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# Mitigating the “Second Disaster”

## *Rethinking donations management*

It happens in every major disaster. Well-intentioned people overwhelm disaster workers with donations of used clothing and household items. While there is no question that people who have lost everything may have need of some of these items, there is little thought given to the impact on disaster operations.

That impact can be significant. In my career I have seen numerous examples of this:

- Staff pulled from the emergency operations center to meet a “symbolic” shipment of donated water from a sister city.
- Military flight missions diverted to pick up donations for political reasons.
- Landfills pushed to capacity with unneeded goods (e.g. fur coats sent to Hawaii).

The problem has several dimensions. Leaving aside the unsuitability of some items, a very real issue is sizing and sorting used clothing. We lack the resources to do this and must rely on agencies such as the Salvation Army or on volunteers. In the end, much of this used clothing ends up in an overtaxed landfill because there is no one to sort it.

A secondary issue is the presence of people in the disaster area who are inadvertently putting themselves at risk or creating problems for the local authorities. It’s no wonder that donations management is referred to as the “second disaster” by many emergency managers.

### **What’s not working?**

Our response has been to mount public relations campaigns that encourage people to donate cash rather than goods. Yet at the same time the media is running horror stories about donated goods, they highlight the efforts of volunteers who are making use of donated goods.

In addition to this conflict in messaging, we have social science research that demonstrates that people tend to be highly altruistic in disasters; they *want* to help. Given this tendency and the evidence of the importance of donations, is it any wonder our “just give cash” message is falling flat?

It may be time to rethink our donations management policies to align with what the research is telling us. In other words, we need to a strategy for donations that satisfies the need for public altruism while minimizing the burden on emergency managers.

## Alternatives

If we reorient our thinking from the problems created by donations to a desired outcome, we can identify several alternatives to our current message, many of which are already being used. Our desired outcome is simple: we want to match resources to needs in the most efficient way possible. To do this, we need to be specific about what those needs are and communicate this to the public.

Here are some possibilities:

1. **Don't discourage all donations; be specific** – It's not that we don't need or want donations. The problem is that we get items we don't want rather than those we need. We need to be specific about what we need and get that message out as early as possible.
2. **Broaden the cash message** – One of the problems we have is that our message usually targets only large organizations like the Red Cross. However, people are reluctant to give to large organizations because of perceived fiscal issues or biases. Offering a range of options for smaller groups might increase their willingness to donate.
3. **Emphasize the use of gift cards** – Gift cards have the advantage of allowing survivors to make the decisions about what they need rather than relying on in-kind donations. Since they are handed directly to the survivor, they eliminate the concern over redirection of funds by a non-profit that is cited as a barrier to donations by many people.
4. **Leverage Amazon's Wish List feature** – One of the emerging trends in donation management is the use of Amazon's Wish List feature. Smaller non-profits having

been using this feature to identify specific items that are needed. People then have the option of what items they want to donate, and the items are shipped to the non-profit, where they are either used or consolidated for forwarding to the recipients. This system could conceivably be used to support shelter operations with little difficulty.

5. **Encourage collective action** – My social organization maintains a disaster coordinator in each region who reaches out to members potentially affected by a disaster and then reaches out to members to help fulfill needs. The donations are specific and targeted to individuals.
6. **Work with existing organizations** – local organizations can serve as collection points, redirect or refuse inappropriate donations, or make use of them locally. But they will need help crafting a plan to surge their volunteer capacity and might need funding in a disaster role.

## Preplanning is a must

Perhaps the greatest challenge will be how we apply technology to support donations management. Well-meaning organizations spring up overnight following a disaster. There is a need to collect, assess, and communicate the existence of these organizations.

As anything in emergency management, donations management does require pre-planning. Questions such as: Who will gather resource needs and communicate them? Who will post to Wish List? Who will establish collection points? must be worked out ahead of time. Trying to craft a plan and build relationships at the time of disaster is difficult; the advantage is to those who prepare. 