

CAER offers tips for rebuilding in the wake of a disaster

Alysia Yeager, American Red Cross
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Do you know what your first steps would be if your community, your home, and your livelihood were impacted by a disaster? Disasters happen everyday, and most of us watch the news coverage from the comfort of our living rooms, thankful it wasn't us. But disasters don't just happen on a grand scale; in fact, the most common disaster in the U.S. today is the single family fire. For many people impacted by disasters there is this overwhelming sense of loss, and doubt about where to start rebuilding.

As the Emergency Services Director at the Steele County American Red Cross, and a member of Steele County Community Awareness Emergency Response (CAER), I am committed to preparing for and responding to emergencies. Remembering that the best way to recover from a disaster is to be prepared before it strikes; know the kinds of emergencies that can take place in your community and plan ahead for them. Even with the best preparations, however, every disaster requires clean up. The following tips are for navigating the aftermath.

The recovery process is usually a gradual one; it takes time and often places a great deal of physical and mental stress on individuals involved. Your first concern is your family's health and safety, and this should remain the number one priority as you move through the other phases of recovery. To keep everyone at their best be sure to get enough rest and pace yourself. Set priorities and be aware of exhaustion. Be sure and drink plenty of clean water and take time to eat well. Often times after a large disaster, organizations like the Red Cross and Salvation Army will be active in the community making sure residents have water and balanced meals to eat. Look for these resources as you and your neighbors move through the recovery process.

As you begin to clean up, be sure that you are wearing all the right safety equipment, such as sturdy work boots and gloves. Be aware of additional safety issues that may have been caused by the disaster. If it is weather related, pay attention for warnings of additional severe weather and plan accordingly.

When returning home, there are a few important things to keep in mind. First of all, be sure you have identification with you so you will be allowed to enter the area which may be restricted to residents only.

Before entering your home, do a thorough check for structural integrity, loose power lines, and gas leaks by walking around the outside. Do not enter if you smell gas, floodwaters remain around the building, or your home was damaged by fire and it has not yet been declared safe.

Once you enter your home, look for the following things:

- Natural gas: If you smell gas or hear a hissing sound, open a window and leave immediately. Do not ignite an open flame or do anything that may cause a spark such as making a phone call or turning the lights on or off.
- Appliances: If appliances are wet, turn off the electricity at the main fuse box. Then unplug appliances and let them dry out. Have the appliances and electrical system checked by a professional before using them again.
- Water and sewage systems: If pipes are damaged, turn off the main water valve. Always check with local authorities before using any water to make sure local sources haven't been contaminated. For a detailed water purification process visit www.redcross.org and click Recover after a Disaster under the Getting Assistance tab.
- Food and Medical Supplies: Throw out all perishables that have been unrefrigerated for more than two hours. If non-perishables or medications have been exposed to high heats, or open flames discard them immediately and arrange for replacements.

One of the most important things to know when recovering from disaster is where to get help with emergency housing, food, clothing, first aid and financial assistance. For residents of Steele County, help is available from the American Red Cross (451-2777), or the Salvation Army (455-2023).

Alysia Yeager is the emergency services director of the Steele County chapter of the American Red Cross and a member of Steele County Community Awareness Emergency Response (CAER), an organization with a purpose to help people, business, and agencies promote the highest possible community awareness and emergency response and recovery from disaster. For more detailed information about how to recover from a disaster, visit www.redcross.org or www.fema.gov. Any questions about this article should be directed to Alysia Yeager at 451-2777 or Alysia@steeleredcross.org.