

How to Give in Times of Crisis or Disaster

High-profile disasters often provoke an outpouring of giving, and for all the right reasons—the dramatic images of destruction and havoc, the stories of lives disrupted and people facing privation—all of these pull on our heartstrings. Desperate for some way to help, we give.

These gifts can make an enormous difference in helping individuals and communities rebuild. But it is important to remember that crises can take many forms, not all of them as visually gripping as an earthquake or wildfire. Any sudden surge of acute need and emergency can require immediate assistance, whether it be a hurricane, a pandemic, an economic crisis, an armed conflict, or a massive political disruption.

In every instance, a rapid and effective response can be vital for those most affected. Here are a few tips to ensure that you make the maximum positive impact.

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Give money, not goods.

With the exception of very specialized circumstances, money is the most flexible, most impactful donation you can make to an organization that is helping those affected by crisis. Goods such as food and clothing impose a substantial burden on nonprofits—they must be received, processed, transported, and distributed, and they may not do the most immediate good for those in need.

When you give cash, you enable the organization to respond quickly to shifting priorities and to direct your assistance where and when it is most helpful.

No strings attached.

General support funds give organizations the greatest latitude to respond to fluid situations, and this is especially vital to an organization helping to respond to a crisis or disaster. Those closest to the ground will always have more information than a donor who is far away and giving them the leeway to exert their judgment can be a tremendous benefit to those they are helping.

By the same token, don't earmark your gift to the current disaster. An organization may be flush with cash for immediate needs but not for funds that can allow them to prepare for the next disaster that others may not foresee.

Do your research—target to the organization, not the disaster.

Make your funds go farthest by giving to organizations that are well-positioned to respond effectively. You want your funds to go to a well-run organization that has shown that it can be effective in the impacted community. That could mean an organization that specializes in assisting during crises, or that has deep local ties or that specializes in the areas that will be vital to a long-term recovery. This may include another community foundation serving the region impacted or a US-based affiliate of an international organization.

Consult experts, articles, and, of course, the California Community Foundation to get a better sense of the best destinations for your giving.

Think long-term and big picture.

Recovery from a disaster or a crisis can take many years, and a community may suffer after-effects long after the world's attention—and the influx of dollars—have moved on. This can present both an unmet need and an opportunity.

In the case of many core community needs such as education, healthcare, youth development, and others, they may need to be rebuilt over the long-term, and the disruption caused by a crisis may even open the door to positive structural changes that can benefit the community long into the future.

By the same token, community organizations that have been major conduits for disaster relief may exit the crisis with expanded capacity to meet important long-term community needs and may be in a position to partner with donors to build a longer-term vision for positive change.

You may also wish to donate to organizations that work to prevent or mitigate future disasters. This important work may not draw the same headlines, but it can make a tremendous difference in terms of lives saved and catastrophes averted.

Please feel free to contact your Relationship Manager or the Donor Relations Team at donorrelations@calfund.org if you have any questions. We are here to help.

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