

Reflections on my day in Hanover

I had forgotten the smell of flood disaster—mud, sewage, mold, damp wood. It assaulted my nose right away. I had forgotten what it was like to sit with families in despair who had lost everything in a matter of hours as the waters rose, and rose, and rose. I had forgotten the helplessness of being able to do absolutely nothing except to listen, to hold hands, give a few hugs, and say, “Ain’t it awful,” a few hundred times. I spend the day in Hanover, WV, talking to flood victims who so far have not received any help from muck out crews.

Maggie Gibson of Hanover was herself a fire victim two years ago, and our agency, WV Ministry of Advocacy and Workcamps (WVMAW), helped her and her husband Junior to rebuild. Although the flood waters passed her by, she was eager to help her friends and neighbors. She knew that loss well. She asked me what she could do, and I reminded her that one thing that helped her to heal was telling her story to those who would listen. I told her she could listen. That was a start. But then I found something else for Maggie to do: because there were no first response teams in Hanover, we needed volunteers to find out where needs were. So Maggie grabbed some friends and they set up at the fire station to take Preliminary Needs Assessments (form designed by Larry Belmont of FEMA). Maggie and friends made flyers to pass around the community, and even went door to door to make sure people signed up for muck out, immediate access needs, even mental health needs.

Yesterday I went to Hanover and met Maggie at the fire station. She said, “Let’s ride,” and we jumped into my car. When she told me to turn right, I said, “Where? This bridge? I can’t go across this bridge!” She said, “You can and you will!” I could and I did—we can do amazing things when we are prayed up for the day.

We stopped by and talked to Rose, who opened her front door to reveal a completely missing floor and a water line 4 feet up her wall. The stench of mold was strong. All of her belongings were ruined and she had no idea how to muck out. I told her that volunteers would be on their way soon and would help her tear out what needed torn out. I told her FEMA would be assessing and she would be notified how to find out about benefits. And I told her that there were folks that will be here to help figure out long term recovery. She said it helped just to know that someone was on the way.

Rose’s story was not unusual. The same story was repeated at so many houses—everything was gone. What would they do? Where was help? Do I throw out everything? Do you think this will mold? What about the vegetables in my garden? Can I eat them? Jimmy said he just couldn’t think about rebuilding only to have another flood wash it all away. He said he wasn’t sure he could sleep again for worrying about it. And he simply couldn’t afford the \$1500 they wanted for flood insurance.

It was remarkable how everyone would comment that as bad as they have it, someone else had it worse. Frankly no one looked any better or worse than the next. It truly was a mess, but their

sense of community was to help one another as they could. And they made sure they sent us to someone else.

As we visited one house, a neighbor was there and asked if we would stop by his place too. We said we would walk right over in a few minutes. He headed on home. When we arrived I shouted, “Yoo hoo!” in the door and apologetically he said, “Well, come on in I guess. I am so sorry it’s a mess.” I said, “Well you knew we were coming! Why didn’t you clean up?” He laughed. He promised it would look better next time. I doubt it, however. Water undercut the house and moved the basement walls. Floors were “hooved up” and the water line indicated the walls would need cut out.

So much to do. But these are resilient folks who will work hard to get back to normal. So many were thankful for just the promise of help on the way. One lady said, “If folks will just help us out I will cook for them!” For all the need, they are still willing to give back as they can.

Needs assessment: Besides the obvious physical labor of serious muck out, folks have questions about benefits. The setting up of the FEMA field office (DFO) in Godfrey’s Corner will address those questions.

Muck out: NAAA (Americorp) volunteers will be coming in next week for muck out. They will be housed at Gilbert and Welch Presbyterian Churches.

Accommodations: It is a challenge to find accessible places for folks to stay. Maggie has offered her two spare bedrooms and showers. Churches are willing for sleepers, but have no showers. Need to follow up on community center in Baileysville.

Coordination of muck in Wyoming County: Since there is not a muck team in charge here, I have suggested to Cheryl that volunteers staff a table at the DFO in Godfrey’s Corner that will have the referrals for muck out. Perhaps a volunteer would have a spreadsheet of houses and needs, and the muck team would report what had been done. Maggie and her band of volunteers are willing to lead teams to houses. They would be willing to help staff such a desk.

LTRC Wyoming: From the completed muck outs reported to the volunteer at DFO, the LTRC would have the referrals for future needs.

Food: Several requests for a food bank have come up. Maggie and I spoke with “Buck” (not Harless—this is Hanover Buck) who owns Shirley’s Restaurant (that will not open soon) and he is willing to allow a food pantry to be set up in a warehouse that he owns. I will speak to Debbie Stewart and contact our denomination hunger action for start up for food pantry. Then we can get them in touch with other VOAD teams to expand this concept.

Feeding: There is a church that is set up in the parking lot with lunches. I am not sure how long they will continue that.

Mental health: No one circled that they needed mental health assistance. These are proud folk. However, every house I entered spoke with tears of the nightmare of the night it happened, and

the overwhelming mess it is. I have no doubt that workers who simply went to listen would discover needs simply by sitting on what is left of the porch of every house.

These are simply my reflections of the day after spending it with the local folks—not official decisions I have made. WVMAW has intentions of sending workers the week of June 1 from VA that are coming here to muck, and thereafter our summer teams will be working with Harry Drake transitioning from muck to long term recovery. We will work from our Kopperston location. All teams originally scheduled for our Welch location will be sent to Kopperston so that the Welch location will be available for mucking teams and other recovery volunteers that need housing.

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