

## **TN April Storms (DR540-25)**

### **Summary**

The following analysis is based multiple interviews from the TN April Storms (DR 540-25). A total of 12 interviews were conducted, which included participants from the American Red Cross's Disaster Relief Operations (DRO) leadership, staff members, CAP staff, CAP partners, and regional chapter staff across various operational roles.

Red Cross opened DR540-25 following a complex sequence of tornadoes and flooding across West and Middle Tennessee. The operation was complicated by successive storms and high river levels, uneven federal attention, declarations in neighboring states, and limited outside resources, making local capacity and speed especially critical. Operating during a prolonged, multi-day event that produced dozens of tornadoes and scattered flooding (notably severe damage in Selmer and Grand Junction), the CAP partners distinguished themselves by traveling beyond their home counties, mobilizing the next day, and using established local relationships to accelerate and focus relief efforts. Interviews indicated that CAP demonstrably strengthened disaster response capacity by pre-positioning assets, embedding liaisons, mobilizing trusted local networks, and enabling rapid, culturally appropriate service delivery that both accelerated assistance and reduced costs for the Red Cross response.

Key enablers included the CAP team's local connections, community-driven partners across health, housing and food security sectors, and individual personalities—particularly CAP leadership whose relationship skills and credibility made rapid reciprocal support more likely. Addition factors enabling CAP effectiveness included pre-event communication and readiness calls, existing trust networks, willingness to travel outside jurisdictions, and active engagement by a capable CAP liaison who coordinated closely with regional and chapter leadership. These factors were credited as important drivers behind improved quality, speed, and cost-effectiveness in this DRO.

### **Background**

CAP leadership framed the CAP approach as "building the resilience of the community" rather than simply rather than simply expanding Red Cross operational capacity, indicating the dual aim of assisting in immediate disaster response and sustained local capacity. Although not directly goals of the program, interviews indicated that, during DR540-25, CAP accelerated time-to-service, and extended outreach to vulnerable

populations by investing in people, assets, and the CAP Liaison function. Leadership and staff accounts described deliberate inclusion of CAP in readiness forums and investments in CAP partner equipment and other resources: DRO and Regional leadership noted integration of CAP on readiness calls—"We include our CAP team on all of our readiness calls" (DRO and Regional leadership interview)—while CAP and chapter staff and partners described grants and asset purchases such as trucks, trailers and refrigerated vehicles intended to boost local capacity (CAP and chapter staff and CAP partner interviews).

## **Speed**

Coordination and speed benefited from deliberate readiness and communication before the storms. CAP team preparedness—alerts to volunteers, readiness calls, and embedded inclusion in reconnaissance and external relations meetings—meant partners could mobilize immediately and place services where the need was greatest.

Early on-scene presence combined with structured Recon and partner-fed intelligence to accelerate needs identification and targeting. Interviewees described boots-on-the-ground Recon routines ("We call it Recon... asking who are the key influencers") and cases of requests that were filled within hours ("After our conversation at around 6:30, his team arrived at the site by 8:00... distributed approximately 60 to 75 kits"). Hyper-local observations collected by partners were funneled upward via the CAP Liaisons and informed rapid operational decisions.

Across multiple interviews and operational reports (CAP staff and partner interviews, DRO leadership and staff accounts, chapter reports), interviewees reported consistent patterns: CAP partners often arrived hours-to-one-day after impact, provided non-traditional gap-filling services (tarps, chainsaw crews, mobile laundry, refrigerated perishables), and substituted volunteer labor and donated supplies that produced substantial cost offsets.

Multiple CAP partner and staff accounts attributed hours-to-one-day mobilization to locally staged assets—"back in, I want to say 2023 we, were given a truck and some trailers" (CAP partner interview) and "They were already here and they already have all the equipment" (CAP staff interview)—and cases of same-day arrivals. The program's significance lies in its practical, place-based amplification of response reach and speed, particularly for vulnerable and hard-to-reach households. At the same time, while pre-positioning is effective for speed, it was indicated that the program may need

clearer asset governance to ensure long-term readiness. Pre-positioned vehicles, equipment, and local stockpiles materially shortened response time but may be lacking standardized sustainment protocols.

## **Quality**

Informal networked outreach—pastor contact lists and social media—functioned as effective channels for volunteer and donor mobilization and for directing residents to services. Partner interviews described pastor-mediated contact networks ("I asked each pastors to give me at least three people") and active Facebook livestreams declaring feeding and distribution locations; DRO leadership recounted IA QR-code placement via partners to reach clients.

CAP enhancements —trucks/trailers, skid steers, and refrigerated units—were decisive enablers of rapid assessment, debris clearance, and perishable distribution. Firsthand accounts credited mechanized assets with large productivity gains ("that skid steer... increased our ability by, I don't know, 3-4 hundred percent" — CAP partner interview) and recounted refrigerated trailers placed at fairgrounds enabling perishable distribution. These concrete logistics capabilities expanded the range of services deliverable locally (e.g., fresh food, night feeding enabled by generators).

Culturally appropriate outreach—trusted faith leaders, language-matched communicators, and venue-based engagement—improved reach and uptake among vulnerable and reluctant households. Multiple CAP staff and partner reports attributed access to hard-to-reach residents to pastor introductions and church-based staging ("Browns Creek District Association was there within hours" and partners "spoke their language"). Distributed feeding and site adoption by faith groups not only provided services but also transferred credibility to Red Cross teams. This culturally attuned model supported a higher acceptance of assistance, especially where digital or impersonal channels would have failed.

## **Costs**

CAP partners materially expanded service coverage and produced significant, if incompletely quantified, cost offsets through donated meals, in-kind kits, and grant-funded assets. Operational leaders reported partner contributions that substituted directly for Red Cross food procurement and labor—"I don't think we paid a dime for feeding" (DRO leadership)—and multiple staff estimated partner donations and avoided

costs in the tens of thousands (examples of \$80,000 to ~\$100,000 cited). Partners also provided refrigerated trailers and heavy equipment that enabled perishable distributions and debris clearing. The available evidence indicates strong value generation, but the interviews reported ad hoc accounting and recommended formalized tracking to transform anecdotal offsets into auditable savings.

Overall cost-effectiveness is favorable in practical terms—partners substituted feeding, labor, and logistics, producing estimated operational savings—yet formal economic validation is hindered by incomplete accounting and non-standardized metrics. Practitioners collectively reported that partner substitution avoided tens of thousands of dollars in otherwise needed Red Cross expenditures (leadership and chapter interviews). Benefits extended beyond immediate cost avoidance to include higher IA uptake, faster stabilization of households (tarps, immediate repairs), and protection against exploitation through visible trusted presence. Nonetheless, the interviews indicated that the cost documentation was uneven, and may lack systematic cost tallies, time-on-task volunteer-hour logs, incomplete accounting of in-kind contributions or rigorous counterfactuals, so monetary conclusions should be treated as indicative rather than definitive.

## **Scalability**

The program's merit is strongest where CAP pre-event investments (assets, trainings, liaison relationships) aligned with on-the-ground partner capabilities (faith networks, refrigerated logistics, chainsaw crews) to deliver rapid, dignity-preserving assistance and to surface vulnerable households that conventional channels would have missed.

Beyond direct service, CAP partners were invaluable as connectors and trust-builders. Their pre-existing, hyper-local networks and relationships enabled rapid introductions to community leaders, pastors, social service organizations and vulnerable households (including Section 8 residents and isolated pockets across train-track divides). That transference of trust and proactive outreach helped the Red Cross shift from a passive "come to us" model to actively pursuing and locating clients, contributing to an unusually high uptake of financial assistance—reported at over 73–75% of eligible clients. "We opened 79% of our cases... the highest that we've ever had in the nation"—and these high uptake rates plausibly reflect CAP's person-to-person outreach, QR-code intake, and partner referrals. Trained local teams and deliberate follow-up calls also supported client management. However, baseline comparisons, counterfactuals, and

systematic measurement are limited, so while association is strong, attribution to CAP activities remains uncertain.

Embedding CAP liaisons and including them in pre-event readiness calls reduced activation friction and enabled partner mobilization. Senior operations staff and CAP managers described procedural integration—liaisons attending leadership meetings and being empowered to signal partner capacity—which produced near-real-time coordination: "It was almost like they went in with us together. So there was no call up" (region/chapter staff interview) and leaders credited the CAP Liaison presence with enabling rapid partner responsiveness. These accounts show liaisoning as a replicable mechanism for converting pre-event awareness into immediate field action.

CAP demonstrated scalable potential through local stocks, storage spaces, volunteer cohorts, and cross-boundary partner networks, but sustainability requires formal training, stewardship, and replication strategies. Evidence shows churches repurposed classrooms as "disaster relief closets," organized kit assembly, and mobilized cohorts of trained volunteers (examples of 42 trained volunteers and rapid 100-kit mobilizations). Leaders urged codifying practices—"How can you teach people how to do what you did?"—and recommended standardized training, credentialing, and stewardship to convert episodic successes into replicable, durable capacity across regions.

Key weaknesses center on inconsistent reporting, governance ambiguity, and operational constraints that limited full accounting of CAP's effects. Multiple respondents acknowledged under-reporting—"everything that was done was not reported" and "It wasn't even on a report anywhere".

## **Recommendations**

The interviewees provided a pragmatic set of recommendations:

### **Communications and Relationships**

- Institutionalize practices that nurture partner relationships between disasters so readiness and mutual trust are sustained
- Map and leverage hyper-local partner networks
- Ensure CAP representation in leadership meetings
- Conduct common training for CAP and DCS personnel
- Formalize CAP integration into blue-sky leadership and disaster response command
- Convene regular meetings to keep coalitions active and aware of mutual capacities

- Teach local disaster staff CAP methods to create a force-multiplying effect across regions.

### **Readiness**

- Institutionalize pre-disaster communication and readiness
- Expand pre-event trainings and credentialing
- Encourage/clarify partner willingness to operate beyond jurisdictional home boundaries
- Integrate CAP partners into formal volunteer roles when needed.
- Hold routine mock trainings
- Ensure clear MOUs for use of vehicles and heavy equipment
- Provide funds to sustain partner operations
- Pilot credentialed shelter or intake roles for trained CAP volunteers
- Earlier and clearer integration of CAP into disaster services before an event
- Clearer regional plans and communication about CAP roles and resources

### **CAP Liaison**

- Institutionalize liaison roles and reporting
- Engage CAP liaisons earlier in operations
- Ensure CAP representation in leadership meetings

### **Reporting and Documentation**

- Standardize asset-use agreements
- Create short reporting templates to capture in-field donations and volunteer activity
- Better methods to quantify true cost offsets

### **Evaluation limitations**

This assessment draws primarily on qualitative interviews and operational accounts (CAP partner interviews, CAP staff debriefs, DRO leadership/staff reports, chapter staff statements) that consistently point to impact patterns but are limited by self-reporting, inconsistent documentation, and few standardized metrics. Quantitative indicators (counts of meals, kits, volunteer hours, asset utilization hours, audited cost offsets) may be underreported and approximate, which constrains definitive attribution and formal cost-benefit analysis. The evidence is consequently strong for directional conclusions

about speed, reach, and practical value, but weaker for precise, auditable estimates of net savings or for isolating CAP's causal effects.

## **Conclusions**

The TN April Storms (DR540-25) response demonstrated that the Community Adaptation Program (CAP) significantly strengthened Red Cross disaster operations by accelerating service delivery, expanding reach to vulnerable populations, and reducing costs. CAP partners mobilized within hours to days, leveraging pre-staged assets, trusted local networks, and embedded liaison coordination to place services directly into hard-hit communities. This translated into faster response times, culturally appropriate outreach, and unusually high uptake of financial assistance.

CAP also provided substantial cost offsets through donated meals, equipment, and labor, though these benefits were only partially documented. The absence of standardized reporting and asset governance limits the ability to validate savings or ensure long-term sustainability. Nonetheless, qualitative evidence strongly indicates that CAP functions as a practical, community-based force multiplier for Red Cross response.

The operation highlights CAP's scalable potential when investments in people, assets, and liaison roles are paired with formalized training, clear governance, and consistent reporting. Strengthening these systems will allow CAP to reliably deliver faster, broader, and more cost-effective disaster relief in future operations.

## Appendix 1: Sentiment Analysis

Themes	Region Chapter Staff	DRO Leadership	DRO Staff	CAP Staff	CAP Partners
Integration with Partners	Positive	Very Positive	Positive	Very Positive	Positive
Local Knowledge and Nuance	Very Positive	Positive	Positive	Positive	Very Positive
Effective Outreach and High Intake	Neutral	Very Positive	Neutral	Positive	Positive
Flexibility in Logistics and Distribution	Positive	Positive	Very Positive	Very Positive	Positive
Dignity-Preserving Service	Positive	Positive	Positive	Very Positive	Very Positive
Proactive Measures and Rapid Response	Positive	Positive	Positive	Very Positive	Positive
Capacity Building and Training	Neutral	Positive	Neutral	Positive	Positive
Visibility and Community Engagement	Positive	Very Positive	Positive	Positive	Very Positive
Coordination and Communication	Positive	Positive	Very Positive	Positive	Positive
Awareness of Missed Populations	Neutral	Positive	Neutral	Positive	Positive

### Summary Insights:

- **Very Positive Sentiments:**



- *DRO Leadership* expresses strong positivity in the themes of effective outreach and local knowledge, highlighting successful partnerships and outreach efforts.
- *CAP Staff* and *CAP Partners* show very positive sentiments in areas related to dignity-preserving services and proactive measures.
- **Positive Sentiments:**
  - Most exhibit positive sentiments regarding local knowledge, visibility, flexibility in logistics, and integration with partners.
- **Neutral Sentiments:**
  - Some themes, such as effective outreach and capacity building, reflect a more neutral sentiment in Region Chapter Staff and DRO Staff, indicating room for improvement or uncertainty in these areas.
- **Overall Sentiment:**
  - The grid shows that while most themes evoke positive sentiments across the board, there are distinct variations in how strong those sentiments are relative to specific roles.