

One Year Of COVID-19: Americans Continue Stepping Up To Address Urgent Needs

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ST. LOUIS — One year since the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic, people have stepped up to address the emotional needs of families reeling from the coronavirus and 2020's record-breaking disasters.

For nearly 80 years, U.S. presidents have proclaimed March as Red Cross Month to recognize people giving back through its lifesaving mission — which is powered by more than 90% volunteers.

Americans experienced more billion-dollar disasters in 2020 than any other year on record, and for many, the pandemic compounded the trauma and financial strain of disasters: struggling families needed help quickly and faced more hurdles to recover, as increased anxiety exacerbated many health and mental health needs.

Missouri and Arkansas Responses

In Missouri and Arkansas, and across the country, trained American Red Cross disaster mental health and spiritual care volunteers have had more than 53,000 conversations to provide emotional support to people in 2020 — which had the greatest number of billion-dollar disasters in a single year. In addition, trained volunteers have provided free crisis counseling through the Red Cross Virtual Family Assistance Center for grieving families during COVID-19.

“The past year has been overwhelming for many in our community, and yet through it all, people are caring for one another,” said Marty McKellips, Interim Regional Director. “When help can’t wait, they provide families with the support they need during emergencies. During Red Cross Month in March, we honor this humanitarian spirit and ask you to join us by donating financially, giving blood, volunteering or taking a class to learn lifesaving skills.”

The Missouri and Arkansas Red Cross Region deployed 25 people to help Texas, Kansas and Oklahoma with recent winter storms, including both in-person and virtual support. Five of the 25 individuals who deployed are currently on the ground in Texas helping with the response. Seventeen individuals supported Kansas and Oklahoma virtually in recent weeks.

“All throughout the pandemic, our volunteers and staff have responded to numerous disasters locally and around the country, including daily home fire responses,” said Chris Harmon, Regional Disaster Officer said. “Our teams have impacted thousands of lives in the hours after disasters struck, providing essential support to helping families through some of their most difficult days. We appreciate their ongoing commitment to our mission to prevent and alleviate human suffering.”

2021 KICKS OFF WITH SEVERE WEATHER So far this year, Red Cross volunteers have provided emergency shelter, food and other assistance following disasters like tornadoes and February’s record onslaught of winter storms, which blanketed some 70% of the continental U.S. with snow, ice and historically low temperatures. The severe winter weather forced the cancellation of Red Cross blood drives in more than 30 states, impacting more than 20,000 blood, platelet and convalescent plasma donations in February.

This spring, meteorologists are also predicting a potentially volatile severe weather season: For the third year in a row, April could be a very active month for storms in the Midwest and South, and the West could see early drought conditions and heat waves.

A GROWING DESIRE TO GIVE BACK A 2020 study on a rise in volunteer experiences added to LinkedIn profiles shows that more people want to help others during this unprecedented time. Last year, more than 70,000 people [across the country] became new Red Cross volunteers largely to support urgent disaster and essential blood donation needs.

Locally, in the Missouri Arkansas Region of the Red Cross, more than 1,600 people became new volunteers in 2020. In addition, thousands of COVID-19 survivors — many new to blood donation — rolled up a sleeve to give convalescent plasma and help patients battling COVID-19.

“Our volunteers make up at least 90 percent of our workforce and are critical to our success,” said Kobi Gillespie, Regional Volunteer Services Officer. “We are currently looking for more volunteers to help us both virtually and in person, especially at blood drives and with disaster response. We have open positions ranging from making phone calls, virtually responding to & helping families prepare for emergencies, dispatching disaster response teams, greeting people at blood drives, driving Red Cross vehicles to transport blood, and so much more.” To learn more about local volunteer opportunities in Missouri and Arkansas, sign up for an informational virtual session at www.redcross.org/arcvolunteerfair.

HOW TO HELP You can help ensure that families don’t face emergencies alone — especially during a pandemic:

? **DONATE:** Support our Disaster Relief efforts at redcross.org/ GivingDay. A gift of any size makes a difference to provide shelter, food, relief items, emotional support and other assistance. Your donation will be part of our annual Giving Day on March 24 to aid families in need across the country.

? **VOLUNTEER:** Visit redcross.org/ VolunteerToday for most-needed positions and local opportunities.

? **GIVE BLOOD:** If you’re healthy and feeling well, make an appointment at RedCrossBlood.org. Your donation can make a lifesaving difference for a patient in need. As a thank you, those who come to give blood, platelets or plasma on March 15-26 will receive a Red Cross T-shirt, while supplies last.

? LEARN LIFESAVING SKILLS: Take a class in skills like CPR and first aid to help in an emergency at [redcross.org/ TakeAClass](https://www.redcross.org/takeaclass). Online options include our Psychological First Aid for COVID-19 course, which covers how to manage stress and support yourself and others.