

Building Local Capacity in Key Disaster Recovery Skills

Presented by Roberta Avila, Executive Director, Mississippi Coast Interfaith Disaster Task Force

Lessons Learned: Nonprofit and faith-based organizations must be prepared to adapt and evolve their missions and focus to address the needs of a community in recovery from a disaster, even if the identified needs do not match the official mission or primary expertise of the organization. They must build partnerships, collaborate, and join coalitions to accomplish recovery goals, raise awareness of needs, and influence resolution of disaster-related policy issues.

Roberta Avila, Executive Director of the Mississippi Coast Interfaith Disaster Task Force (IDTF, www.msidthf.org), opened her presentation by highlighting the value of the Forum: “I would first of all thank CARRI for bringing us together. When I learned there are other cities learning what makes a community resilient, I immediately thought ‘we must come together’! And, here we are! Being here with all of you makes me feel like I’m not in this alone. I’m learning a lot today and hope to take lessons learned back to our community.”

Avila briefly described the early history of IDTF. Initially formed in 1980 to provide a way for a very diverse religious community to support recovery efforts, IDTF had already responded to three hurricane disasters on the Mississippi coast prior to Katrina. After Hurricane Georges in 1998, IDTF functioned for two years as a long-term recovery committee (LTRC). Avila explained, “The unmet needs of the community were identified, a funding table was created, and then cases were brought to the funding table.



All the faith-based groups came together to address the recovery plans for families with unmet needs. This was very successful. After the LTRC completed its work, all the case files were closed, and IDTF went dormant. In the dormant phase, the board met just twice a year. That is how IDTF operated prior to Katrina. It is operating very differently now because of Katrina.”

After Katrina, IDTF’s board reconvened and Avila helped rebuild the organization. Instead of serving as an LTRC as in prior disasters, IDTF became an umbrella organization for other faith-based organizations and disaster recovery organizations (DROs). IDTF reframed its mission to facilitate communication, coordination, and collaboration among organizations involved in disaster preparedness and recovery, and to advocate for vulnerable populations.

Disaster Recovery Skills. Resilience depends on having local capacity for key disaster recovery skills. IDTF recognized the needs for certain key skills in the midst of Katrina recovery. Believing that the community’s resilience and recovery depended on those skills, IDTF leaders adapted the focus of the organization to address those needs. Avila described the epiphany that led to the new mission: “We recognized early there was a need for many skills in the midst of

Katrina. We saw a need for training people in volunteer coordination and case management, so we reconnected with partners and brought them in to provide expertise.”

IDTF partnered with local churches and external faith-based organizations to organize skills trainings for local people. For example, Lutheran Disaster Response (LDR) (www.ldr.org)

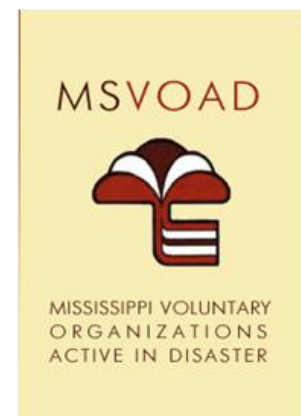


brought volunteer coordination expertise, and the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) specialized in case management. As Avila reported, “A lot of those involved were not only local churches but DROs. In every other hurricane disaster, the coast had only one LTRC (spearheaded by IDTF), but with Katrina 15 LTRCs formed that covered the state as far north as Jackson. We had to consider, how do you train all the volunteers and case managers? Fortunately, IDTF had some history in responding to disasters. We asked the

DROs, ‘what do you need?’ We then convened and advertised the training, and brought in the VOAD [Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster] expertise to conduct the training, utilizing their training manuals.”

IDTF identified case management, volunteer coordination, and mental health care as the critical recovery skills requiring additional capacity within the community. A broad array of local leaders required basic training in these key skills in the aftermath of Katrina, even though these particular skills may not be obvious aspects of their day-to-day jobs. Since Katrina, IDTF has concentrated much of its efforts on working with local churches and other faith-based and nonprofit organizations to fill these gaps.

Case Management. Case managers work with individuals and households to help them identify and meet their needs to facilitate their recovery. Case management requires knowledge of policies and processes and the resources available to meet various needs; it requires people skills and follow-up. In its efforts to build capacity for case management, IDTF coordinated with LDR and UMCOR to provide expertise and trainers for local faith-based organizations and other nongovernmental organizations. They also involved VOAD partners who had other expertise. As a result, IDTF has also become a strong advocate for case management resources. A major focus of the Katrina Recovery Summits held in 2008 and 2009 has been the need to extend access to case management and resources beyond established deadlines.



Volunteer Coordination. Volunteer coordination and case management go hand in hand. Volunteers must be trained and well utilized to maximize their effectiveness in meeting needs identified through case management. After a disaster, huge numbers of volunteers, both individuals and groups, arrive from many geographic locations to assist response and recovery. They also emerge from within the community. IDTF called on LDR, a VOAD partner, to coordinate construction and volunteer efforts. Their experts helped train local church and other

faith-based organizations that had set up DROs and were using volunteers for the rebuilding and rehabilitating of homes. Voluntary activities are often carried out under the auspices of nonprofit and faith-based organizations, so coordination among those organizations to avoid duplication of effort is important. Networks such as VOAD, discussed in this paper under Building Coalitions, facilitate coordination.

Mental Health Care. Another key recovery skill is the ability to support one's own mental health and to deliver basic mental health care to others. After Katrina, IDTF recognized a major need for emotional and spiritual healing in the community. During and subsequent to the storm, many members of the community experienced multiple deep losses and frustrations. IDTF was aware that many case managers experienced trauma themselves and that their work required they hear others' traumatic stories. Consequently, the organizations providing case management saw large staff turnover. Avila said, "We brought in trainers to provide 'caring for the caregiver' training.

IDTF brought in experienced trauma counselors and mental health experts who had responded to the Oklahoma City bombing and 9/11 attacks to train local pastors and case managers in basic mental health care skills. The training included emphasis on how to care for themselves in order to increase their capacity to care for others. Avila explained that IDTF is continuing to roll out new training programs: "We just had our first interfaith training on crisis intervention and had 30 clergy in attendance."

Avila described another mental health initiative, the Primary Mental Health Collaborative, which she explained was formed to avoid duplication of mental health efforts after Katrina. The Mississippi Coastal Primary/Mental Health Collaborative provides a venue for sharing information on direct services, projects, and research that addresses primary/mental health needs, and it encourages partnerships and services that are affordable, accessible, and culturally appropriate. (See www.msidthf.org/PMHCpage.html and www.msidthf.org/primarymentalhealthflier.html.)

IDTF has hosted a series of annual Mental Health Summits (2007, 2008, and 2009). "At the first Mental Health Summit in 2007, attendees learned about an integrated mental health system project." After the Summit, IDTF participated in an advisory committee that guided an application for a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) Grant for an integrated mental health pilot project. RWJF decided to fund the pilot project, which was launched in May 2009 and is led by Dr. Carol Jones and Coastal Family Health. This summit has grown quite large. Avila explained, "We are learning a lot from the experts who attend, including how to plan, prepare, and respond differently for future disaster." IDTF is also working to raise awareness and change aspects of the Stafford Act, which inhibits swift action on the part of state departments of health in the aftermath of disaster (i.e., definition of crisis counseling).

Building Coalitions. The ability of community organizations to combine forces and work together effectively in a variety of coalitions and partnerships is critical to community recovery and resilience. IDTF is inherently a coalition of faith-based organizations and congregations; while providing the umbrella and primary support for the Primary/Mental Health Collaborative and its Mental Health Summits, Interfaith Clergy Disaster Network Training, and Katrina Recovery Summits, IDTF has involved many other organizations in planning and conducting those activities.





At the same time, IDTF has fostered and participated in other coalitions, such as the Steps Coalition to support Katrina recovery. IDTF has learned that an adequate supply of affordable housing is a key building block of a resilient community, so IDTF works with the Steps Coalition to address affordable housing issues on the Gulf Coast. IDTF also takes an active role in raising awareness and advocating for policy changes that will expedite recovery and help prepare for future disasters.

IDTF is an active partner in Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD), a national organization (www.nvoad.org) with state and local chapters. Since Katrina, Mississippi has an active statewide VOAD network (MSVOAD, www.msvoad.org) and a South Mississippi VOAD network (SMVOAD). Avila emphasized, "It's important that communities know and understand national, state, and local VOAD capabilities."

***Editor's note:** IDTF was honored in March 2009 as a Merit Finalist for a Mutual of America 2008 Community Partnership Award, which recognizes nonprofits doing collaborative work in a way that can be a model for other groups with similar missions. In accepting the award, Avila said, "One of our mottos is 'better together.' If there is one thing we have learned, it's that we will move the recovery forward if we continue to find ways to partner around the myriad of issues that still face our full recovery from Katrina." She added, "We have built our work on faith, and not on one faith, but on many."*