToday.com.

If you go

WHAT: Manatee County churches and government discuss hurricane recovery in a workshop.

WHEN: 9:30 to 11:30 a.m. Tuesday

WHERE: Manatee County Convention Center, Palma Sola Room

ADMISSION: open to the public

INFORMATION: 744-5155