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Providing a Lifeline to Flood Victims

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Genex case manager Lisa Dykhoff travels 700 miles to help those affected by Oklahoma natural disaster

As most of us watch the [devastating record flooding along the Arkansas River](#) play out on newscasts, Red Cross volunteers like Lisa Dykhoff, RN, MSN, CCM, are onsite in Oklahoma and other affected states, helping hundreds of residents impacted by the disaster.

As a Red Cross medical volunteer, Dykhoff took time off from her job as a Genex case manager in the Denver area to begin a 10-day deployment in a Tulsa-based shelter. There she's providing care to victims left homeless by the historic flooding. We recently caught up with Dykhoff — who's been an RN for 30 years, including the last 18 as a Genex case manager — to give us an assessment of the situation and the work she's doing with the Red Cross.

Tom Kerr (TK): How did you get involved in the relief efforts in Oklahoma?

Lisa Dykhoff (LD): I was called with a request to deploy soon after the flooding started on May 20. I checked with my Genex manager about taking the time off and I was on my way within 24 hours.

TK: Describe what the scene was like when you arrived in Oklahoma.

LD: I reported to the Red Cross headquarters in Tulsa. I participated in a short orientation, met with the

disaster health services lead in the morning and then on to the local shelter in the afternoon with other nurse volunteers. When I arrived at the shelter, there were nurses who had arrived earlier as well as volunteers from all over the country serving many different roles.

TK: Who is coming to the shelter seeking services?

LD: People who have been evacuated due to active flooding or threat of flood due to severe weather including tornadoes, torrential rain and historic flooding along the Arkansas River. So far, the number of people who are staying here has varied between 35-80 at a time. Most are now homeless due to the floods.

TK: What's your role there?

LD: I'm operating as a shelter RN. In the shelter, we take care of all minor injuries but for anything significant we refer them to an urgent care or ER. I assess medical and functional needs and help the residents with any disaster-related or disaster-affected injury or illness. Some typical activities I'm involved in include talking with residents about their health needs and evacuation experience, providing health education, taking vital signs, and assisting with pre-disaster health activities, such as wound dressing changes and glucose monitoring for people with diabetes. We do our best to help clients maintain independence while in the shelter. For those who are injured or ill, we use critical thinking to decide if they need to go to the ER or urgent care. I also use my case management skills. For example, I help order and replace durable medical equipment and medications for those who lost theirs during the flood or evacuation, or arrange a person's previous home care services to be provided at the shelter. I am working 12-hour night shifts which I haven't done in a long time. To be honest, it is very hard work but extremely rewarding. The residents know you are volunteering and are extremely grateful that you are here.

TK: Are you in any danger being near the disaster area?

LD: The shelter is removed from the flooding so I have always felt safe. I've been the sole night nurse along with several experienced shelter workers. You always have someone you can call if you have a problem or question such as the RN lead, and there is a shelter manager on site 24 hours a day.

TK: What are some of the challenges volunteers are facing in helping individuals affected by the floods?

LD: In the shelter, you have people of all ages and functional levels in one large space who are facing one of the most stressful times in their lives. Support animals are also in shelter. Each person is touched in a different way by the disaster and it can be challenging for nurses to sort out all the issues and needs and figuring out how to access resources in a different city. We have support from a lead RN and more seasoned Red Cross volunteer nurses and that helps you get through the initial learning curve and become more familiar with local resources as well as those available through the Red Cross.

TK: How is the situation there now?



LD: There is still a flood threat. I have heard residents are starting to go home if their homes are safe. It seems to be a fluid situation though dependent on weather.

TK: Do you have a story you'd like to share of a particular individual you've helped?

LD: I have crossed so many paths and shared in their disaster experiences that it is hard choose just one. Last night, when I came into work the residents presented us with a cake and a thank you card signed by everyone in the shelter. We were all deeply touched. One resident overheard me tell someone that I was not from Tulsa and she said, "Well, you are from Tulsa now." They've made me one of their own and the amount of gratitude is touching beyond words.

TK: How did you get involved in working with the Red Cross?

LD: I started doing volunteer trips to Mexico in a medical clinic and wanted to find a volunteer opportunity closer to home. I also wanted an opportunity to do more hands-on care. I contacted my local Red Cross chapter and, after speaking with them, decided to join the Disaster Health Services team. I just recently joined in April 2019. I completed the training, which is online, and you can do it on your own schedule. I was called up to deploy shortly after completing the training due to urgent disaster needs.

TK: Why did you choose to volunteer?

LD: I love case management but also enjoy doing a little hands-on nursing care. This type of volunteering gives me the opportunity to practice in a different way and experience new things. I also have had a desire to give back to my community and country and, since they have a need for nurses, I chose to join ARC.

TK: What would you say to individuals interested in volunteering to help in these types of emergencies?

LD: It is extremely rewarding to help people in a time of dire need. I understand how these individuals feel as I once had to evacuate due to a fire in my area. As an RN, you can use your skills to make an impact in people's lives during this time. Professionally, it is a good way to broaden your skill set. You don't have to travel far with Red Cross. You can respond to local disasters as well.

TK: How can individuals help the flood victims?

LD: There is a shortage of nurses so, if you're a nurse and are interested in volunteering, I recommend going on the [American Red Cross website \(redcross.org\)](https://www.redcross.org) and contacting your local chapter. A local volunteer RN will contact you and help you get started. Even if you aren't a medical professional, the Red Cross has many other needs, so I encourage everyone to get involved.



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