

Not My Fault: The best way to help disaster victims: Make sure your family, business, community are the most prepared they can be

Lori Dengler/For the Times-Standard

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For over a week you have been glued to news or social media following the events in Mendocino, Sonoma and Napa Counties. At first it seemed like a few fires burning the hills and sparsely populated areas. Slowly the realization of the magnitude of these fires began to hit. You continue to be amazed by the videos and stories of narrow escapes and heroic actions by responders.

You want to help. You saw a posting or heard a news report that people need X, Y and Z. You pick up some supplies and add some old camping gear. Maybe your church, scout group or other organization puts out a call for donations. A neighbor adds some casseroles and cakes so that the displaced people can have some home cooked food. You drive hours to deliver your goods to one of the shelters. It feels good to do something that will assist the thousands of people who lost so much.

At the shelter you see sidewalks piled high with donated supplies. No one seems to be coordinating the goods and much is strewn about. Perhaps you unload and add your offerings to the pile. Maybe you ask someone at the shelter what to do with it and they tell you they can't handle donated goods right now, and no, they can't take any food that hasn't been prepared in a licensed kitchen according to state law.

Like the aftermath of hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria, the Northern California fires have brought with it the contributions of thousands of well-intentioned people. Shelter volunteers and disaster workers call this the "second disaster" because now responders have to deal with disposing these items. Research estimates that 60% of donated goods will end up in a landfill.

Sometimes these well-meant offerings can be hazardous. In 1998 Hurricane Mitch struck Honduras leaving more than a million people homeless. A plane bringing responders was unable to land at the airport because the runway was covered with boxes and bales of unsolicited clothing.

Just because you have heard a call for items on TV or social media, doesn't mean it is a legitimate or current request. In May of 2011 a tornado ripped through Joplin, Missouri. A news reporter learned people had lost their appliances. She then reported on television that Joplin needed refrigerators, washers, dryers, etc. And people responded, filling sidewalks and parking lots. But people had lost their homes and there was no place to store, distribute, or install/repair. It ended up being an extra expense and time sink for responders who had to move it all to a landfill.

"Be kind," someone exhorted me on Facebook after I posted an article about not sending stuff to the fire victims. I applaud your desire to help people who have lost so much. The altruism of people in the aftermath of a disaster is one of the better traits of humanity. All I am asking is to make sure your donated effort is of use.

The most useable donation is money. Money to reputable aid organizations can be turned into food, clothing, shelter and the many other needs of displaced and affected people. "I am on a fixed income," you say and really can't afford to give money. Think creatively and pool your efforts. I applaud the second-graders at Ridgewood Elementary School who set up bake sales and lemonade stands throughout Humboldt County for wildfire victims. They raised \$3,000. Consider having a neighborhood yard sale with all proceeds going to relief.

One of the best things you can do now is to use your energy and compassion to make sure your family, your business and your community is the most prepared it can be for the next disaster – the one that strikes right here. Do you have an emergency plan? Have you stored emergency supplies? Do you have copies of your important documents that you could grab at a moment's notice if you had to evacuate? Are you signed up to receive emergency notifications?

Today is the Great California ShakeOut. This is an easy first step to preparing. Set your phone alarm to 10:19 or listen to KHSU FM 90.5. DROP down to the ground and COVER your head and neck with your arm. If there is a study table or desk nearby, slide beneath it and HOLD on the legs to keep yourself underneath. Get into the habit of counting how long the shaking lasts. If you live or work in a tsunami zone, a count of 30 or longer is your signal to move inland or to higher ground as soon as the shaking eases enough so that you can safely walk. The more you practice the more likely you will be to do the right thing when a real tsunami could be on its way.

Preparing for earthquakes will help you prepare for all emergencies. Leave a message at (707) 826-6019 and we will be glad to send you a free copy of Living on Shaky Ground. How to Survive Earthquakes and Tsunamis in Northern California. The website <http://abc7.com/take-action-how-to-help-north-bay-fire-victims/2515175/> includes links to reputable fire donation sites.

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