

Caring For Children After Disasters



“Everything we usually do has been turned upside down,” says Lisa Crouch, Associate Director of Children’s Disaster Services, a Week of Compassion partner through Brethren Disaster Ministries. Children have unique needs following disasters, and CDS typically provides trauma-informed childcare in evacuation

shelters and disaster resource centers during and after disasters. But as the pandemic has changed the face of disaster response, CDS has adapted their work for the COVID-19 context.

CDS decided to shift gears back in early summer, after learning that volunteer teams would not be deployed to disaster sites for the foreseeable future. With non-congregate sheltering, there would be no place to provide a community play space, and gatherings in general were not advised. CDS began to strategize about how they could support children from a safe distance.

The solution: to distribute “kits of comfort” for children affected by disaster. Each kit contains activities specially designed for children who have been affected by disasters and an activity guide for parents. In 2020, CDS distributed over 2500 kits to children across the country.

Many of the kits were specifically designed for those impacted by COVID-19. Some went to families that were quarantined in COVID-positive hotels; and 1,000 went to tribal communities that were hit especially hard by the virus.

The feedback from those who received the kits has been overwhelmingly positive, and families have been very appreciative. Of course, there have also been challenges. Finding a contact in the affected communities and getting them delivered has been difficult, in the fluid environment that typically follows a disaster. Furthermore, with a record number of disasters occurring in 2020—from wildfires and hurricanes to the pandemic itself—quantity has also been a concern. Partners have had to be very discerning about how to make sure the children with the greatest need actually received them.

Crouch shares that “the best thing to do when lives are disrupted is to bring back

some sense of normalcy... [For children], the best way to do that is to incorporate some type of play. They see that normalcy coming back. We see them working through their emotions. It's very important to let them work at their own pace and not push any direction but let them work through how they're feeling." The kits of comfort are helping thousands of children do that, and Week of Compassion is grateful for the work of our partners in thinking creatively about how to minister to children in these unique circumstances.

2020 marked CDS's 40th Anniversary of serving children. "We certainly had envisioned it being a different year, but feel thankful that we were able to still be instrumental in helping children after disasters, even from afar," says Crouch. "Not only was it our 40th anniversary, but we also went over the '100,000 children served' mark, which is an amazing feeling of accomplishment. We are thankful for our partnerships with organizations, like Week of Compassion, that enable us to stretch our programs to reach as many children as we can."

Children's Disaster Services is available to virtually present to community groups and congregations regarding the needs of children in disasters. The focus and length of the presentation can be tailored to meet the needs of the requesting party. Topics may include: how CDS works in a disaster setting; history and future of CDS; highlights from deployments; building resiliency in children after disasters; the importance of play; and best practices for helping kids cope with a multitude of disasters, including COVID-19. For more information, contact Lisa Crouch: Lcrouch@brethren.org.

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