

Private Donations

It is common when a mass crisis occurs that people want to donate funds to help provide services to the victims of the crime and/or help non-profit agencies provide services to the victims. Often people do not know how to donate or where to donate their funds. Families and friends of the victims may also set up individual funds for specific victims to help with a variety of costs.

Identify an Agency/Financial Institution that can Accept Private Donations

Identify an agency that is willing and able to accept funds for this purpose. It may be an existing non-profit agency or it could be a financial institution such as a bank. Non-profit agencies need to make sure that their bylaws allow them to collect and disburse funds for this purpose. Any agency/financial institution needs to determine whether the donations for this fund would be considered tax deductible for the people that donate and whether there is any tax implications for the people receiving private donations.

Identify these agencies/financial institutions before an event occurs! It is also necessary to decide what the funds will be used for and who will decide how the money is distributed.

Setting up the Funds

You may want to consider setting up two funds – one that is designated to go directly to victims of the crime and one that is designated to provide services for the victims and/or community.

Funds directly for the victims – It is extremely important that before people contribute to a fund for a mass tragedy incident that it clear to those who will be donating to the fund: 1) Who will receive these funds; and 2) How the money will be disburse.

Here are some tips when you set up a fund:

1. Establish one central fund that people can donate to that is reputable, established, and has the ability to disburse money directly to the victims
2. Advertise through the news media and community groups that people can donate to this fund.
3. Make sure that people can donate by credit card through a website or through PayPal.
4. Determine how it will be decided who will be eligible to receive money from this fund – In the past, there have been two general ways that private funds have been disbursed: 1) Through an assessment of the particular needs of the

families; and 2) through a formula that is established which takes into account whether a death has occurred and the severity of people's injuries.

5. Victims usually need funds soon after the incident because many times they are not able to work and have bills to pay such co-pays and/or have to replace items such as phones and medicines. Victims may need to have family members come to Colorado to help them. Think about who would be eligible to receive those funds and how those funds can be disbursed quickly. These funds are usually unrestricted funds meaning the victims/survivors who receive them can use these funds however they chose. Although agencies will track who gets the funds and what the intended purpose is for the fund, there is not a reporting process once those funds are disbursed to the victims/survivors.
6. The disbursement of private funds is a very difficult process and often causes hard feelings among the victims/survivors of the incident both towards each other and to the people administering the funds. One of the lessons that has been learned throughout the country through various tragedies is to have a plan in place before anything happens in your community.
7. Once a centralized fund is established it must be established immediately how those funds will be disbursed and by who. Will there be a committee that will make that determination and if so how will the membership of that committee be determined? Who makes the decision as to how the money will be divided? Will an assessment be made based on individual needs for those that are injured? Will money be set aside for future needs of the victims? If money is going to be based on a formula, how will that formula be developed?
 - a. Columbine did an assessment of the victims' individual needs. People were brought in to make that assessment.
 - b. The victims who were injured or died in the Aurora tragedy received a set amount of money soon after the shooting. Following that initial disbursement, Aurora had a person from outside of Colorado meet with the victims as a group and then developed a formula as to how the money would be distributed and to whom. It was based on: 1) those who died in the shooting; and 2) for those who were injured, how many nights were spent in the hospital. Those who did not stay in the hospital did not receive any funds.
8. Accountability is key. Records MUST be kept by the agency who disburses the money.

Donations for Goods and Services to Victims and Agencies

People who are donating funds may want to have their donations go to provide direct services for the victims. This may include cash donations or good and services.

It is important that the agency that is handling the donations of specific goods and services has the ability to have in-person staff to answer calls, the names and contact information of the victims/survivors the incident, the ability to vet and screen the donations, the ability to store and goods provided, and the ability to get the goods and services to the needed person/agency.

Some ideas of how those donations can be used include:

1. The provision of “no cost” mental health services to any victim. Although victim compensation will cover mental health needs, there are times when people want to talk to a counselor or therapist immediately after the incident.
 - a. In the Aurora shooting, Aurora Mental Health provided therapists who were available to anyone in the community at no cost for the first two weeks after the shooting.
 - b. In the Columbine shooting, Jefferson County Mental Health coordinated the mental health response.
 - c. After the shooting at Platte Valley High School in Bailey, Colorado, the Pike Peak Mental Health Center coordinated the response along with assistance from Jefferson County Mental Health.
2. Provision of crisis counselors and/or therapists at schools, business, etc. immediately after the incident when children are going back to school or people are returning to work.
3. Funds to hire case managers to help victims with some of their short and long-term needs.
4. Services for special populations including victims with disabilities, those who need interpreters, etc.
5. People have donated security systems for schools, food assistance, tickets to sporting events, and numerous other activities. It is important to identify what agency is going to be “the keeper” of these offers, make sure the general public has the contact information for the agency who is accepting these donation and how these “gifts” will be distributed.

Pre-planning is Key

1. What agency/financial institution will collect the funds?
2. How will funds be disbursed and to who?
3. Who will make the decision as to the distribution of funds?
4. Anticipate the economic needs of people – people may not be able to go back to work and may not have a source of income to pay rent, utilities, food, etc.