

Starting a Virtual Community After a Fire

In the aftermath of the Marshall Fire (2021), we created a Slack community to serve as a centralized hub for resources, trusted information, and emotional support for survivors. It became the "single source of truth" for our community, helping to connect people and ease the recovery process. The founders of the Marshall Together Slack community have documented some key lessons learned from this experience.

How to Start:

1. Gather a Group of Fire Survivors

Start by inviting only those who have been directly impacted by the fire. We defined this as individuals who had received a FEMA letter or were in the process of filing an insurance claim on their property.

2. Become the Single Source of Truth

After a disaster, many communication threads, such as text groups, Facebook messages, and WhatsApp chats, will emerge. While these can be helpful in the short term, they often become overwhelming and disorganized. Our Slack community acted as the central place for people to find vetted resources and updates. We held "show-and-tell" sessions to introduce new members to Slack and demonstrate its value in connecting and organizing information.

3. Vetting Information

In the chaos following a fire, misinformation can spread quickly—whether through the media, word of mouth, or rumors. It's hard to process everything when you're dealing with "fire fog" (the mental exhaustion that comes with trauma). In our Slack community, we made it a point to ensure that all shared information was credible. If someone posted a claim without a verified source, we asked them to provide one or we removed the post. This helped relieve members of the burden of sifting through unverified information.

4. Start with a Few Key Channels

You don't need a lot of channels to get started—just a few key ones to help organize discussions and support. Here's a sample of essential channels:

- **#general**: A space for members to connect and share whatever is on their minds.
- **#available-rentals**: A place to post housing leads, which is especially important during the initial stages of the recovery process and while navigating your ALE (Additional Living Expenses).
- **#resources**: A place to share helpful links and recovery materials.
- **#donations-discounts**: A channel for posting organized drives, free resources, and discount opportunities.
- **#events**: A space for promoting community events or recovery-related activities.

- **#insurance:** A place for general insurance questions. Over time, you might want to create separate channels for different insurance companies, depending on community demand.

5. Listen to Your Community

As your community grows and evolves, so too will its needs. Stay flexible and be ready to create new channels or archive ones that are no longer necessary. This helps keep the community focused on what is most helpful at any given time.

6. Use an Email Service to Reach Members

We used Flodesk (though there are many options) to send mass communications to our community. This was an efficient way to quickly share resources, updates, and other important information.

Starting a virtual community after a disaster can be an incredibly powerful tool for connecting, sharing, and healing. It's important to create a space that feels organized, safe, and responsive to the needs of those going through recovery.

For questions, please reach out to hello@marshalltogether.com