Frequently Asked Questions
About International Disaster Relief Donations

CASH DONATIONS

Why do I always hear that cash donations are best? It makes me feel that relief organizations are only interested in my money. I’m willing to do so much more!

From decades of experience through hundreds of disasters we have learned that monetary contributions are by far the most effective way for people to channel their good will to those affected by disasters overseas. Disaster situations evolve quickly and cash contributions enable relief agencies to purchase exactly what is needed when it’s needed and to respond to new requirements as they arise. Unlike material donations, cash donations entail no transportation costs, no delays, no customs and other fees, no carbon footprint and they do not divert relief workers’ time. In addition, cash donations allow relief supplies to be purchased in markets close to the disaster site, which stimulates local economies by stabilizing employment and generating cash flow. They also ensure that commodities are fresh and familiar to survivors, that supplies arrive expeditiously and that goods are culturally, nutritionally and environmentally appropriate. Few material donations have this highly beneficial, four-fold impact.

How can I be sure that I can trust these agencies to use my cash to really help disaster victims?

A number of resources are available for learning about how your donation will be used. During major international emergencies, the Center for International Disaster Information (CIDI) provides a web link from the CIDI home page at www.cidi.org to InterAction’s list of responding agencies. InterAction is a coalition of nongovernmental organizations involved in international relief and development. In order to acquire and maintain membership, each organization goes through rigorous financial and policy reviews to ensure that cash donations are used appropriately. For additional information about InterAction, its membership and standards, please visit www.interaction.org

You may also want to visit the Better Business Bureau’s site at www.bbb.org/us/charity The Bureau, along with the National Charities Information Bureau, the Council of Better Business Bureau’s foundation and its Philanthropic Advisory Service have joined to form the Giving Alliance, where you can find valuable information on making informed decisions when supporting charities. Other popular resources for evaluating charitable organizations include:

Charity Navigator
www.charitynavigator.org

Guide Star
www.guidestar.org
After major disasters, new, unofficial "relief agencies" may begin collecting cash donations which they claim are destined for disaster victims. Some of these organizations are not registered with the U.S. Government as legitimate charities, though they may place advertisements in newspapers and on internet sites. Because they are not registered, there is little follow-up to ensure that funds collected by these groups ever contribute to relief work in affected areas. If you have doubts about an organization, you may request copies of its audited annual reports as proof that it is registered as a legitimate charity with the Internal Revenue Service, and as proof of a track record in international disaster relief activities.

**What is the appropriate range of overhead that relief agencies should be charging?**

Some relief agencies operate with very low overhead rates because of the nature of their work. A logistics organization, for example, may incur lower overhead costs because they may need fewer people “on the ground” than an organization that sends medical personnel to the disaster site, or professionals to administer the transportation and distribution of commodities and manage longer-term relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction programs. InterAction’s list of agencies involved in response to a particular emergency usually includes information about activities each agency is undertaking and links to information about overhead costs. These lists are accessible on InterAction’s website, [www.interaction.org](http://www.interaction.org).

**Can I receive a tax deduction for my cash donation? How about a report on how my donation to a relief agency was spent?**

Yes, you may request both from the agency to which you make your donation. Additional information on tax exemptions and deductions is available on [www.bbb.org/us/charity](http://www.bbb.org/us/charity).

**IN-KIND DONATIONS**

**I want to give material help to survivors, not just cash. What’s the best way to do that?**

A common misunderstanding about disaster relief is that household items - principally used clothing, canned food and bottled water - are urgently needed after every disaster. The truth is that every disaster is unique, affects people uniquely and requires a unique response. Needed commodities and more can always be purchased locally – even in famine situations. Local procurement supports merchants and economies that are also hard-hit by disasters, and provides supplies that are fresh, familiar, and culturally, nutritionally and environmentally appropriate. Every disaster response is tailored according to population needs that are assessed by relief professionals on-site. Unrequested, unneeded material donations clog supply chains, take space required to stage life-saving relief supplies for distribution, and divert relief
workers’ time. Material donations should only be considered in light of an official needs assessment made by a relief agency working in the affected area. Donors of material goods should identify a recipient in-country and arrange transportation in advance, including customs and other fees.

After collecting several hundred pounds of used clothing, I learned that the relief agencies are not able to transport or use my donation. Now what do I do?

The good news is that you have discovered an important truth about unsolicited donations and can now enlighten others about how to give smartly. For your collection, check out CIDI’s 55 Ways to Repurpose a Material Donation at www.cidi.org which may help you convert your collection into cash to be applied to the relief effort, or to donate locally. For a list of agencies that accept donations of specific types of used clothing and other related materials, check out www1.networkforgood.org. For more guidance on how to demonstrate Smart Compassion, go to www.cidi.org.

I’ve heard that the U.S. Government provided free transportation for donated commodities in the past. They have planes flying overseas all the time – surely they must have some extra space for my donation.

It is not safe to assume that the U.S. Government or any relief agency will transport donations free of charge or even for a fee. That may have been the case decades ago but is no longer true. The collecting individual or agency is responsible to pay commercial rates for the transportation and warehousing of items gathered - costs which can add up to hundreds of thousands of dollars depending on the collection’s weight and volume.

Also consider that sometimes, unless the government of the disaster-stricken country has specifically requested a donation, they may not allow the plane or ship to offload it. The donor is then responsible for the costs of transporting the shipment both to and from the disaster site. In addition, governments of some disaster-affected countries will not waive customs fees on donated items. It will then be the responsibility of those to whom the materials are sent to find the funds to pay these duties - funds which would be more constructively used to help survivors.

Any call for material donations must meet these criteria or risk burdening the relief effort it seeks to support:

- A credible relief organization has identified an unmet need for items being requested;
- An organization is prepared to receive, manage and distribute the items;
- Costs of transportation, shipping, warehousing, and distribution are covered;
- Management of customs tariffs, fees and other cross-border requirements are covered;
- Quality assurance requirements from the host government and the recipient are met and are available for disclosure.

I have several vials of prescription and non-prescription medications that I would like to donate to disaster victims. How do I go about donating these medications?

Distribution of narcotics and other medications to persons other than those they were
specifically prescribed for is illegal in the United States. The coordination and collection of medicines and medical supplies are best left to trained specialists who are experienced in responding to health-related emergencies overseas. The acquisition of appropriate clearances, shelf-life requirements, reliable distribution mechanisms and other factors for transport and use of medications require special knowledge and expertise. If you have no use for prescription medications in your possession, it is recommended that you dispose of them in a safe and effective manner. For additional information regarding international drug donations, please visit the Partnership for Quality Medical Donations at www.pgmd.org

VOLUNTEERING

I would like to volunteer a few days of my time as an international disaster relief worker. I’m good with children and I can also drive a truck or hand out blankets. I haven’t worked overseas but I have traveled quite a bit during my vacations. I will do anything to help!

The desire to help “hands on” is generous and admirable. The kinds of help that disaster affected populations most need, though, come through trained, experienced relief and development professionals. When there is a call for volunteers, candidates with the best prospect of being selected have fluency in the language of the disaster-stricken area, prior disaster relief experience, and expertise in technical fields such as medicine, communications, logistics, or water/sanitation engineering. In many cases, these professionals are already available in-country and U.S. volunteers are not needed.

When a relief agency accepts a volunteer, that agency is responsible for the volunteer's well-being, including food, shelter, health and security. Resources are strained during a disaster, and people without the necessary technical skills and experience can be a financial and logistical burden to an ongoing relief effort. That, plus the goal of providing optimal service to disaster-affected people, is why most hiring agencies will require at least a few years of relief experience, as well experience working overseas. Requests that volunteers make a commitment to spend three months or more working on a particular disaster are not unusual.

Most offers of "another body" to drive trucks, set up tents, feed children and perform similar duties are not accepted. Local volunteers and even disaster survivors themselves are available, and benefit from, participating in relief and reconstruction activities in their communities.

Relief work is a profession that demands trained, experienced individuals who can work effectively in exceptionally difficult conditions for long periods of time. That is true for volunteers as well.

How do I get experience in international relief work if no agencies will give me a chance?

If you are interested in becoming a qualified volunteer it’s best to start small and start locally. Volunteering in your own community will give you experience providing effective help to people in need. Your local Red Cross chapter can give you information on disaster management training courses, which are held throughout the year www.redcross.org/en/takeaclass Your local fire department may also offer training and accept untrained volunteers. Many community colleges offer advanced training in health and other sectors that are relevant to domestic and overseas
emergency work.

As you become more experienced, you can begin to ascertain whether domestic relief agencies will accept you as a volunteer. Contact agencies that interest you; ask about the qualifications they look for and inquire whether your training makes you eligible to help.

For those who can make the time commitment, the Peace Corps is an excellent gateway to the experience one needs to pursue professional or volunteer work overseas: www.peacecorps.gov/index.cfm?shell=learn.howvol as is AmeriCorps www.americorps.gov/about/ac/index.asp

I am a doctor (paramedic, nurse, EMT, dentist) and I know that my services must be needed for relief activities. Where do I sign up?

In most international emergencies doctors are available locally, within the country and within the affected region. In many cases, the host country government will rely upon in-country resources before requesting outside assistance, since local doctors are most familiar with the medical systems, the language, the culture and treatments required.

If you are interested in offering your services as a volunteer, be sure you are working with an agency that is operational on the ground and has authorization from the affected country government to bring in personnel and medications. When unannounced doctors fly into affected countries they frequently travel no further than the airport or to the capital city. If they’re not affiliated with an organization, their medical training may not be recognized, lodging may be unavailable, and roads may be impassible due to the emergency. Local health officials are likely to be fully occupied with relief activities and cannot take time to meet, train and guide a visiting physician.

Many medically oriented relief agencies have volunteer personnel that they have worked with for many years and can call upon at a moment's notice. If you would like to be part of such a cadre, you must register with an organization before a disaster strikes, so that your qualifications and experience may be reviewed and your paperwork put in order.

I understand that disaster relief personnel must have the appropriate skills and training before they are sent on overseas assignments. I am interested in pursuing international disaster relief and humanitarian assistance as a career. Can you tell me where I can get the appropriate degrees and training?

An increasing number of colleges and universities offer degrees in humanitarian fields including Public Health, International Affairs, Economics and International Humanitarian Assistance Law. Within these curricula are a number of humanitarian sectors that you can focus on, including health, water/sanitation/hygiene, logistics, nutrition, shelter, risk reduction and protection. An internet search of colleges, universities and training centers near you can provide a wealth of information and guidance.

I have read your guidelines regarding volunteers, and feel that I have the necessary skills and time to devote to volunteering. Now what?
If you feel you meet the criteria for being an international disaster relief volunteer, we invite you to register your skills in CIDI’s Donation Registration Database. Registering does not guarantee that a relief agency will send you on an assignment, but it makes information about your skills and experience accessible to relief agencies when they need to find personnel to meet specific emergency needs. If an agency can use the volunteer’s skills, that agency will contact the volunteer directly to verify references and finalize details of the assignment. Information contained in this database is shared only with U.S. Government agencies, international relief agencies that are members of InterAction, or relief agencies that are registered with the U.S. Government.

SECURITY

I have relatives who are U.S. citizens and are living in the country where a disaster has occurred. How do I find out if they are safe?

The best resource is the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Consular Affairs. General information about the Bureau can be obtained from the State Department web site at www.state.gov. If you want to call the State Department, check the website first for information that will be asked of you by the person who answers your call.

We were planning to travel overseas, but from what I see on the news, I’m not sure if we should still go. I understand that the airport is open, but how do I find out whether it is still safe to travel?

The State Department is your best resource for this as well. For information regarding travel warnings and other related information, please visit the travel-related section of the State Department’s web site at www.travel.state.gov for up-to-date information about your destination.

ADOPTION

I have seen on television that many of the disaster victims have been orphaned. How can I adopt these children?

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees and the U.S. Department of State has established protocols about adoption. In most cases it is preferable to place orphaned children with members of their extended family or with other families in the same culture. For these reasons and others, many governments do not allow foreign adoptions. Additional information may be obtained through the UNHCR web site at http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/opendocPDFViewer.html?docid=3bd035d14&query=adoption and from the State Department Office of Children’s Issues at www.travel.state.gov.

BUSINESS

I work for the law firm (or public relations firm) of a large corporation. I have been asked to find out how to make a large material corporate donation. What are my next steps?

A good first step is to call CIDI. Center experts can talk with you about financial, cultural and logistical considerations for you and for those you want to help. Many important details, including the quantity and quality of the donation, requirements for
transportation and warehousing must be settled before you proceed. An alternative is to go to CIDI’s Donation Registration Database and submit the information online.

**I manufacture materials that I feel would be useful for disaster relief organizations. How do I get my company listed as a resource?**

First, we invite you to register with the Center’s Donations Registration Database, which records items for donation or for sale. Relief agencies that have access to CIDI’s database and are looking for a specific commodity may contact your company directly if what you’re offering is needed. To register, go to [www.cidi.org](http://www.cidi.org) and complete the registration form for offers of commodities. Remember that registering your offer does not guarantee that a relief agency will contact you, and that CIDI does not “match” donations to relief agencies. Agencies procure supplies based on unmet needs in the field and whenever possible, these agencies acquire supplies as close to the disaster site as possible to support local economies and significantly reduce transportation costs. Information contained in CIDI’s database is not linked to government procurement or contracting systems. Those may be accessed through [www.fbo.gov](http://www.fbo.gov).

**I am interested in bidding on U.S. Government contracts to be involved in international disaster relief activities. Where do I find information?**


**My company is interested in pursuing business opportunities in a country that has recently experienced a major disaster. What is the best resource for investigating my options?**

The Commerce Department has a program for assisting U.S. companies that wish to do business abroad. For additional information, visit the Commerce Department’s web site at [www.commerce.gov](http://www.commerce.gov) and type *international commerce* in the search engine.

*Excerpts from this document should reference the Center for International Disaster Information (CIDI) as the source.*