

Baptist disaster relief supports Memphis first responders

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Tennessee Baptist disaster relief volunteers responded to a request from the state to provide support for first responders preparing for anticipated protests in Memphis in the aftermath of the beating and death of Tyre Nichols.



Disaster Relief volunteers from Mississippi and Tennessee arrive in Memphis on Jan. 27 to help provide support for first responders in Memphis. (Photo by Sarah Ellsworth/The Baptist Paper)

While disaster relief teams are no strangers to helping people affected by

natural disasters, this was the first time for Tennessee Baptist volunteers to activate for potential civil unrest, said Wes Jones, Tennessee's disaster relief specialist.

"It's new for us, but it's been done by other teams in different states," Jones said prior to the Jan. 27 release of the videos showing Memphis police officers assaulting Nichols during a traffic stop.

"This is actually pre-planning for a possible disaster. Hopefully, nothing bad breaks out when the tapes come out, but they have to be pre-staged and ready to go. You can't come in two days later. They want to be in the right place at the right time. So, we want to be there to help them and support them as we can."

Nichols, a 29-year-old Memphis resident, was beaten by five Memphis police officers on Jan. 7 and died from his injuries a few days later. The officers have been charged with second-degree murder.

Once it was determined the video footage would be released publicly, local officials called in extra first responders to be prepared for the reaction. Nichols' mother, RowVaughn Wells, called for protests but pleaded with the public to keep them peaceful.

So far, the protests taking place in Memphis and other major cities across the United States have been peaceful, and no reported rioting has taken place.

'A unique opportunity'

Disaster relief volunteers from Tennessee provided shower and laundry facilities in Memphis for the extra personnel brought in from other cities, while a Mississippi disaster relief team assisted by preparing and serving meals.

“This is a unique opportunity, that we’re serving the (first responders), because they don’t have the means to set up meals for themselves,” said Robert Barnett, a volunteer with the Mississippi team. “They’re here to protect the city. So, we’re providing the meals for them because the state has asked us to do so.

“To me, it’s no different. We’re just doing the job that we’re called to do—whether it’s civil unrest, whether it’s a natural disaster, whatever. That’s what we do. We’re not really concerned with the difference between the two.”

About 15 Mississippi Baptist volunteers were preparing three meals a day at a nearby Memphis-area location, loading the food into insulated containers, transporting it to the first responders, then cleaning up, returning to the kitchen and beginning the process again for the next meal.

‘It’s my heart to serve people’

Debbie Snyder, one of the Mississippi volunteers, was on her first disaster relief assignment. Snyder loves to cook and has her own catering business.

“It’s my heart to serve people. This is just what I do,” she said. “And I serve people with food.”

Snyder said her desire was that people would come to know Jesus as their Savior through the ministry of Disaster Relief volunteers.

“I hope their bellies are full, and I hope their hearts get full,” she said.

While the Mississippi volunteers travel back and forth from their kitchen to where the first responders are being housed, Tennessee volunteers remained onsite to oversee the shower and laundry facilities they transported in.

They also provided chaplains for emotional and spiritual support.

Butch Porch, the Tennessee team leader and a member of Woodland Baptist Church in Brownsville, Tenn., said he doesn't recall being involved in an operation like this before.

"We were asked to help, and that's what we're going to do," Porch said. "The main thing that we're doing is providing a service to people who are actually displaced. These (first responders) came all the way from Bristol."

While the nature of the disaster may be different, Jones said he hopes the Memphis operation helps Tennessee Baptist disaster relief build relationships with first responders.

"Because any disaster, first responders are there," Jones said. "They work hard and long hours under sometimes very adverse conditions, and so anything we can do to support them and help them in their different tasks, that's good with me."

Hubert Yates, state director of disaster relief in Mississippi, said the Mississippi Baptist team responded when Tennessee disaster relief asked for their help.

"This is one of the strengths of Southern Baptist disaster relief," Yates said. "It's a wonderful example of the Cooperative Program, outside the flow of money. We come together to accomplish the task."

Jones said he didn't have an end date for the work in Memphis, but since protests were peaceful on Friday night, he didn't expect the operation would last much longer.

Tim and Sarah Ellsworth team covered the disaster relief response in Memphis as part of a collaborative effort by Tennessee's Baptist & Reflector, Mississippi's Baptist Record, The Alabama Baptist and its

national publication, The Baptist Paper.