

# LESSONS LEARNED IN DISASTER RECOVERY SHOW HOW THE PRIVATE SECTOR SHINES IN RECOVERY EFFORTS

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**W**hen a disaster strikes a community, it's crucial to allow churches, charities, and businesses to lead the recovery efforts for a successful recovery. The response of the Middle Tennessee community to the recent outbreak of tornadoes highlights the vital role that community organizations play in disaster recovery when given the chance.

While every disaster must be recognized as unique, lessons from communities previously affected by natural disasters can offer important insights on successful and unsuccessful approaches to disaster recovery. From my (Dan's) intensive field research following the Joplin, Missouri tornado in 2011, I saw the importance of allowing churches, charities, and businesses to lead the response and recovery efforts.

Churches, charities, and businesses often have better access to local circumstances and needs than government officials. This access to local information is crucial and reflected by the fact that the most successful national and international charitable organizations involved with disaster recovery, such as Samaritan's

Purse, partner with local organizations that know the community. Joplin's impressive recovery from their tornado reflects the decision of federal, state, and local officials to facilitate community-based recovery rather than attempting to micromanage it.

We can see this in Middle Tennessee. Within days of the tornadoes, nonprofit Hands on Nashville reported nearly 30,000 volunteers signed up to serve as part of the tornado relief efforts. Hands on Nashville and other groups have already organized large recovery missions and donated supplies across the affected region. These nonprofits worked closely with the City of Nashville and other agencies to ensure volunteers were safely and timely deployed to areas in need of help. In conjunction with the nonprofits, several Nashville-area churches, like Mt. Gilead Missionary Baptist Church in Hermitage and Lee Chapel AME Church in North Nashville, became de facto relief centers in their affected communities, receiving donations and coordinating assistance.

Businesses also play an important role in successful disaster recovery, often by delivering meals, supplies, and equipment to victims and volunteers. While often viewed as outsiders with no vested interest in the community, big-box retailers are vital to the recovery process, often arriving with emergency necessities in disaster-stricken





**Volunteer disaster recovery groups responded across Middle Tennessee after the tornado outbreak on March 3, 2020. The homes above were one of the many neighborhoods in Nashville that suffered severe damage. | PHOTO BY BRIAN DELANEY/PERI STAFF**

communities ahead of the federal government. Following the Joplin tornado, Chick-fil-A was one of the first affected companies to rebuild, providing the first glimpse of returning to normalcy to the shattered community. Walmart saw the need in the community and stocked non-traditional items such as kitchen appliances and mattresses.

We are seeing businesses and big-box retailers play a similar role here in Tennessee. In East Nashville, restaurants like 615 Waffles not only prepared and delivered meals for victims and volunteers, but also served as a base to dispatch volunteer workers. Lowe's trucks were seen in the ravaged Stanford Estates subdivision in Donelson, loaded with free moving crates for victims' belongings and crews in red company vests helping with residential debris removal. Tides Loads of Hope, a program to provide mobile laundry services

to disaster victims, quickly arrived and started serving disaster victims. In yet another example, Proctor & Gamble has been delivering personal care kits, including necessary supplies such as toilet paper and diapers to those affected by the disaster.

While much research is still to be done on the disaster recovery, and we will surely learn more from the recovery efforts in Middle Tennessee, it is clear that churches, charities, and businesses play a crucial role in response and rebuilding efforts. Government officials in Tennessee can help aid response and recovery efforts by focusing more on restoring public services than attempting to direct or displace these community-based responses.

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