



BUILDING
HOPE
75
YEARS
1950 • 2025

MDS and mitigation: building back better

What's "mitigation" mean? Simply put, it means "building back better." That's something Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS) volunteers do wherever they serve.

For homeowners, mitigation means being able to sleep at night knowing that their homes are built to withstand the next storm, flood, fire or earthquake that comes their way.

Mitigation means lessening the impact of a disaster, or looking for ways to prevent it altogether. This includes repairing or rebuilding homes so they can survive future disasters, or even moving them to a different location altogether.

Examples of MDS's mitigation:

Installing storm shelters. When MDS volunteers build new homes or repair damaged ones, they also install a storm shelter on the property of homeowners in high-risk areas. MDS purchases storm shelters from certified suppliers who meet the minimum criteria set by the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the National Storm Shelter Association.

Raising homes. In flood-prone areas, MDS builds new homes that are raised above the specified flood plain levels. Not only do MDS volunteers meet the required levels—they seek to add two feet to that height. This reduces the risk to the homeowner and usually reduces the cost of insurance as well.

The small town of Crisfield, Maryland, is getting a boost in the form of 106 home elevations that will put residents—who have borne the brunt of repetitive flooding—out of harm's way.

The mitigation project is being led by a new Blue Ribbon Task Force comprised of 57 people representing faith-based partners, universities, environmental groups, the federal government, and foundations.

That sense of security has already started for homeowner Annette Morgan, whose home was elevated eight feet above ground. "I'm ecstatic," she said. "I'll be able to sleep at night despite the high tide warnings on my phone."

Volunteers from MDS are providing the labor involved in preparing the house for raising. Then two local contractors are raising the homes, and MDS volunteers then chime back in to re-apply siding, new stairs and make other repairs so that families can move back in.

Using wind-resistant construction. In areas of the U.S. at risk of tornados or hurricanes, MDS builds new homes designed to withstand 140-mph winds.

When Super Typhoon Yutu hit the island of Saipan in 2018, striking the remote island with 180-mph/290 km winds, the homes MDS had rebuilt on the island survived.

Built to the highest standards to withstand fierce winds, using hurricane straps and fasteners, the 47 homes rebuilt and repaired by MDS volunteers came through the storm with only minor damage.

Employing fire-resistant methods. When homes are lost to wildfires, MDS builds back using fire resistant techniques: minimizing or eliminating exposed wood on the exterior of the home and using roof materials that are especially fire resistant.

Creating new communities. In White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia; Sikeston, Missouri; and Bloomington, Texas, MDS worked collaboratively with multiple partners to build small, new communities—clusters of homes located on higher ground.

Building better bridges. When building driveway bridges, MDS uses wooden-decked steel beams placed over concrete abutments on either side of the creek, with steel pilings driven to bedrock, carefully spanning across streams to prevent catching debris or disturbing ecology. The structures are more easily maintained, and more resilient than the bridges they replace.

Addressing trauma. MDS volunteers also work to mitigate the psychological trauma and loss of hope that people undergo when they experience repeat disasters. How? By not only rebuilding and repairing homes but by providing a listening, caring presence for disaster survivors.

Respond. Rebuild. Restore.