

Building Your Community

Disaster Relief

The need: When a fire, flood, or storm hits, families can lose their homes and everything in them in a single day. Whole communities need help getting back on their feet. The dangerous work is for trained adults. But there's a lot youth can safely do to help people recover.

"We rise by lifting others." — Robert Ingersoll

"A single act of kindness throws out roots in all directions, and the roots spring up and make new trees."
— Amelia Earhart

"Out of difficulties grow miracles." — Jean de La Bruyère

FACILITATOR NOTES

Time. about 60–90 minutes, run in one sitting. Works in a classroom, youth group, or club. Option A needs no setup; Options B and C use real service arranged ahead of time.

Service today. Pick one option in Serve below and set it up before you begin.

Warm-up (10 minutes)

FACILITATOR NOTES

Keep this quick, short answers are great. Read the questions together.

- Have you ever seen a disaster on the news, or been through one? What stuck with you?
- If your family lost your home in a day, what would you need most, right away, and in the weeks after?
- Why do you think people keep needing help long after a disaster leaves the news?
- What can young people safely do to help, and what should be left to trained adults?

Learn (10–20 minutes)

Natural disasters, fires, floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, can upend a community in hours. Families lose homes, belongings, photos, pets, and the ordinary sense that they're safe. In the first days there's a scramble for the basics: shelter, food, water, clean clothes. But the harder truth is that recovery takes months or years. Long after the news crews leave, families are still rebuilding, still replacing what they lost, still trying to feel normal again. Disaster relief means helping at both stages, and a lot of the most needed help is calm, behind-the-scenes work that's perfect for youth.

After a disaster, people need:

- Right away: shelter, food, water, clothes, and basic supplies.
- In the weeks after: help cleaning up, replacing belongings, and handling the overwhelm.
- For a long time: patience, support, and not being forgotten once the news moves on.

A closer look. Picture a family who lost their home to a house fire, gone in an afternoon, decades of life reduced to ash. The first night, a shelter takes them in. The next week, neighbors and strangers drop off clothes, gift cards, and a box of toys for the kids. But months later, when everyone else has moved on, they're still rebuilding, still missing a thousand small things, still shaken. That's when a youth group

shows up with assembled kits, a fresh meal, and a card that says “we didn't forget you.” Sometimes the most powerful relief comes after the spotlight is gone, when the cameras have left but the need has not.

Why the help has to last. It's easy to think of a disaster as a single event, but for the people living it, it's the beginning of a long, exhausting climb. Repairs, paperwork, and replacing a whole life take time, and the emotional weight, the fear, the grief, the stress, doesn't vanish when the water recedes. Attention rushes in during the first dramatic days and then drains away, even though the need stretches on for months. That's the gap youth can fill. They can be the helpers who show up early with supplies. And just as importantly, the ones still there, and still caring, after most people have forgotten.

How youth can help, safely. The front-line, dangerous work belongs to trained adults and responders. Youth help with the huge amount of safe, supporting work, and there's plenty. Youth can:

- Assemble relief kits: hygiene items, water, snacks, basic supplies, comfort items for kids.
- Run supply or fundraising drives for the specific things relief groups say they need.
- Help at safe collection or distribution points, sorting, packing, and organizing, away from any danger.
- Support recovery long-term: cards, encouragement, and cleanup help once an area is declared safe and adults are leading.

Keep these in mind.

- **Safety first, always.** Never go near an active or unsafe disaster area. Your help happens in safe places, led by adults.
- **Give what's needed, not what's handy.** Relief groups need specific things; random donations can actually get in the way. Ask first.
- **Don't forget the after.** The need lasts far longer than the headlines. Being there months later is rare and precious.
- **Money and supplies both help.** Trusted relief organizations often turn a dollar into more help than a carload of random goods.

Serve (30–60 minutes)

Today you'll put this into practice in a real service activity. Here are ways to do it:

Option A — Spread the word and send heart *(no cost, no prep, works in any setting)*

You can help before spending a cent. Find out what a trusted local relief group actually needs after a disaster, and make a clear flyer or announcement so your community knows exactly how to help, what to give, where, and when. Then write cards of encouragement for affected families to tuck into relief kits. Good information and a little heart ask nothing of your wallet, and both are genuinely needed.

Option B — Assemble relief kits *(low cost, a bit more effort)*

As a group, assemble relief kits from donated items or a small shared budget, the things families need right after a disaster: bottled water, non-perishable snacks, basic hygiene, baby supplies like diapers and wipes, and comfort items and small toys for kids. Pack them neatly, label them clearly, and deliver them to the organization. Build them to the relief group's list, not to your guesses.

Prepare ahead. As the facilitator, you'll get ahead of time the relief group's actual needs list and gather the items (donated or from a small budget), so the kits match what's truly needed.

Option C — Join an ongoing relief or recovery effort *(more effort; ongoing service)*

Partner with an established local or national relief nonprofit, like the Red Cross or a community recovery group, for the long haul: run a drive for exactly what they need, help at a safe collection or distribution center, or, once an area is declared safe and adults are leading, help an affected family with cleanup. Showing up for the slow recovery, long after the spotlight fades, is exactly the help that tends to run short.

Prepare ahead. As the facilitator, you'll connect ahead of time with an established local or national relief nonprofit and set up a safe way to help. JustServe.org can help you find one and make the connection.

Before you go (all options): This is the most safety-sensitive need in this whole section. Youth never enter disaster zones, damaged buildings, or any unsafe area, full stop; that work is for trained adults and emergency responders. All youth help happens in safe, supervised settings (a school, church, or collection center), with your mentor, and through established relief organizations. Follow every instruction from the adults and the relief group exactly.

Reflect (10 minutes)

FACILITATOR NOTES

After serving, talk through a few of these together, then give everyone quiet time to write.

What surprised you about what people need after a disaster, especially in the long run?

Why do you think help fades even though the need lasts so long?

How did it feel to help people you may never meet?

What's the difference between giving what's truly needed and giving what's easy to give?

Then finish one or both sentences:

One way I want to help people recover from a disaster is...

One thing I'll remember about helping after the headlines fade is...
