

COVID-19 Community Innovation Stories

In the face of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic outbreak, the country is seeing innovations in communities that highlight the best of American ingenuity. We highlight these stories to show how many people are helping those around them, and prompt everyone to think about how they can help others.¹

WASHINGTON – The whole-of-America response to COVID-19 pandemic continues across the country as nonprofit organizations work hand-in-hand with FEMA and other Federal agencies to support communities affected by COVID-19 while continuing to respond to other disasters.²

Using Technology to Deliver Services in Social Distancing Environment

- The National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (National VOAD) created the [Disaster Agency Response Technology](#) (DART), a platform that allows member agencies to coordinate disaster case management, track donations, manage volunteers, and perform other tasks online.³
 - Using DART, the Society of St. Vincent de Paul (SVdP) is performing disaster case management in Texas. Volunteers are taking calls via Zoom, FaceTime, and Skype.
- Team Rubicon and others are utilizing video conferencing tools like Microsoft Teams, and Blue Jeans, to hold interactive webinars on a variety of subjects relating to COVID-19.
- On a larger scale, organizations have gone to platforms like Monday.com to allow staff to collaborate while working remotely.⁴
- Information Technology Disaster Resource Center (ITDRC), comprised of volunteer technology professionals, has established Project Connect, an initiative to set up Wi-Fi hotspots in underserved communities around the country.⁵
- As part of an interagency agreement Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) staff is assisting Small Business Administration (SBA) with answering calls from individuals requesting information about the SBA loan program.

¹ This document contains references and links to non-federal resources and organizations. This information is meant solely for informational purposes and is not intended to be an endorsement of any non-federal entity by FEMA, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, or the U.S. government.

² Sources throughout this document were derived from numerous working groups, conference calls, and webinars conducted with stakeholders including federal and nongovernmental organizations.

³ <https://www.nvoad.org/disaster-agency-response-technology-dart/>

⁴ 2020 FEMA Webinar

⁵ 2020 FEMA Subject Matter Expert Interview



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- Approximately 300 reservists from the Individual Assistance (IA), Disaster Survivor Assistance (DSA) and National Disaster Recovery Support (NDRS) cadres are deployed virtually and answer 12,000-14,000 calls on a daily basis.
- FEMA anticipates supporting the SBA for up to 60 days as the SBA develops staffing capacity to assist callers.⁶

Implementing New Ways to Crisis Counseling

- In the COVID-19 environment, voluntary organizations have shifted to new virtual ways to provide support to communities. Volunteers use the Disaster Distress Helpline (DDH), dedicated to providing year-round disaster crisis counseling, to connect with individuals via phone and provide services through online platforms.⁷
 - The DDH is the nation's only hotline dedicated to providing 24/7/365 crisis counseling and emotional support for survivors, responders, and anyone in the U.S. experiencing distress or other mental health concerns related to natural or human-caused disasters.
 - Call 1-800-985-5990 to connect with a trained counselor; Spanish speakers can press "2" for bilingual support.
 - To connect with a counselor via SMS from the 50 states text TalkWithUs for English or Hablanos for Spanish to 66746.
 - Spanish-speakers from Puerto Rico can text Hablanos to 1-787-338-2663.
 - Deaf and hard of hearing individuals can text TalkWithUs to 66746 or use preferred relay service to call 1-800-985-5990. TTY 1-800-846-8517.
 - The DDH is answered by trained counselors from a national network of independently operated crisis centers who offer supportive counseling, including information on common stress reactions and healthy coping, as well as referrals to local disaster-related resources for follow-up care and support. The DDH is operated by Vibrant Emotional Health and funded by the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).
- Organizations, such as New York Disaster Interfaith Services (NYDIS), American Red Cross, The Salvation Army, Catholic Charities and Southern Baptist Disaster Relief are expanding their online capabilities to meet the need of communities in a socially distance environment.
 - NYDIS is working on offering virtual memorial services for families impacted by COVID-19.⁸
 - Red Cross has increased its condolence care mission by setting up a virtual family assistance center that will provide links and information for those who have lost someone due to COVID-19. This online call center will be staffed by mental health, health services, and spiritual care professionals, reaching underserved and rural communities.⁹
 - The Salvation Army continues to use its national hotline 844-458-HOPE (4673), available seven days a week from 9 a.m. to 1 a.m. Eastern Time. The organization has introduced a new [prayer request form](#) online to engage with those who need it.¹⁰

⁶ 2020 FEMA Conference call with federal and voluntary organizations

⁷ <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline>

⁸ <https://www.nydis.org/#>

⁹ <https://www.redcross.org/virtual-family-assistance-center.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.salvationarmydfw.org/p/services/prayer-request-form>

- Catholic Charities also joined the effort of online counseling. While, some charities had telehealth platforms in place for outreach of rural communities, the rest had to adapt to new ways for providing spiritual and behavioral health support by using audio and/or visual platforms.¹¹
- Southern Baptist Disaster Relief has established 9 toll-free emotional & spiritual care counseling hotlines in 9 States across the country.¹²

Finding Innovative Ways to Ensure Food Security

- Food security has become an issue of concern throughout the country. Increased demand for food supplies and decreased production and accessibility have pushed communities, all levels of government, and non-profit organizations to implement new ways to improve food security.
 - The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has expanded [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program \(SNAP\)](#), to cover children who normally receive free or reduced-price school meals.
 - The innovative SNAP online grocery purchase pilot program was extended to include [Arizona, California, Florida and Idaho](#), in addition to North Carolina, Alabama, Iowa, Nebraska, New York, Oregon and Washington.¹³
 - Additionally, as part of the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program (CFAP), USDA is now providing [\\$19 billion in relief support](#) for the initiative – Farmers to Families Food Box Program. This program is intended to support farmers and ranchers, while maintaining the integrity of the food supply chain, and ensuring every American continues to receive and have access to the food they need.¹⁴
 - The USDA has also recently published [Frequently Asked Questions](#) for nonprofit organizations engaged in food distribution and seeking to receive food through the Farmers to Families Food Box Program.¹⁵
 - Participating distributors and wholesalers will package pre-approved boxes of fresh produce, dairy and meat products for delivery to food banks, community and faith-based organizations and other non-profits serving communities in need.¹⁶
- While Federal government agencies are finding new ways to address food shortages, National VOAD members, such as the Society of St. Vincent de Paul (SVdP), are modifying their existing programs to address the need.¹⁷
 - SVdP has changed its “House in a Box Program” to support the food need and connect individuals with various large stores. Eligible individuals receive something akin to a boarding pass that they can print off and use in a store or for curbside delivery service. This new program

¹¹ 2020 FEMA and voluntary organization webinar

¹² 2020 FEMA Subject Matter Expert Interview

¹³ <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program>

¹⁴ <https://www.usda.gov/media/press-releases/2020/04/17/usda-announces-coronavirus-food-assistance-program>

¹⁵ <https://www.ams.usda.gov/publications/content/farmers-families-food-box-program-faqs>

¹⁶ <https://www.ams.usda.gov/selling-food-to-usda/farmers-to-families-food-box>

¹⁷ <https://www.svdpdisaster.org/house-box-program>

is expanding and engaging more stores throughout the communities to have access to more products.¹⁸

- In an effort to address the needs of the most vulnerable population, The Salvation Army, Operation BBQ Relief, and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania are providing meals to Pennsylvanians.¹⁹
 - “[Operation Restaurant Relief](#),” is a network of barbecue restaurants and food distributors providing 180,000 freshly prepared and pre-packaged meals per week to individuals, seniors and families need that are distributed The Salvation Army.
 - In addition to the meals in Pennsylvania, Operation BBQ Relief is distributing another 360,000 meals to Feeding America and 30,000 meals to other organizations nationwide each week.
 - All meals are packed in boxes that provide enough food for a family of four for four days.
 - The Salvation Army workers pick up the boxes from six warehouses across the state and transport them to their local Corps Community Centers. Workers quickly distribute the food boxes to individuals and families in local communities.
- The states are also working with the Federal government to address food security issues as rapidly as possible. For instance, the State of California, in partnership with the FEMA, is launching a new program called “[Restaurants Deliver](#)” that will pay restaurant and hospitality workers to cook and deliver meals for at-risk seniors during the COVID-19 crisis.²⁰
 - This new initiative will target low-income older adults who have compromised immune systems and those who are at high risk for COVID-19 or who have already been exposed to coronavirus.
 - The initiative will address both issues of nutrition and isolation felt by more than 1.2 million seniors living alone in the state, while providing a financial boost to the food sector.
 - The goal of this program is to provide a “farm to table” concept and connect farms with restaurants to ensure the provided meals include local produce and are of high nutritional value. An unlimited number of meals will be provided to those who qualify.
 - To see if individuals are eligible, they need to dial 2-1-1, or go online to the [California Department of Public Health COVID-19 response site](#).

Combining Forces to Overcome Hunger

- Due to increased demand on food supplies and a shortage of manpower in communities, Team Rubicon has partnered with other organizations to support at-risk neighbors.

¹⁸ 2020 FEMA and voluntary organization webinar

¹⁹ <https://www.lockhaven.com/news/local-news/2020/04/salvation-army-helping-to-provide-meals-to-those-in-need/>

²⁰ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2020/04/24/california-program-give-free-meals-seniors-jobs-food-sector/3023757001/>

- On April 16, 2020, [Team Rubicon partnered with Feeding America](#) to ensure that families in vulnerable communities get the food and supplies they need throughout the course of the COVID-19 pandemic.²¹
- [Team Rubicon volunteers](#), comprised mainly of veterans, provide the manpower, experience, and know-how to support food bank operations. They package food for distribution, deliver meals to the homebound, coordinate logistics, organize fellow volunteers, and conduct warehouse management.²²
- During the pandemic, Team Rubicon’s volunteers have helped more than half a million people in more than 500 communities around the country.²³
- Other non-profit and community organizations have joined forces to overcome the food security threat and fight against hunger.
 - Meal on Wheels, The Salvation Army, The Baltimore Ravens, and the City of Baltimore are collaborating to provide 7,000 meals a day, with extra on Friday to cover the weekend, to those in need.
 - [ICNA Relief](#) has distributed over 66,636 food boxes and 33,759 hot meals, serving 57,695 families. The 3,043 volunteers delivered groceries and baskets to the elderly and underserved populations.²⁴

Using Personal Skills to Make Personal Protective Equipment

- [Volunteer Ministers from the Churches of Scientology Disaster Response](#) have been using personal skills to help during the pandemic in various parts of the country. These volunteers are making masks for emergency responders, healthcare providers, and residents.²⁵
 - In Seattle, WA, some of the church’s volunteer seamstresses have been sewing hundreds of masks for distribution to non-profit organizations, such as The Salvation Army, who are on the front lines helping the public.
- The Church of Scientology members in Nashville, TN, are making reusable cloth masks as a health measure for residents to wear in public settings such as visits to doctors or grocery stores, and also for emergency responders and nursing staff. [Mennonite Disaster Service](#) is coordinating a network of local volunteers (seamstresses, drivers, and distributors) who are creating masks for nursing homes, daycare centers, hospitals, and individual families.²⁶
 - Mennonite Disaster Service has been producing 100,000 masks per week for distribution to affiliates and partners in need.

²¹ <https://teamrubiconusa.org/blog/feeding-america-partnership/>

²² <https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/16/us/coronavirus-team-rubicon-veterans-helping-neighbors-cnnheroes/index.html>

²³ <https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/16/us/coronavirus-team-rubicon-veterans-helping-neighbors-cnnheroes/index.html>

²⁴ <https://www.icnarelief.org/covid/>

²⁵ <https://www.einpresswire.com/article/514749008/volunteer-ministers-and-the-churches-of-scientology-disaster-response-use-personal-skills-to-help-during-the-pandemic>

²⁶ <https://mds.mennonite.net/covid-19-volunteers-in-action/>

- AmeriCares has shipped approximately 250 shipments of personal protective equipment (PPE) to 46 States across the Country.²⁷

FEMA's Best Practice Initiative

There are extraordinary efforts nationwide to support personnel and resource needs to battle the COVID-19 pandemic. FEMA is working to highlight these efforts and encourage everyone to think about what they can do to be a part of providing solutions to help. Visit <https://www.fema.gov/coronavirus/best-practices> for more information.

Topics for the "Best Practices" series are generated from crowd-sourced suggestions. Have an idea? Let us research it! Organizations and individuals can e-mail best practices or lessons learned to fema-cipsupport@fema.dhs.gov.

For more information on how to help during COVID-19, visit [FEMA's website for information on donations and volunteering](#).

FEMA does not endorse any non-government entities, organizations, or services. Claims made by third parties have not been independently verified by FEMA.

²⁷ 2020 FEMA Subject Matter Expert Interview