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INNOVATIVE PRACTICE

Community Resilience: Using a Religious Literacy Primer to Improve Engagement with Faith Communities

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SUMMARY

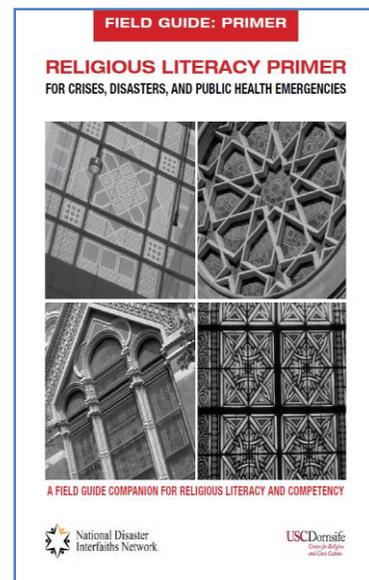
In 2014, the National Disaster Interfaiths Network (NDIN) and the University of Southern California Dornsife Center for Religion and Civic Culture (USC-CRCC) released [*Working with U.S. Faith Communities During Crises, Disasters, and Public Health Emergencies: A Field Guide for Engagement, Partnerships, and Religious Competency*](#) (the Field Guide) and the [*Religious Literacy Primer for Crises, Disasters, and Public Health Emergencies*](#) (the Primer). The Field Guide provides best practices and guidance for government leaders and emergency managers on approaching and partnering with faith communities as part of emergency response and preparedness activities. The Primer provides information on 24 faith traditions in the United States, and emergency managers can use it as a guide to better partner with and serve faith communities.

DESCRIPTION

In 2010, USC-CRCC and NDIN began collaborating on how to improve the relationships between emergency managers and faith communities. By 2014, the NDIN and USC-CRCC developed and released the Primer and Field Guide. Both of these documents are designed to better prepare emergency managers to serve members of faith communities and increase their operational knowledge of these communities' beliefs, practices, and traditions. The documents are also aimed at developing a collection of best practices and standards for engaging faith groups.

The Primer

In 2010, NDIN and USC-CRCC began drafting a tool to help emergency managers improve their coordination with faith communities. A grant from the California Emergency Management Agency partially funded the recruitment of ten contributors to work on the Primer. These contributors had backgrounds in academia, national and regional interfaith networks, public health consulting, government, and human rights.



The NDIN and the USC-CRCC released the *Religious Literacy Primer* to help emergency managers understand religious and faith groups when preparing for, responding to, and recovering from disasters. (Source: [*Religious Literacy Primer for Crises, Disasters, and Public Health Emergencies*](#))

In order to determine which faith groups to include in the Primer, contributors considered three criteria:

- 1) The size of the faith group;
- 2) How frequently the group worked with emergency responders; and
- 3) Whether the group had specific needs or accommodations that might be unknown to emergency planners or responders.

After determining the most relevant faith groups to include in the Primer, contributors drafted sections on each faith tradition, focusing primarily on operational responsibilities and details rather than theological beliefs. Once the sections were complete, religious scholars and other subject matter experts vetted the final document to ensure the accuracy of the Primer.

Disaster Tip Sheets for Religious Competency in Mass Care Settings

The Religious Literacy Primer includes [tip sheets](#) to encourage cultural competency and notify mass care providers of reasonable religious accommodations for five major religious affiliations. These sheets are intended to be an easily distributable guide to help staff and volunteers understand key elements for greeting, sheltering, feeding, and accommodating the religious needs of members of various religions.

The Primer contains information on 24 of the largest and most active faith communities in the United States. By using the Primer, emergency managers are better prepared to provide food, shelter, health care, and worship space in accordance with the needs of faith communities.

Discussion Points within the Primer

For each faith listed in the Primer, the Primer provides details on the following categories:

- Self-identification terminology
- Founder(s)
- Sacred Texts
- Religious Leaders
- Religious Objects/Symbols
- Gender Roles/Interaction
- Holy Days/Festivals
- Death: Dying Practices
- Death: Body Preparation
- U.S. Population
- Branches & Denominations
- Sacred Buildings/Structures
- Local/Regional/National POCs
- Facilitating Practices
- Principal Weekly Observances
- Rituals/Ceremonies
- Health: Medical Care
- Health: Mental Health
- Worship Language(s)
- Basic Tenets
- Governance (Judiciary)
- Governance (Congregation)
- Culture & Social Interaction
- Daily Religious Practices
- Dress Code
- Dietary Laws and Customs
- Pregnancy and Birth

For service providers, the Religious Literacy Primer also lists information relating to:

- Physical Contact Rules
- Mass Care Facility Rules
- Dietary Restrictions
- Mental Health Care
- Medical Treatment

The Field Guide

Similar to the Primer, NDIN and USC-CRCC developed the Field Guide with the assistance of contributors from academia, national and regional interfaith networks, government, and other fields. While the Primer provided government leaders and emergency managers with specific "how to" guidelines when engaging specific faith groups, NDIN and USC-CRCC recognized a gap in guidance for how to effectively work with groups prior to and during disasters and crises. NDIN and USC-CRCC realized that literature and guidance prior to the Field Guide did not focus on the considerations for how government should partner with faith communities.

To this end, the creation of the Field Guide was designed to provide standards, best practices, and deliverables for government and emergency managers as they engage with faith communities. The Field Guide addresses how emergency managers can establish

structures and systems, and build staff competency for functioning strategically when engaging faith groups. This allows emergency managers and government organizations to develop a strategy for effective partnerships that can be implemented in ways that are both religiously literate and competent. Similarly, the Field Guide provides guidance to government partners in understanding the pitfalls faith communities may experience as government attempts to partner with them and leverage their resources. This guidance is designed to provide emergency managers with the information needed to prevent their faith-based partners from becoming overwhelmed—especially with multiple-agency requests for partnership, communications, and messaging—and provide examples of effective engagement approaches. Finally, the Field Guide provides emergency managers with concrete steps, which are different from how they might deal with businesses or civic organizations, to demonstrate respect to faith groups and engage these communities with the necessary level of expertise.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

For more information on NDIN and USC-CRCC's efforts to improve interactions with faith communities during disasters and crises, download a copy of the [Field Guide for Engagement, Partnerships, and Religious Competency](#).

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