

Partner Perspectives: Michele Lerch, Operations/Disaster Coordinator for Hawkeye Area Community Action Program (HACAP) on Addressing Individuals' Needs

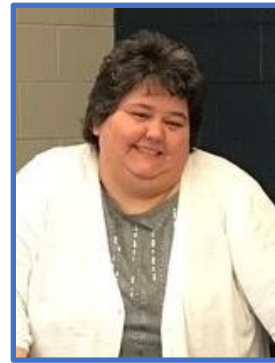
Please tell us briefly about yourself, your organization, and the work you do around natural disasters.

HACAP is a local community action agency dedicated to removing the barriers of poverty in Eastern Iowa through a wide range of programs and services tailored to meet the diverse needs of the people we serve. September was my 18-year anniversary with HACAP. I started out as an Energy Counselor, later became the United Way 211 Data Base Manager for 39 Counties and WIC support staff, and currently serve as the Operations Coordinator/Disaster Coordinator. Sixteen of my 18 years have included some form of a disaster role – serving as co-lead of HACAP's Energy Response Team for the Duane Arnold Nuclear Plant, co-lead for the 2008 Flood, and Disaster Coordinator when the 2020 derecho hit Iowa.

In my current role, I administer and oversee compliance for the [Iowa Individual Assistance Grant and Disaster Case Advocacy Programs](#) for HACAP's 9-county service area. To discuss how to serve clients better during a disaster, I meet with local emergency managers, City staff, Community Organizations Active in Disaster (COADs), Long-Term Recovery Groups (LTRGs), and local nonprofits throughout the year. HACAP is a member of [Iowa Disaster Human Resources Council \(IDHRC, Iowa's VOAD\)](#), and I serve as Secretary for [Linn Area Partners Active in Disaster \(LAP-AID\)](#).

What is the last disaster you supported in Iowa? Any this year? Has this year been different than prior years?

This year counties in HACAP's service area have experienced [six state disaster proclamations in a five-month span](#) – two in May, three in June, and one in July. This year has been different. In my 16-17 years of disaster work, I cannot remember a time when we had more than one or two disaster proclamations in one year. The last five months have kept us busy!



What have been the greatest needs or challenges faced in those disasters? Did you have to adapt typical processes to address them?

[Time and frustration](#) for both the impacted families and caseworkers are always a challenge. Everyone involved wants the repairs done and families back into their homes as soon as possible, but everything takes time. To provide services, paperwork must be completed, insurance companies must be dealt with, contractors must be found, and families must find temporary shelter – all of these create [extra stress for families](#). They are trying to navigate all the “extras” while still going to work, getting kids to school, and trying to restore some normalcy when their lives have been disrupted.

What are the most valuable lessons learned and best practices to come from these experiences? Are any of them transferable to other types of events or locations?

In any situation, we need to [listen](#) to the people we are serving to understand their needs. What are their needs and concerns? If we cannot help them, are there other [options](#) we can offer? Everyone's situation is different. Have [patience and empathy](#) – it takes time.

Will your experiences this year inform or refine your approach to response or long-term recovery in the future?

Yes, it [definitely](#) will refine my approach.