

## *WORKING BEHIND THE SCENES*

### History of New York State Council of Churches in Disaster Response

In recent years the New York State Council of Churches has become involved in disaster response. Major involvement began following the 1998 Northeast Ice Storm. A stumbling block for some who wanted to put resources into long term recovery was that the money needed to be channeled through a 501(c)3 federal tax-exempt organization. Organizers in Northern New York included the Rev. Clint McCoy, Executive Presbyterian of Northern New York, who approached the Council about being the fiscal agent for long term recovery efforts. An agreement was reached.

After the recovery efforts were over a small amount of unspent funds from the Ice Storm recovery effort was given to the Council as seed money to create a fund of last resort – a place where people could turn when all other forms of help were exhausted. About half of that amount remains, the other half having been distributed. Individuals, congregations, denominations or organizations can donate to the fund; donations are tax deductible. This history and the Council's response to it led to the creation of a formal document that laid out how the fund would be administered. This was distributed to providers for comment and amendment before being passed by the Collegium (Board of the Council) in 2004.

### Disaster Response - Local, Governmental and Non-Governmental Agencies

Disasters create needs so great that local, government and non-governmental agencies need to work together to respond. These responses begin with local emergency efforts. Some are immediate and personal by those who witness destruction and give of their time and resources to assist those who have been affected. Another local response is by emergency providers – fire departments, EMTs, the local Red Cross and others who can be on the scene immediately.

But at times the needs created by the disaster can overwhelm the capacity of local emergency providers. In most cases like this, the area is declared a Federal Disaster Area which opens the door for state and federal emergency management agencies (SEMA and FEMA) with their vast resources to step in. No one could make it through these initial days without the help of SEMA, FEMA and the Red Cross, but their presence is time limited – and some needs go on well past the deadline.

This moves us to providers who specialize in long term recovery. Much of this work is coordinated by Church World Service and denominational disaster teams – volunteers from within their constituency with resources available from the national bodies. Some specialize in a certain kind of service, such as counseling or hands-on building and repair. Often various denominational teams are on the ground in the same area. The challenge of networking these faith based providers was raised in conversations about how to provide more effective and efficient service.

### Networking Faith Based Providers

The Council named a team that has been working with Church World Service and others to find a way to coordinate their efforts. The team has been exploring options for how this could be done without taking valuable time of providers for meetings. Looking for an opportunity when many providers would be together the team approached New York State VOAD (Volunteer Organizations Active in Disaster) about doing a workshop at their annual conference and will be leading a workshop “Interfaith Organizing” in June.

Presently members of the team are: Joann Hale (Church World Service), Eileen Dearborn (United Church of Christ), Clint McCoy (Presbyterian Church USA) and Chick Straut (United Methodist Church). Other parties interested in being part of the team are encouraged to call the Council Office at 518-436-9319.

#### Other Disaster Related Activities of the Council

In addition to efforts to network faith based providers and support the work of the unmet needs process and long term recovery through the Ecumenical Disaster Relief Fund, the Council also

- provides information about disasters to denominational units to share with their constituencies. (This was used so broadly following 9/11 that AOL shut down the Council account thinking the Council was sending spam, but they rapidly restored it when they learned what was being sent and why.)
- promotes awareness about disaster response by disseminating information about trainings and other educational information to encourage participation by faith communities.
- advocates, when needed, for legislation that will help the work of disaster responders in New York State.