

7 Questions on the Information Technology Disaster Resource Center

Chris Hillis



Volunteers are the hands of voluntary agencies, helping organizations carry out their mission. There are hundreds of ways to take your passions and use them to help others, whether it's through skills-based volunteering, non-formal volunteer work or participating in a social action volunteer program. The importance of giving back is something that Chris Hillis, Co-Founder of the Information Technology Disaster Resource Center (ITDRC), understands well. Chris explains ITDRC's mission and the importance of communications in disaster recovery.

What is ITDRC and how did it come into being?

ITDRC is a non-profit organization that was founded in 2008 to provide IT resources and communications to communities affected by disasters including wildfires, hurricanes, tornadoes and flooding incidents. ITDRC aimed to create a program with a large scope and a national footprint, which is how we came up with the idea for this nationwide project.

How many volunteer members are there and what specializations do they have?

There are about 1,700 volunteers who dedicate their time to ITDRC. They come from all walks of life and contribute however they can, whether they work as application developers, helpdesk technicians, network designers or engineers. We have a place for anyone to volunteer with us, technical or not.



How important are communications to disaster recovery? Can you describe the difference communications make?

Communications are necessary in each stage of the disaster lifecycle. Residents need information about evacuation orders and shelters before disaster strikes. Throughout the course of a disaster, people need to connect with loved ones and let them know they're safe. ITDRC also provides equipment for communities needing long-term recovery after disasters. We maintain a large cache of equipment, so that we may provide resources to communities for long durations. Equipment can be installed and utilized anywhere from days, to months, to even years in some cases to support long-term recovery.

For example, Joplin, Missouri was hit by an EF-5 tornado in 2011, and the community needed equipment installed for a longer period of time. We did the same for communities affected by Hurricane Sandy in 2012. Once the installation is no longer needed, the equipment is shipped back to us, reimaged and prepared for the next deployment.

What projects has ITDRC led to help people in need?

ITDRC assists with, on average, 15 major deployments per year. These are large flooding incidents, hurricanes, tornadoes and wildfires. We work with a lot of small rural towns that don't get much national attention, too. These deployments are meant to provide aid to survivors in shelters, food banks and command centers. Our goal is to ease the burden of responders and to let them do their job efficiently, and we aim to provide an outline for affected survivors to regain a sense of normalcy.

At any given time, we're continuing to provide support and services to roughly 150 sites across dozens of operations. ITDRC provides IT resources and communications for the post-disaster lifecycle, meaning long-term recovery groups that remain open for years as communities rebuild. We also provide connectivity in common areas for long-term housing in temporary communities. One example where we have done this is in temporary communities affected by the Camp Fire wildfire in California. These types of networks remain active for one to two years, and then we remove the network when it is no longer needed.

What volunteers are you looking for and how can people help?

There is value in technology, which is why we work with so many skills-based volunteers with technical backgrounds. While ITDRC's missions is technical in nature, we also need volunteers who focus on administrative and logistical tasks. We need to be able to move people & products to affected areas to effectively set up operations.

We're always accepting hardware donations, and we don't pick one specific type of hardware over another. We accept both new hardware and life-cycled hardware. We do our best to give last year's cast-offs a second life as organizations upgrade to the latest and greatest.



What is one project story that stands out to you when you describe ITDRC to your friends?

One story that stands out the most to me is the story of Puerto Rico and Hurricanes Irma and Maria. The stillness and quiet I experienced in some of the remote areas was very unsettling. It was surreal. In a lot of areas there was no cell service. People were trying desperately to obtain even one bar of cell service. What happened in Puerto Rico opened our eyes on how to respond to future events, especially for islands and other remote territories.

How do you feel about the work that you do? Is this what you wanted to do since you were young?

This isn't something that I expected to do, but it is one of the most rewarding endeavors I've pursued. I get to work with great volunteers across the country, and we have garnered a lot of support from industry partners to ensure our mission is a success. At ITDRC, I've been able to combine my passion for technology and my education in emergency management to bring something unique to disaster relief. I wholeheartedly enjoy what I do.



[If you're interested in learning more about what we do, check out this video about our disaster recovery efforts in the Bahamas after Hurricane Dorian.](#)