

## Faith Communities & Debris or Mud Removal

Many disasters create localized or community-wide debris fields or mud flows. Religious leaders and volunteers from their congregations are ideal partners to work with emergency managers at debris removal and cleanup. **NOTE:** Debris and mud cleanup can be both a physical hazard to your volunteers and an environmental hazard, short and/or long-term, to both human and animals.

TIP SHEET

18

**SAFETY FIRST— BE CERTAIN ALL DEBRIS REMOVAL IS DONE BY SAFETY-CONSCIOUS VOLUNTEERS WHO ARE PROPERLY EQUIPPED WITH PROTECTIVE GEAR & WELL TRAINED ON EQUIPMENT USE.**

### DEBRIS OR MUD REMOVAL—PUBLIC PROPERTY

#### Role of Government in Debris and Mud Removal

After a disaster strikes an area, the government may help with restoring public works. This includes clearing and rebuilding roads and bridges and clearing debris or mud from hospital and school buildings; it also extends to public parks and conservation sites. FEMA will provide grants to reimburse local governments or specific contractors to remove debris from public property. In some cases, where the debris could cause a public safety risk, the government will help remove it from private property. However, in general the government will not aid in the removal of debris/mud or reconstruction that takes place on private property. For more information regarding exactly what types of private debris removal FEMA will provide, please see the **FEMA: Debris Management Guide** link in the Other Resources section on the page 2 of this Tip Sheet.

### ROLES OF RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES IN DEBRIS OR MUD REMOVAL

#### Coordinate with local Emergency Management Efforts

While individual members of your community may need immediate attention and decisive action in debris or mud removal, you should organize and integrate your efforts with the larger community—usually through emergency management and state VOAD efforts. Generally, one specific agency is charged with overseeing the debris clean-up in a community. Coordinate your actions with them to ensure that your efforts are not duplicating someone else's, while priority needs goes unmet. A multilateral and well-organized effort which involves many parts of the community will help deliver assistance and information to the greatest number of people in the quickest manner possible. Keep in mind that the damage to a particular structure or amount of debris that needs to be cleared from a specific property may not be visible to the public. Your community should set up a system that addresses people's needs based on knowledgeable assessments, not only on eye-witness accounts.

#### Who is in Need of Debris or Mud Removal

When attempting to aid in debris/mud removal, organization is essential. While many survivors may need aid in debris/mud removal, it is important to decide who should receive attention first. Generally, the role of faith-based efforts is to help those who are most in need of assistance. These people may be elderly, uninsured, underinsured, special needs or have chronic health issues (diabetics, asthmatics, et cetera) to care for their property. Your congregation should help identify them and swiftly deliver volunteers or funds to help them begin the clean-up and recovery process.

### BEST PRACTICES FOR DEBRIS OR MUD REMOVAL

**Regardless what type of debris or mud removal you are doing, these tips can be helpful:**

- Use safety-conscious and well-trained volunteers and safe, well-maintained power tools.
- Maintain open communication with local emergency managers. In case an accident occurs, be prepared to call 911 or other first responders so they can provide proper medical attention to anyone who is injured. Update tetanus & hepatitis shots.
- Do a "walk-around" of the area that you will work on. Look for possible safety hazards including: toxic substances, exposed electrical lines; the smell of gas, signaling a broken or leaky gas line; sharp objects that could cut volunteers; any signs of animals/poisonous snakes or insects (bees and spiders) that could harm your staff and volunteers.
- Call the utility company and shut off the gas, water and electric lines to reduce the chance of fire and electrocution, especially when working inside houses or in places where the ground has been disturbed.
- Have a first aid kit ready. Even small cuts and scrapes can become infected if not properly treated. This kit will serve to clean and bandage minor injuries; however, seek medical attention for any and all larger injuries.
- Due to the high likelihood of scratches and cuts, all who help with debris removal should receive a tetanus vaccine before beginning work, to prevent infection from any cut sustained during debris removal.
- Wear proper attire. This will depend on the specific type of debris removal. However, long pants, boots, gloves and protective clothing such as hardhats and eye protection are good essentials to wear during any debris removal operation.

## BASIC TYPES OF DEBRIS REMOVAL

Listed below are some of the basic types of debris you might encounter and the safety hazards that accompany each:

**Vegetative Debris** includes, trees, stumps, limbs, trunks, shrubbery and other leafy materials. When working with this type of debris, be careful of water, gas and electric lines that may be exposed due to a fallen tree or unearthed stump. If in doubt, call the utilities company to ensure that all gas, water and electricity lines have been turned off before working on this type of removal. Hornet nests and other animals that live in/around foliage pose a danger to people attempting to remove vegetative debris. Your staff and volunteers should be able to recognize basic creature dwellings and avoid aggravating the animals that may have once called the debris home. Often this type of debris removal requires the use of power tools, such as a chain saw. Ensure that the volunteers using these dangerous tools are well trained and/or have previous experience with them and are taking the proper safety precautions, like wearing protective eyewear and gloves.

**Building/Construction Debris** includes damaged components of buildings or structures such as lumber, plywood, glass, metal, roofing, tile, carpeting, pipes, concrete, asphalt, equipment, furnishing, and fixtures. The most obvious dangers surrounding this type of debris removal include exposed pipes, sharp jagged edges of metal/wood, and rusty nails. All of these can cut through or puncture most clothing; thus, all volunteers must wear proper attire including work boots and gloves. Also, falling debris can cause injury, especially when the head is struck; therefore, always beware of what (or who) is above you, and wear a hardhat when useful. Finally, any volunteers wielding power tools should be properly trained and use proper safety equipment.

Asbestos: A less obvious threat is asbestos inhalation and the health problems that arise from it. While asbestos use has declined dramatically in the past few decades, many old buildings still use asbestos for insulation, especially in the walls and ceilings. It is crucial that all volunteers working on the removal of construction debris be able to identify and avoid asbestos. Asbestos can only be removed by a licensed professional, working within the regulations of the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

**Mud** (commonly called Muck) includes all mud, sand, soil, sewage, and other semi-liquid material. This type of debris may gather on a property or in a building after disaster-caused flooding. This type of debris can be toxic or contain bio-hazards. It can be mixed with household hazardous waste, such as paints, pesticides, and other dangerous chemicals. To reduce the risk of fire and electrocution, it is essential that all electrical and gas lines be shut off before any work is done. Mud also serves as a hiding spot for many animals and a breeding ground for insects. Furthermore, the sitting water can cause harmful mold, which can be dangerous to inhale.

All volunteers “mucking out” a property should wear proper attire, including rubber boots, mask, gloves, hardhat and other protective clothing.

*Note: in some cases FEMA will aid in the removal of the debris listed above. Refer to the **FEMA Debris Management Guide** link in Other Resources section for more information on the specifics of exactly what items FEMA will help remove. The guide also contains more specifics on how to deal with other types of waste in a safe manner.*

## DEBRIS AND MUD DISPOSAL

Familiarize volunteers with proper debris or mud disposal in accordance with local law and policy. Information on disposal protocols will be made available by local emergency managers, public health officials or the sanitation department. Most vegetative debris or building debris can be piled curbside for removal—or hauled to landfills. Burning debris is usually illegal and can expose the volunteers and the public to toxins. Poison oak and poison ivy can cause injury via smoke, not just physical contact with leaves.

Asbestos must be sorted, packed and disposed of by professionals. Do not allow volunteers to dispose of asbestos.

Mud disposal should also be conducted with local guidance and in accordance with local ordinances and environmental laws.

## OTHER RESOURCES

- **Church World Service: Emergency Clean-Up Buckets—**  
[http://www.churchworldservice.org/site/PageServer?pagename=kits\\_emergency](http://www.churchworldservice.org/site/PageServer?pagename=kits_emergency)
- **FEMA Debris Management Guide:** <http://www.fema.gov/government/grant/pa/demagde.shtm>
- **Environmental Protection Agency: Flood Clean-up—**<http://www.epa.gov/iaq/flood/index.html>
- **Environmental Protection Agency:** <http://www.epa.gov/osw/inforesources/pubs/orientat/rom2.pdf>
- **OSHA Fact Sheet: Flood Recovery—**[www.osha.gov/OshDoc/floodCleanup.html](http://www.osha.gov/OshDoc/floodCleanup.html)