

Considerations when offering disaster assistance: a special COVID-19 advisory

We hope this message finds you, your families, colleagues and loved ones safe and healthy. Together we are confronting a disaster like no other, and we with the [AIA Disaster Assistance program](#) would like to provide some information to help you navigate approaches to providing assistance to your communities and clients.

Background: The president has declared a national emergency due to [COVID-19 and placed FEMA](#) in command. Several states have declared emergencies, and others projected to follow. Those of you who are SAP trained may recall and rely upon the chain of command in the National Response Framework through to your state.

So what does a disaster assistance volunteer to do during a pandemic? What is the role of the architecture profession? Here are some suggestions:

- First, take care of yourself, your family, your colleagues and loved ones.
- Do what you do best: service your clients with empathy and care. They need you now more than ever. Ask them what their challenges are and how you can help. [The AIA Trust](#) and [AIA Contract Documents](#) department, among other areas of [the Institute are providing resources](#) to members on how to [continue business during COVID-19](#). Do your clients have concerns about leaving their buildings vacant? Do they worry their employees will be afraid to return to the building for fear of a virus resurgence?
- In many states with declared emergencies, many but not all architects are still working because construction is deemed an essential service. And yet given constraints of coping with a crisis, [not all firms are working at full capacity](#). Talk with your peers and local AIA Component to see how to support firms in their efforts to keep critical projects moving forward.

Preparing offers of assistance:

- Do your research. What are your emergency alerts and reliable news outlets telling you about the challenges in your communities? Utilize these “situation reports” to anticipate short and long-term impacts. Architects are great at visualizing that which does not exist.
- Utilize your personal and state disaster program networks to ask: what do our communities need from architects? See below for a list of some issues and ideas we’re hearing from the network. They may or may not apply to your situation or your capabilities.
- Work with your state component staff to identify the best representative(s) for local or state government task forces. Ensure your state component has a seat at the table with adequate representation. [The AIA Disaster Assistance Handbook](#) offers both a framework for responding and tangible guidance that can certainly be applied to this very different type of disaster. Don’t have time to read this long document to understand the role of AIA/architects, refer to the State Disaster Coordinator Basecamp for these resources and more: the [cheat sheet here on Getting Involved With Disaster Assistance](#). In particular, this [user guide How to Engage an Architect in Disaster Assistance](#) was developed to communicate to the public and officials on the role of architects in disasters.

- While we thankfully don't have typical building damage to evaluate, every building in the US has been impacted by the pandemic. Brainstorm creative safe alternatives to quarantine and social isolation! How can architects advise on social distancing strategies? What are some of the temporary, shorter and long term solutions to provide more space, better indoor air quality, cleaner surfaces? What might a transition plan (and corresponding architectural solutions) for full occupancy look like?
- Power in numbers! Leverage the AIA committees and member expertise in your local components to tackle some of the bigger community issues that arise. Look at the opportunities to be created by working in collaboration with other AIA committees in your component. Local components work in cooperation with state components, as with your usual State Disaster Assistance organizational structure.
- Use the above to develop a Needs Assessment- what are the issues that architects can help with, and second develop a Capacity Evaluation – know the training/education, skills and general availability of members to provide assistance to the response and recovery (as volunteers, as an AIA component, as firms). After these two steps, the AIA Disaster Coordinator and Staff POC (or other designated component representative) can prepare an outreach message to your state or local emergency management contact (see your state disaster program organizational chart)

COVID-19 Disaster Assistance: who, what, when and how

- When evaluating requests for assistance, remember that every [public] building has an architect. Does the architect need help? Do you have the requisite skills and capacity to provide that help? Is it best to refer the request elsewhere?
- Vet requests for assistance: Are current resources exhausted to be able to meet the need? If resources are still needed, confirm with the architect [of the building or project], as applicable. Is this an appropriate volunteer project? For the AIA committee? A special task force? Or perhaps a firm pro bono project? See guidelines and free resources on pro bono projects [here](#).
- Before embarking on any volunteer activities, determine your liability exposure. Does your state have a [Good Samaritan Law](#)? If so, please consult with local counsel to see if it applies to the current disaster. Remember, you must be deputized and deployed by an authority having jurisdiction. If your state does not provide liability coverage in this situation, be sure to address this.
- Provide consistent service: remember to apply a standard of care in all you do (volunteer, pro bono or fee for service).
- Media requests: AIA Component staff are skilled at working with the media, and will have (or will develop) talking points for communicating AIA's activities with the public. Please contact your state component for a media spokesperson.

What else can I do?

- For volunteers: Explore opportunities to apply your education, skills, equipment and ideas to other creative uses. Some firms are utilizing patterns and materials to make critical medical equipment such as face masks and shield. Connect with your favorite charities and non-profits that may be found in your state chapter of the [National Volunteers Organization Active in Disaster](#). Ask what their needs are, see how architects can help. Alternatively, take off your architect hat and contribute to your communities as a neighbor and citizen.
- Got quiet time? Mentor an emerging professional on how to [address hazard risk](#) and [design for resilience](#) or stock up on your 18 hours of AIA learning units and prepare yourself to be a better citizen and architect in the next disaster. Earn your [resilience certificate on AIAU](#).
- Utilize this experience as a learning experience. Work with your [AIA Knowledge Communities](#) to share what you're learning, ask questions, document key experiences so we may work together on improving our practices to prevent a future pandemic from disabling the country.

Keep checking back to [AIA's Disaster Updates webpage](#) for more technical /design and community engagement resources related to COVID-19. Please continue to use the State Disaster Coordinator Network. With your friends and networks (that's us too!) create and share HOPE... and the silver linings: What are some of the incidental benefits of quarantine? What are you learning about how you would shape "a new normal" once the crisis subsides?

The Disaster Assistance Program

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COVID-19 Potential Architectural Solutions:

- a. Healthcare facility issues: shortage of beds, staff, equipment
- b. Sheltering in place - primary standards/guidance are not written for pandemics, including how to isolate portions of a home or structure.
- c. Temporary housing for quarantine (acquisition, design, retrofit of)
- d. Multi-purpose use and adaptive reuse of buildings [for emergency purposes]
- e. Virtual participatory design processes that don't reinforce existing power dynamics
- f. Un/der utilized buildings to reduce density of shelters and provide safe, healthy space for those experiencing homelessness, recovering from natural disasters, hurricane shelters, etc
- g. Restaurants as community kitchens and reducing density of existing soup kitchens
- h. Temporary retrofits of essential service locations (grocery, pharmacy, fuel/utility, etc) to protect workers and citizens
- i. Alternative ideas or recommendations for volunteer-based construction teams that increase affordable housing stock (ie. Habitat for Humanity)
- j. Forensic architects identifying sources of indoor environmental quality issues
- k. Documenting and debriefing: preparing recommendations for code changes to reduce disease transmission, social distancing, and the above
- l. YOUR Idea Here!