

Are you ready for the next disaster?

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When another big hurricane strikes Southwest Florida, anyone without a disaster kit risks becoming a burden, rather than a help.

People can avoid finding themselves in that undesirable position this week by learning how to survive a disaster and how to help their neighbors to boot.

The workshop, taught by local disaster responders, will be held Friday evening and all day Saturday at Covenant Life Presbyterian Church on McIntosh Road in Sarasota.

Participants can learn basic first aid, how to use tools safely and how to help distribute food or provide other services when disaster strikes.

Every corner of the nation is susceptible to natural disaster. It can be a severe thunderstorm, such as the one that mangled mobile homes on Longboat Key last month, or a hurricane such as Charley, which caused catastrophic damage in Charlotte County seven years ago.

"It minimizes the impact of a disaster when people can help each other, especially in disasters where you have to have some degree of self-reliance," said Iñaki Rezola, senior director of response with the American Red Cross Sarasota/DeSoto Chapter.

The workshop will also teach people how to prepare their own families for disaster and offer a chance to get to know local responders.

Sarasota has one of the most well-organized response communities in the nation and is held up as a model by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, said Stewart Stearns, chairman of a coalition of response groups, called Sarasota Community Organizations Active in Disaster.

The county has yet to be tested by a major disaster, but a recent brush with severe storms in late March offered a glimpse of the county's coordination. After storms damaged mobile homes on Longboat Key, responders were ready to handle a much more severe problem within an hour and a half, Stearns said.

Everyone should be prepared to help themselves in a disaster, emergency officials insist.

"If you don't put together a disaster kit, it's like going camping with nothing but the clothes on your back," said Ed McCrane, director of Sarasota County Emergency Management.

Worse, an able-bodied person who is unprepared creates a "double-negative," says Curtis Hencye, who organized the workshop. "Not only can I not help somebody, somebody has to come help me."

Hencye, known locally as "the disaster pastor," is a missionary with Relief Ministries Calvary Chapel. He and his wife respond to disasters nationwide and sometimes globally.

A common feeling among those who survive major disasters is a sense of helplessness. Knowing how to help others can alleviate that problem, Hencye said.

Workshop instructors include representatives from Sarasota County Emergency Management, Sarasota County Health and Human Services, the Medical Reserve Corps of Sarasota County, Sarasota Community Organizations Active in Disaster, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the American Red Cross, the Salvation Army, All Faiths Food Bank and Adventist Community Services.