

You can play a role in helping others recover after disasters like Hurricane Ian

#DAYTONSTRONG: Give back to other communities in their time of need



Laura Mercer Guest Columnist



Only the roof remains of a home in Fort Myers Beach, Fla., after Hurricane Ian, Oct. 5. Most long-term help for victims of disasters is provided by community organizations and volunteers. REBECCA BLACKWELL / AP

Hurricane Ian made landfall in Florida on Sept. 28 as a very powerful Category 4 hurricane, with top winds of 150 mph, according to the Associated Press. More than 100 deaths have been reported, and the storm's damage has been estimated to range from \$40 to \$70 billion in insured losses.

The Dayton area is no stranger to the long and difficult road to recovery that follows a natural disaster. The damage from the 2019 Memorial Day tornadoes is still plain to see in many communities that were directly in the storm's path. Efforts are still underway to replace trees, assist homeowners who suffered losses and to restore natural areas that were leveled by the tornadoes. How can our community give back to others who have recently experienced similar hardship? Hear two perspectives in today's Ideas & Voices on how you can make a difference in the lives of those still reeling from tragedy.

A community's path to recovery from a large-scale natural disaster is complex and multi-faceted, with survivors relying on the assistance of many parties, including private insurance, government (federal/FEMA, state and local), community organizations and volunteers.

Survivors with the means to self-recover through personal resources and insurance will do so, but in many instances those that are impacted are under-resourced and reliant on significant assistance to rebuild their lives.

The Dayton region has recent first-hand experience with the recovery process. The 2019 Memorial Day tornadoes damaged almost 6,000 homes, with nearly 1,200 of those classified as having major damage or destroyed.

The tornadoes' paths disproportionately impacted low-income neighborhoods where many residents were uninsured or under-insured.

Our Harrison Twp., Trotwood and Old North Dayton neighborhoods bore the brunt of the storms. While the poverty rate for Montgomery County is about 17%, these three neighborhoods' rates range between 25-35%.

The federal government's role in a disaster focuses primarily on immediate response and providing impacted jurisdictions access to funds to help them handle the immense burdens a disaster brings. Government does not do longterm recovery for individuals and households. That role falls to community organizations and volunteers, often affiliated with National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOADs).

In the wake of the 2019 tornadoes, a group of our community stakeholders set up a Long-Term Recovery Group to assist survivors. More than 2,100 families, both renters and homeowners, sought assistance.

Forty-six percent of the homeowners we served were uninsured or under-insured.

While FEMA and government resources supported our work, the average FEMA award to impacted families was \$2,913 – not nearly sufficient to allow people to rebuild their lives.

Volunteers and financial support through donations to The Dayton Foundation's Greater Dayton Disaster Relief Fund made our region's recovery possible.

When the tornadoes struck, volunteers from across the nation swarmed in to help with immediate response and stayed to help us rebuild.

These volunteers contributed over 118,000 hours to response and recovery efforts, a value of \$3.3 million.

VOADs from around the country set up host sites in local churches and lived in our community while they helped us rebuild. Hundreds of individual donors and organizations contributed over \$2.2 million to buy materials and to support a wide range of recovery needs. Without this assistance and generosity our community would still be devastated.

This is how disaster recovery works; we are all interdependent, and you can play a part in helping others.

Hurricane Ian's wrath in Florida, Hurricane Fiona's in Puerto Rico, and the floods and tornadoes in Kentucky are top of mind for many of us. If you'd like to assist those that have been impacted, I offer the following guidance:

Volunteering: If you'd like to volunteer for immediate disaster response work or longer-term repair/rebuild work, you should engage with one of the National VOAD members or other organized and resourced group (nvoad.org). Many of these are faith-based, but you do not necessarily have to be a member of that faith community to join them. Military and first responders may find a great fit volunteering with Team Rubicon (www.teamrubiconusa.org/volunteer).

Florida and Kentucky also both have local leads coordinating efforts (volunteer.volunteerflorida.org and kentuckyvoad.org).

Donating: Money is one of the most powerful tools in disaster recovery. The Dayton Foundation offers guidance on reputable charities for recent disasters (daytonfoundation.org). VolunteerFlorida.org also has donation guidance. Please refrain from sending material donations that have not been specifically requested by an organization that is actively engaged in the region's recovery work, as unsolicited donations can overwhelm communities and hinder recovery.

Thank you to all who supported our community's recovery and to those of you who will strive to help those more recently impacted. You make the world a better place.

Laura Mercer is the former executive director of Miami Valley Long Term Recovery Operations.