

Winter Weather Disaster Preparedness: Diocese of Maryland

“We’ve been faced with several large storms, back-to-back blizzards, just crazy weather,” says Sharon Tillman, Director of Diocesan Initiatives and Disaster Coordinator for the Episcopal Diocese of Maryland. Experiencing those weather events led Sharon and the diocese to put together a plan “to help our congregations better prepare for things like oncoming storms,” she says.

“I was the Communications Director when we began this initiative,” Sharon says, and communication was a big part of their strategy to help congregations get prepared. “We put out information through e-news and other communications channels, such as our Facebook page and website.”

At-home preparations

Sharon says that winter storm preparedness has a lot to do with helping parishioners be safe in their own homes with their own families.

One major message that they stressed was about driving to church. “If it’s too dangerous to get in your car to drive to church, don’t do it,” Sharon says. “Pull out your Bible at home and read, spend time together. Take time to reflect on what’s happening. Call on neighbors to make sure everyone is all right.”

She says they give the “typical ‘go kit’ recommendations, [What to Put in your Emergency Kit](#) which includes having batteries, and 72 hours’ worth of food, water, medication, and pet supplies.”

The diocese also encouraged parishioners to think about specific issues that they might face based on where they live. “Where I live, we’re prone to losing power, for example,” Sharon says. “If that’s the case, do they have a generator ready to go? Have they brought in firewood? We gave them reminders about practical things.”

How to make planning manageable

Because Maryland is so diverse in its geography—from mountains to the Chesapeake Bay—different congregations face different potential weather threats. That’s one reason the diocese makes generalized recommendations to its congregations. “We help them with risk assessment that all churches can do generally, and then they determine how to make adjustments for the emergencies they might face,” Sharon says.

Emphasizing an “all-hazards approach,” Sharon recommends that churches understand the common denominators of disaster planning. “If you can plan for one event, that’s easier than planning for 20 events.” In other words, she suggests that you create one overarching disaster plan that can be modified for any disaster that could occur. “It makes disaster planning a more manageable task.”

Important to plan, important to reach out

“It is so important to have a plan,” Sharon says. “We get complacent when there aren’t any disasters.” She says that the threat of winter weather events is a “great excuse to think about planning. The time to do it is *before* something happens, during a calm time when you can sit and think clearly.”

She says that an important part of disaster planning is reaching out to the community. “Build relationships. Talk to the fire and police chiefs and the neighborhood watch. Meet them before something happens rather than in the midst of something.”

Reaching out isn’t just about contacting authorities who might help your parish in case of emergency. Sharon also says, “It’s important that, as individual churches make plans, we think about the community beyond our walls. Who will be in need? Know how you’ll react when the need is not in your backyard.”

Episcopal Relief & Development provided Sharon and the Diocese of Maryland with resources for their disaster planning. You can access those resources at <http://www.episcopalrelief.org/press-and-resources/resource-library>.