

WHY DONORS SHOULD KEEP THEIR FAITH IN THE RED CROSS

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SUMMARY

- Journalists are holding the Red Cross to an impossible standard.
- Without Red Cross, Harvey and Irma relief would be seriously lacking.
- Donors should remain confident in the charity's good work.

DAMNED IF THEY DO, DAMNED IF THEY DON'T

The media's response to Hurricane Harvey should give us all pause, especially with Irma — a dangerous Category 5 storm — now sweeping through the Caribbean and toward Florida.

In their relentless bashing of the Red Cross, journalists at top-tier publications aimed to deter donations to our country's strongest disaster relief organization.

But, with two devastating storms to address, was this really the time to undermine the Red Cross and hamstring their relief efforts?

The media added to an already dismal situation by sparking a sense of outrage and mistrust against those trying to help, surely demoralizing thousands of Red Cross staff and volunteers.

This time, it was a long list of culprits — [NPR](#), [ProPublica](#), [New York Times](#), [Slate](#), [Bloomberg](#), [MSNBC](#), etc. All of their accounts echoed the same sentiment: the Red Cross is ineffective; donations never get to the people who need it; their CEO is overpaid; and they mislead the public about spending. The cynical narrative is spreading like wildfire in comments sections and on social media. One NPR interview was so absurd that it prompted a string of complaints and a rare [follow-up apology](#) from the NPR Ombudsman.

In all this senseless criticism, the charity simply can't win. Let's take 3 common complaints against the charity and consider the circular logic that always leaves them in a no-win situation.

Critics complain that the Red Cross won't report on the strength of its disaster response outcomes. But, when they receive reports, critics complain that the outcomes can't be trusted.

Transparency concerns are valid when you're dealing with a multi-billion dollar charity. When \$488 million is raised (as in Haiti), it's important to understand where those dollars go. Such generosity should be put to good use.

But, even when the charity tries to share its results, the media discredits them.

ProPublica maintains that the Red Cross made “dubious claims of success” after the Haiti earthquake, even after the release of detailed reports documenting all spending and outcomes. They leveled similar criticism against the Red Cross after Hurricane Sandy — rejecting solid data from the charity while amplifying unsubstantiated claims from single staff members. In their line-by-line response to Sandy criticism, the Red Cross aptly points out: “the reporters did not hold their preferred source [Red Cross critics] to the same standard of proof.”

When it comes to results, the charity is clearly guilty until proven innocent.

Critics complain about the strength of Red Cross disaster response. But, when the Red Cross strengthens its infrastructure, critics complain about increased overhead.

You hear this complaint all the time — as if it’s easy to assist tens of thousands of people when local roads and infrastructure have been totally destroyed. The same people who complain about lackluster responses are often the first ones to question spending on staff and overhead. But, you can’t have it both ways.

If we’re demanding a strong response, we should also be demanding adequate investments in leadership, technology, strategic planning, and infrastructure. If the Red Cross skimps on these areas, how can we possibly expect effectiveness? We’re deluding ourselves; it’s an impossible standard.

Ken Stern, the former CEO of NPR, does a nice job documenting this predicament in his book *With Charity For All*. After 9/11, the Red Cross saw an opportunity to address infrastructure gaps that hampered their response to the attack. However, when they proposed putting a portion of 9/11 donations toward this long-term need, fraud charges were threatened, the CEO was forced to resign, and the project was abandoned. Years later, the same infrastructure gaps predictably strained under the stress of Hurricane Katrina. As Stern writes: “the failure to invest in 2001 had direct implications for the breakdowns in 2005.”

Charities can either spend what’s needed to drive good results or succumb to the scarcity mentality that’s demanded by the media and by donors. If you ask us, an effective response should be everyone’s top priority.

If the public truly understood the situation, they would agree — but the media’s sensational coverage has allowed this misconception to persist.

Critics complain about Red Cross expertise. But, when the Red Cross hires local experts, critics complain that it increases overhead costs.

ProPublica's scathing investigation from 2015 questioned Red Cross "know-how" during the 2010 Haiti earthquake. The report's deceptive headline, which famously claimed that the Red Cross "raised half a billion dollars for Haiti and built six homes," has become a popular refrain for Red Cross critics.

Unfortunately, the ProPublica reporting misconstrued important facts. The Charity Defense Council pointed this out in another media advisory and the Red Cross debunked many of the myths in their own rebuttal. For example, the claim that only six houses were built omitted the fact that these homes were constructed as part of a small pilot project. Once the Red Cross realized the challenges in building permanent homes, they made a strategic pivot and provided more than 132,000 people with safe housing.

What does that say about the expertise of the Red Cross? Well, they're certainly not infallible. Who could be in devastated, unpredictable disaster zones? Perhaps they should have anticipated some of the technical challenges of building so many permanent homes in Haiti, but they didn't. To their credit, they listened to feedback and changed course. They created more scalable housing solutions and partnered with local experts when needed.

Critics love to jump at this point, as well. They suggest that the Red Cross brings little value and that they simply take a cut of the overhead when they make grants to partner organizations. This is also misleading — and it misses the larger point.

Massive disasters create more needs than any single organization can address. Aid agencies need to collaborate to provide relief and services. Small charities have valuable grassroots connections; large charities, on the other hand, bring the financial, logistical, and manpower resources to respond to disasters at scale. Both play a crucial role.

But, again, the Red Cross can't win on this issue. When they revise a failing plan, their know-how is questioned. If they seek local expertise from partners, they get criticized for that, too.

If we truly focused on results, we would celebrate these pivots and partnerships.

NOT PUBLIC-SPIRITED JOURNALISM

The Charity Defense Council welcomes constructive, public-spirited media criticism. Good investigative journalism spotlights injustice and changes our society for the better. We have brave journalists to thank for reform in meat processing, housing standards, and the Catholic church.

But, when it comes to the Red Cross, the media needs to reconsider whether it's truly engaging in "public-spirited journalism." Does this wave of criticism help hurricane victims or simply hamper life-or-death relief efforts?

Without the Red Cross, there would be dangerous gaps in disaster relief. They have a network of 35,000 employees and 500,000 volunteers. They collect and distribute over 40% of the nation's blood supply. Each year, they respond to more than 60,000 disasters. If the Red Cross is weakened, there's simply no organization that can replicate their scale and sophistication.

Are they perfect? No. But, to dismiss this charity as unworthy of donor support — especially under such urgent circumstances — is certainly not public-spirited. It's irresponsible.

TAKE ACTION

1. Share with your personal network.
2. Ask 5 of the Red Cross's biggest celebrity-supporters to Tweet their support:

[@KevinHart4real](https://twitter.com/KevinHart4real)

[@TheEllenShow](https://twitter.com/TheEllenShow)

[@heidiklum](https://twitter.com/heidiklum)

[@Oprah](https://twitter.com/Oprah)

[@BarackObama](https://twitter.com/BarackObama)



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