

This is Lieutenant Roger McCort from The Salvation Army in Eureka with today's Community Comment.

I am unbelievably grateful for the way people step up to help each other out in times of need. This has been a summer filled with disasters and many thousands have had lives saved and hope restored by the kindness and generosity of individuals and agencies reaching out to them.

Stories of people helping have poured in from fires up and down the West Coast, Hurricane Harvey in Texas, the earthquake in Mexico, and Hurricanes Irma and Jose on and below the Atlantic Seaboard. And those outside the affected areas have given generously to help those on the ground.

But it is in this last area where the absolute best of intentions can add to the disaster in ways which givers don't always understand.

A news item I saw circulating in Harvey's wake said a couple had gone to a fast food franchise and picked up four-hundred burgers, which they brought to a local evacuation center. The workers there first tried to turn them away, then accepted the food, but began putting it in boxes under the counter rather than handing it out in the shelter. Offended, the donors took their food back and went outside the shelter to hand it out; then made a big noise about their poor treatment at the hands of that agency.

This wasn't my agency, but I can tell you what they were thinking. First, they were so grateful that this couple wanted to help. Second, when they saw the burger wrappers, their hearts sank. If they accepted that food, they were going to have to throw it out, thanks to health codes and a sense that they didn't want to be responsible for a hurricane survivor being killed by poisoning from mishandled food. Small chance of that? Maybe, but it happens.

Relief agencies hate to say no, but, to put this in the most basic terms possible, most goods which are donated to help during or after a disaster actually create a kind of secondary disaster.

A pipeline exploded in San Bruno a few years ago, displacing a few hundred people. Truckloads of used clothing was donated to the service center we had set up. Enough for every person to have picked out a dozen outfits, if it had been in their sizes, if it had been sorted out, and if they had needed it – which they didn't. Furniture too – piles of used beds and dressers and tables and chairs dropped in the walkways leading to the relief center, all to benefit those who

had lost their homes. Where were they supposed to keep a mismatched menagerie of furnishings while they waited a year or more for their homes to be rebuilt?

Even gifts which seem more useful at first glance, like bottles of water, can be procured by relief agencies for far less that it costs to accept, process, transfer, and redistribute the case someone has thoughtfully yet thoughtlessly dropped off from the back of their car.

If you want to help, the best way is not to give stuff. It's to make a financial donation to a relief agency you trust. The dollars you would spend on a case of water will go a lot farther and may be used for something needed more, like medical care or flood clean up kits.

If you aren't sure who to trust, find agencies like The Salvation Army who put every dollar given for disaster relief into disaster relief, not into paying for administration or advertising. There are a few of us out there, if you look, and your gifts are desperately needed and greatly appreciated.

Grace and peace to you. This has been Lt. Roger McCort with today's KINS Community Comment.