

Antietam Valley Long Term Recovery Group

After-Action Review: July 2023 Flooding

Approved by AVLTRG - October 2025

Purpose of the After-Action Review Process

This After-Action Review (AAR) serves several key purposes for the Antietam Valley Long Term Recovery Group (AVLTRG). First, it provides an opportunity to reflect on the process of journeying with survivors through the recovery process. Second, it allows the group to discuss lessons learned and valuable advice for future LTRGs. Finally, the AAR is a chance to celebrate the successes that were achieved during the recovery process. All ideas and discussions within this report are considered non-precedent setting.

Expected Outcomes

This AAR will serve to:

1. Develop the strategy necessary to rebuild the foundation for the Berks County Community Organization Active in Disaster (COAD).
2. Encourage local action earlier in the recovery process to capitalize on early interest and sustain community engagement.
3. Identify methods and processes to tell the story of the survivor needs and the recovery effort more effectively.

Incident Summary

On July 9, 2023, a significant weather event occurred in parts of Berks County, where 5 to 8 inches of rain fell in just a three-hour period. This intense rainfall led to flooding from Laurel Run affecting Temple, Willow Creek affecting the Blandon and Fleetwood areas, and Antietam Creek, displacing more than 40 people from their homes. Flooding also severely damaged Antietam Middle-Senior High School.

The Antietam Valley Long Term Recovery Group (AVLTRG) was formed to address the aftermath of the disaster. The AVLTRG, made up of volunteers, collected disaster survivor information from various sources, including Crisis Cleanup, the Red Cross, the Antietam Valley Community Partnership (AVCP), and the County Multi-Agency Resource Center (MARC). Through these channels, they were able to call 250 households to document their unmet needs.

Further outreach, including door-to-door campaigns, identified approximately 130 cases that required recovery assistance, with 31 of those needing home repairs. These cases included 38 households located in the Pennview Mobile Home Park in Exeter Township, as well as 90 households in other surrounding municipalities.

Incident Timeline

- ***July 9, 2023:* Flooding occurs.
- *July 10, 2023:* A distribution center was established.
- *Within the first week:* The Greater Baptist Network was on-site.
- *Mid-July 2023:* The Antietam Valley Community Partnership (AVCP) hosted a pasta dinner.

- *July 13-15, 2023:* A Multi-Agency Resource Center (MARC) was opened.
- *July 2023:* Pastor Duquette begins to provide financial assistance from Pennside Presbyterian Church and spiritual support to flood survivors and volunteers.
- *July-September 2023:* Muck-and-gut teams were on-site.
- *2023:* The school was condemned, and there were issues with where to send the students.
- *Fall 2023:* A grant was given to the AVCP from Faith Lutheran, Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, and Lehigh Presbytery.
- *November 13, 2023:* A second MARC was held.
- ***September 28, 2023:* The request for a FEMA disaster declaration was denied.
- ***November 13, 2023:* Berks Community Action Program (BCAP) became engaged as a possible avenue to access \$300,000 in funding for home repairs.
- ***January 25, 2024:* BCAP disengaged without dispersing any funding.
- *January 2024:* The Disaster Recovery Assistance Program (DRAP) was authorized.
- *January 16, 2024:* DRAP training was conducted.
- *January 2024:* Disaster Case Managers (DCMs) were hired by Lutheran Congregational Services (LCS).
- *January 19, 2024:* A \$20,000 United Church of Christ (UCC) grant was approved.
- *Winter 2023/2024:* AVLTRG officially forms.
- *Early 2024:* The Antietam Recovery team distributed gift cards.
- *Spring 2024:* Storage containers were acquired from PA Department of Human Services and moved by American Logistics Aid Network (ALAN).
- *May 13, 2024:* The first volunteers arrived, and the Heavenly Helpers worked on a home in Blandon.
- *June 20, 2024:* The first Pennview Mobile Home Park workday took place.
- *July 21, 2024:* An anniversary event was held.
- *October 2024:* Lowe's sponsored a workday.
- *November 2024:* AVLTRG represented at the Berks Community Foundation Listening Session Series.
- *June 23, 2025:* Antietam Middle-Senior High School was demolished.
- *March 2025:* AmeriCorps team work began.
- *April 30, 2025:* DRAP deadline for work to be completed.
- *June 30, 2025:* DRAP deadline for paperwork to be filed.
- *September 2, 2025:* Two of the 31 cases remained to be completed.

****NOTE:** There was much time and effort wasted on two separate possible funding sources that never came through. First, the FEMA declaration for Individual Assistance for this event was denied 11 weeks post-disaster. Second, Berks County Community Action Program (BCAP) initially was poised to support disaster survivors by providing \$300,000 of Pennsylvania Housing Affordability and Rehabilitation Enhancement Fund (PHARE) funding to support home repair costs. 10 weeks later, they disengaged without dispersing any funding. Both delays caused frustration and unwarranted concerns about potential duplication of benefits with ultimately nothing to show for it.

AVLTRG Mission & Goals

AVLTRG officially formed in the winter of 2023 and is dedicated to providing county-wide disaster recovery coordination for survivors of the July 9, 2023, flooding in Berks County, Pennsylvania. The group's mission is accomplished by sharing information, making it easier for residents to access essential services, and jointly resolving cases with disaster-related recovery needs.

AVLTRG's primary goals are to address immediate needs related to safety and security as quickly as possible, with a special focus on issues concerning heat, hot water, and mold. To achieve this, the group provides a range of services including:

- Disaster Case Management
- Technical assistance with DRAP applications
- Construction cost assessments
- Purchase and storage of materials
- Construction supervision
- Rebuilding and replacement of mechanical equipment
- Coordination of all volunteer efforts

AVLTRG Key Participants

- **Pennside Presbyterian Church:** Convener, Board Member
- **Lutheran Berks County Congregations/Lutheran Disaster Response:** Board Member, Disaster Case Managers
- **PA Southeast Conference, United Church of Christ/St. Paul's UCC Amityville:** Board Member, Volunteer Coordinator, Construction Coordination
- **Antietam Valley Community Partnership:** Board Member, Rebuild, Key Local Contact

Key Results

A total of 31 cases were approved for resources, with a **combined funding of \$135,000**. 15 of the cases were in Pennview Mobile Home Park.

This funding was a mix of governmental and private sources, including a **\$75,000 in grant funding to individuals from the Commonwealth's Disaster Recovery Assistance Program (DRAP)** and **\$60,000 from private and non-profit donations**. The non-profit contributions came from various sources, including

"The combined strength of volunteer rebuilders, expert case managers, and DRAP funds, make survivor recovery possible in an era marked by more frequent and volatile storms."

- *Julia Frank, PAVOAD President and Lutheran Disaster Response Director*

local churches and significant grant awards from UCC Disaster Ministries, Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, Lutheran Disaster Response, and the Antietam Valley Community Partnership. The group set a \$5,000 cap on AVLTRG organized funding per home to ensure funding could be spread across as many households as possible and to align with the scope of work covered by DRAP.

In terms of labor, **196 volunteers contributed a remarkable 2,535 hours**, saving thousands of dollars in labor costs by focusing on tasks that did not require licensed contractors. This does not include volunteer hours contributed by AVLTRG members spent on coordination. AVLTRG was also able to stretch its funds further by acquiring discounted materials from Lowe's.

Individuals and families served by AVLTRG live on low-income, underscoring the need to work with a broad network of partners to ensure community recovery.

"The flood flipped over a rock and the rock is poverty in Berks County."

- Rev. David Duquette, Pennside Presbyterian Church & AVLTRG Chair

Outstanding Work

AVLTRG has made significant progress, completing 29 out of its 31 Disaster Case Management cases. As of September 2025, 100% completion is expected with a contractor being hired to finish one of the cases, and a roof being installed on the other. Once these final tasks are finished, any remaining funds will be transferred to AVCP who will oversee completion of any remaining work. AVCP is also assisting with cleanup of creek bed debris in partnership with the townships, state representatives, and the school district.

Strengths

One of the greatest strengths demonstrated by AVLTRG for this incident included the incredible engagement of several local partners. Embedded within the community, AVCP demonstrated remarkable initiative in conducting door-to-door outreach in the impact area to identify survivors in need of assistance to recover. The faith-based community showed the utmost care for the AmeriCorps crew, providing home cooked meals and raising everybody's spirits in the process. The AVLTRG volunteer coordinator recruited volunteers and arranged for workdays, allowing survivors to stretch their allocated funding. Additionally, local partners allowed the use of their non-profit status in order to build a relationship with the ProDesk to obtain a discount of 30% at Lowe's as well as to partner for a one-day workday.

"This has been a two-year journey for us. It's one of those things where it's two years in longitude but it was day by day, moment by moment so it's very helpful to be able to pull back and take in the long view and see what we've accomplished, and I hope that everyone recognizes the tremendous job that we've done. I think we overcame some very significant adversities to achieve this. I think we made our community largely whole, at least as far as the housing goes, and hopefully that takes steps towards a larger wholeness."

- Rev. David Duquette, Pennside Presbyterian Church & AVLTRG Chair

The local partners brought knowledge of the community and their own social service skillsets to the table yet were humble enough to engage technical assistance from PAVOAD partners who brought expertise in the disaster realm for establishment of the long-term recovery group and disaster case management process. The engagement also enabled activities such as the loan of storage containers to store building materials from the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services that were moved by disaster logistics partner American Logistics Aid Network (ALAN). PAVOAD allowed AVLTR a place to create an easily searched for web presence that clearly communicated the work they do and contained a call to action with contact information.

The county did an excellent job bringing resources directly to the survivors by establishing the resource center adjacent to Pennview Mobile Home Park where survivors could meet with the Small Business Administration (SBA) to discuss low interest loans and with the Department of Human Services' County Assistance Office staff for benefits reviews and Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) applications.



Word cloud created by AAR participants on the greatest strengths of AVLTRG

AVLTRG put on a highly successful first anniversary event that doubled as both a community celebration and outreach event. First responders, legislators, and survivors were among those who attended for food (served by Bridge Community Church), music, and connection in what was described as a positive, uplifting environment. Disaster case managers were able to open some new cases as a result of outreach that occurred at the event. Connections were made with several Spanish speaking families via a Spanish speaking intern and the local Salvation Army director. Though this did not result in any cases, AVLTRG feels the groundwork is laid for improved outreach to the Hispanic community for future events. Faith based partners provided opportunities for spiritual care. A family shared their recovery story publicly. AVLTRG members reflected that they felt a sense of personal gratitude from the event.

Partner Engagement

Holistic recovery is more than the repair of physical structures. Additional partners could add value to assist with needs such as those related to:

- Emotional and spiritual care
- Mitigation
- Debris removal from waterways
- Blankets and clothing
- Pets and unowned animals
- Food and water
- Children, infants, and toddlers
- Older adults
- Disabilities and other access and functional needs
- Other unmet needs

AVLTRG reported well attended meetings before the FEMA denial, but experienced difficulty connecting resources with the needs in part due to concerns about duplication of benefits as well as an incomplete understanding of what each partner brings to the table.

Groups that AVLTRG specifically mentioned a desire to engage in a deeper, meaningful way include the local Salvation Army, Red Cross, United Way, Community Foundation, and faith-based organizations via Transformational Ministry (formerly Council of Churches). There was some involvement from these entities during this incident (and during past disasters) though change in contacts and/or organizational structure is a barrier. Implementation of a pre-disaster COAD onboarding process would be helpful. As part of this process, AVLTRG should be flexible considering how partners are willing/able to engage.

An example of how a modified model of participation worked well for this incident was the relationship with a local township representative. The individual did not come to every meeting but understood the AVLTRG mission. AVLTRG reached out when support was needed and the representative was a positive force for serving the community through delaying permitting fees and speaking with the AmeriCorps team.

Areas for Improvement

AVLTRG's body of work was significant and meaningful to the community's recovery from this event, however the group wishes to document areas of improvement that could create a more successful overall effort in terms of goals, objectives, practices, expectations, and partnership.

As discussed earlier in this report, partner engagement for fundraising is time sensitive. Early momentum and ability to leverage some local fundraising options was lost due to the wait for a FEMA declaration and then BCAP funding. This was in part due to the concern about the potential for a duplication of benefits.

The sequence of delivery for VOAD funding warrants further discussion by PAVOAD, who have traditionally waited for federal declaration status to be determined prior to using VOAD resources for truly unmet needs. For future events, the commonwealth has indicated that if the Disaster Recovery Assistance Program (DRAP) is warranted the program will be activated without waiting weeks or months for a FEMA denial.

The process for the flow of DRAP grants is an area for improvement warranting further discussion. For this incident, DRAP checks went directly to homeowners, not to the contractors doing the work. It is difficult for low-income survivors to hold on to large sums of money for a long period of time amidst other pressing needs beyond home repairs. One survivor spent their DRAP funds on medical bills and another unfortunately had the money stolen by a contractor. Additionally, cost estimates for repairs can be way off if voluntary organizations get great deals on building materials, as they did in this case, leaving the survivor to pay back the unused DRAP funding if another approved use is not identified. Direct payments to the contractor would circumvent issues with unauthorized uses. Some of these issues will be rectified by DRAP grants being issued over two payments, the first as a down payment. This is already planned for implementation by the commonwealth.

AVLTRG experienced difficulty engaging the community foundation in part due to the lack of a comprehensive knowledge of foundation operations. The foundation wanted specific metrics that could not be provided timely, allowing the golden window for fundraising to pass. There is likely a near

universal knowledge gap for local VOADs/COADs with respect to engaging with community foundations. Development of some templated materials to better engage these partners for disaster recovery is warranted.

This incident did not result in a huge need for temporary housing; Only two homes in Pennview Mobile Home Park were condemned and those displaced individuals went to live with family. However, it is worth noting that survivors have been known to continue residing in destroyed homes due to barriers in finding temporary housing such as pets or financial resources. This can lead to health and safety issues such as hazards posed by the structure and/or mold and is something that those working in long-term recovery should be on the look out for in the event that additional assistance is needed with temporary housing.

Sourcing sufficient staffing, volunteers, and contractors was also a challenge to support this recovery effort. There is a need to build up a Lutheran Congregational Services (LCS) volunteer pool. Work in the Pennview Mobile Home Park also presented a challenge. The work requires a unique skillset compared to working on a single-family home as it is perhaps more difficult to identify the needed work and for older volunteers to crawl underneath the home to complete certain tasks.

Materials that better describe the nature of the work, such as a more specific volunteer job description and/or task sheet allow volunteers to better prepare or to self-select appropriate work for their capabilities. If the survivor is ok with sharing their information, a template family profile will paint a picture of the family's needs and may be helpful in creating a sense of ownership for the volunteers. The AVLTRG Volunteer Coordinator indicated that it was helpful when churches used the "adopt a home" concept where they arrange work with the homeowner directly and have ownership of the process.

A recurrent theme for future improvement is the need to tell the story of the disaster recovery needs better to all audiences and partners. Creation of a thorough disaster recovery incident briefing in partnership with the county would be a useful tool to communicate the urgency and needs with partners. It was also suggested that a greater presence on social media through utilizing community organizations, such as AVCP, that have existing followings. Additional promotion through local champions and VIPs such as legislators may also be helpful.

A useful tool for telling the story of the recovery effort would be a project summary impact report such as a sample from the VALOR program that was produced several years ago. The summary details work completed, dollar figures, project highlights, volunteer hours and value, quotes from homeowners and emergency managers and is the kind of material that will be used for years to show the impact of the long-term recovery group's work.

"I never did this, I'm not a non-profit guy, I'm just a guy that lives close by. There is a certain amount of talent needed to explain to whomever what we're doing, the fact that it isn't as hard as you're imagining it. The whole idea of having a community in need so close to the rest of the community that is not known about. It's a matter of getting the word out and knowing how to muster together a group of volunteers. The people that came were not from the community. There are very few people that actually came from the area and that was disheartening."

-Chuck Parker, Antietam Valley Community Partnership

Two other ideas were discussed to assist with community recovery needs holistically. The first is the possibility of hosting Camp Noah, a nationally acclaimed week-long program that helps children process

their disaster or trauma experience through creative activities and play. Hosting the program is a heavy lift for local entities, but very worthwhile. The second is providing access to Emergency Behavioral Health (EBH) services to support survivors during any anniversary events or to help people cope with anxiety related to future weather events. Berks County does have a multi-disciplinary EBH team lead by the Office of Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities and delivered in partnership with Office on Aging and Children and Youth staff.

A Path Forward for AVLTRG

AVLTRG should be proud of the work they have accomplished to make their community largely whole after the devastating flooding. There are many bright spots to celebrate and a clear path forward for the COAD's continued work in the community. Possible avenues of effort include:

1. Creation of a public-facing version of this document for sharing with PAVOAD partners and other regional COADs/VOADs.
2. Development of a COAD partner onboarding process, focusing on the organizations identified in the partner engagement section of this report. A model process could include:
 - a. (Re)establish contact to share results of this recovery effort, thank the partner for any support rendered, and express a sincere desire to engage for the betterment of the community.
 - b. Visit the organization to meet and greet, tour their facility, and conduct an informational interview about their services. Consider a group onboarding of faith-based organizations, if appropriate.
 - c. Discuss how the organization wants to engage to support disaster events and be open and flexible to their preferences. For example, a referral process for help with specific needs rather than regular meeting attendance, or use of lay leadership as representatives from a faith-based organization rather than reliance on clergy.
 - d. Catalogue organizational capability information and contacts and verify them on at least a yearly basis. A template sufficient for use commonwealth-wide should be created.
 - e. After a disaster occurs, reach out to refresh the partnership. Brief the partner on the situation and show the damage/needs to generate a sense of urgency. Ask how they are already helping and how they want to engage.
3. Tell the story of this disaster recovery by creating a project summary impact report. The summary should detail work completed, dollar figures, project highlights, volunteer hours and value, and include quotes from homeowners and emergency managers as well as photos. A template sufficient for use commonwealth-wide should be created.
4. Tell the story of future disaster needs to generate a sense of urgency, better engage local partners, and take advantage of the golden window for fundraising. Several work products will facilitate these conversations including:
 - a. Timely creation of a Disaster Recovery Incident Briefing which includes immediate post-impact images/footage of the aftermath as well as pre-disaster drone footage for comparison, data from damage assessments, key trends, description of the impacted population, description of barriers to recovery, details of work already completed or identified for completion, volunteer and funding needs, and ways partners can help. This briefing should be created in partnership with the county. Ensure that metrics needed by

community foundations are included. A template sufficient for use commonwealth-wide should be created.

- b. Creation of volunteer job description(s) and/or task sheet(s) that fully describes the nature of the work. This will allow volunteers to better prepare or to self-select work appropriate for their capabilities. A template sufficient for use commonwealth-wide should be created.
- c. Creation of a Family Profile to paint a picture of the family's needs and create a sense of ownership for volunteers. The Family Profile could contain survivor information such as name, picture, about them, a picture of the impacted home, possible hazards, a punch list of jobs to make the home safe and livable, and a list of other needs to help drive in-kind support from faith-based and other partners. A template sufficient for use commonwealth-wide should be created.
- d. Consider how to tailor and amplify your message to your target audiences via social media or other means.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to the leadership of the AVLTRG for your willingness to engage in the self-reflection necessary to complete this report. It will be a driver for change not just for the Berks COAD, but commonwealth wide. Thank you to PAVOAD for your technical assistance in planning for the debrief and for providing access to the helpful National VOAD tool for LTRG Self Evaluation. This work is difficult but is not without reward. Thank you for all you do to help Pennsylvanians impacted by disaster.