

Unit One

Introduction To Disaster Relief Voluntary Agencies

OVERVIEW

The series of severe disasters that have occurred since the late 1980's reminds us how vulnerable we are as a society.

In order to avoid further great losses to life and property, it is imperative that we in governmental and non-governmental organizations be closely united and develop strong working relationships. Combining resources and applying them in a collaborative manner will help us develop disaster-resistant communities and prevent losses in the future. Strong collaboration will also lead to more effective disaster response and recovery activities. The first step in developing closer working relationships between governmental emergency management and non-governmental organizations is to learn more about one another.

In this unit, you will learn about:

- ◆ The purpose of this Independent Study course;
- ◆ The unique strengths of voluntary agencies; and
- ◆ Common misconceptions about voluntary agencies.

The purpose of *The Role of Voluntary Agencies in Emergency Management* is twofold. First, it is intended to increase the level of awareness of Federal, State, and local emergency managers, members of voluntary agencies, and the general public about the roles of voluntary agencies in emergency management. Second, it is intended to encourage further collaboration between government and voluntary agencies in emergency management. The subject matter is geared toward an introductory level, however, readers are encouraged to explore more about the voluntary agency sector through additional resources listed in Appendix D.

This Independent Study course addresses voluntary agencies whose chief missions include the provision of disaster mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery services to the public. The focus is clearly on the well-established Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD) movement, including the State and local VOADs emerging around the country and the National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (NVOAD). NVOAD provides guidance, conference forums, leadership development, and other technical assistance to the State and local VOADs. It is understood that the VOAD movement is an open and inclusive movement and that any non-profit organization committed to emergency management work that meets the basic membership criteria is welcome to join.

You will find certain key themes in much of the work of voluntary agencies. Perhaps the overarching themes include:

- Service to marginal or vulnerable populations, both rural and urban;
- An emphasis on capacity-building, whereby a disaster-affected community is encouraged to learn and grow from the disaster experience;
- The idea that all disasters are local and there will be a strong emphasis on local participation and leadership in decision-making; and
- The extraordinary opportunity that voluntary agencies provide for literally millions of people throughout the country to get involved in their communities to help themselves and others. This theme is one that contributes toward a more civil society that benefits us all.

The expectation is that completing this Independent Study will lead to a better understanding of the roles of disaster relief voluntary agencies which will facilitate closer and more effective working relationships among all emergency management partners. These collaborative relationships will, in turn, lead to a higher level of public service to communities throughout the country—a common goal for both governmental and non-governmental organizations.

AN EXAMPLE OF VOLUNTARY AGENCIES IN ACTION

The case study that follows describes a devastating disaster event—the Red River Floods of 1996-1997. It indicates how, in response to this event, voluntary agencies, local, State, and Federal governments, and the community at large worked together to meet the needs of the disaster-affected individuals and families. The purpose of this case study is to begin introducing you to the array of services provided by disaster relief voluntary agencies and to emphasize the importance of collaboration between all emergency management partners in disaster response and recovery.

“We will rebuild and we will be stronger and we will be in it together.”

— Pat Owens, Mayor of Grand Forks, North Dakota

The Red River Floods

The winter storms that led to the Red River Floods began before Thanksgiving with "Blizzard Andy" (1996) and ended after Easter with "Blizzard Hannah," (1997) the fiercest of all—a storm with the force of an Atlantic hurricane and the cold of an arctic night. Every community in the Red River basin endured the blizzards.

In early March 1997, flooding began in southern Minnesota and quickly spread to South Dakota and North Dakota. The greatest devastation occurred in Grand Forks, North Dakota, and East Grand Forks, Minnesota, following the failure of the dike system, which required over 50,000 people to evacuate their homes. Many small rural communities throughout the southern and central part of Minnesota and eastern North Dakota were also affected by the flooding.



Volunteers built dikes around many homes in South Fargo, North Dakota, following the Red River Floods.

Evacuees found themselves in need of emergency housing, mass feeding, and personal care items. The need for emergency response during this disaster was so massive that no local government, community, or voluntary disaster relief agency could alone address all the needs of the disaster victims. Disaster relief voluntary agencies, such as the Salvation Army, the American Red Cross, Adventist Community Services, Southern Baptist Disaster Relief, and Mennonite Disaster Service, quickly partnered with local communities and the government at all levels to assure a

successful response to the flood victims assisted.

Some specific examples of the collaborative efforts of these emergency management partners are highlighted below.

- Rural communities around the area opened their doors to the flood victims, and neighborhoods of 2,000 to 3,000 people tripled their populations overnight. In addition, at the height of the flood, over 1,400 evacuees become the personal guests of Air Force personnel who lived in base housing near the affected areas.
- A United States Air Force base, located 17 miles west of Grand Forks, North Dakota, became a temporary home for thousands of evacuees. Three large airplane hangars were quickly converted into mass shelters which were co-managed by the American Red Cross and the Salvation Army.
- Southern Baptist Disaster Relief dispatched a large food-preparation trailer to the Air Force base for the evacuees. The Salvation Army and the American Red Cross transported and served meals prepared by the Southern Baptists. Air Force personnel supervised and coordinated this mass feeding effort, maximizing the contributions of each voluntary agency.
- Families from Mennonite Disaster Services provided assistance to the Salvation Army in operating a major distribution center for donated goods and in running their social services office. While the husbands from Mennonite Disaster Services worked in the warehouse and distribution center, their wives provided assistance in the Salvation Army's social service office. The Salvation Army, in return, provided housing and meals for the Mennonite families.
- As a shortage of food supplies at the distribution center began to develop in June, the Fargo Food Bank responded by providing needed food supplies for a six-week period.
- Southern Baptist Disaster Relief opened an emergency day care center just a few doors down from the Salvation Army's distribution center. As activities at the day care center developed and supply needs emerged, the Salvation Army was able to respond with goods housed at their warehouse. As a result, a strong working relationship developed between these two voluntary agencies.
- Throughout the response effort, volunteers were recruited from St. Paul and Minneapolis through area voluntary agencies, local corporations, and the media. For example, the NBC KARE 11 television station in the twin cities partnered with local voluntary agencies to provide months of volunteer support to the disaster area. Northwest Airlines donated a DC-10 on three different occasions to fly several hundred volunteers to participate in a one-day community restoration house cleaning project. The University of North Dakota provided housing for these volunteers.

As these examples indicate, the Red River Floods provided many unique opportunities for cooperative partnerships between disaster relief voluntary agencies, the local, State, and Federal governments, the corporate world, and the public at large. As a

result, thousands of disaster-affected individuals and families received timely and effective assistance.

VOLUNTARY AGENCIES: STRONG EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT PARTNERS

The Red River Floods disaster is an excellent example of how voluntary agencies are critical partners in helping communities recover from the devastating effects of disasters. Although this example dealt with the flooding of a river, many of the services provided by voluntary agencies and the partnerships that developed could also result from a hurricane, earthquake, tornado, or act of terrorism. Discussed below are some unique strengths of voluntary agencies that make them such effective partners with the other providers of emergency management services.

Involved Throughout the Emergency Management Cycle

Voluntary agencies are involved in all four phases of emergency management – mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery. During **mitigation**, voluntary agencies educate their constituencies and communities about what they can do to reduce the damage of future disasters. They also advocate for programs and legislation that mitigate disaster damage and loss of life. During the **preparedness** phase, voluntary agencies assist in developing community disaster plans, train disaster responders, and provide community disaster education. Voluntary agencies provide mass care services and emergency assistance including sheltering, feeding, and clothing of individuals and families during the **response** phase. Finally, during disaster **recovery**, voluntary agencies work in partnership with the government and the affected community to identify and meet the remaining long-term recovery needs of disaster victims.

“While the public is aware of the vital role that disaster relief voluntary agencies play in providing emergency assistance during a disaster, people often don’t realize that these organizations continue to provide help long after the emergency has passed.”

— Dick Buck, Federal Coordinating Officer

Unit Three: Roles and Services of Disaster Relief Voluntary Agencies in Emergency Management will discuss the specific services that voluntary agencies provide during each of these four emergency management phases.

First To Arrive, Last To Leave

Voluntary agencies are usually one of the first responders to arrive on a disaster scene. Because many agencies are community-based, they are able to mobilize quickly and provide immediate emergency response activities such as feeding, sheltering, and clothing victims. Voluntary agencies are almost always on the scene prior to a Presidential declaration and oftentimes provide their services when a Presidential declaration is not needed.

There are also a number of voluntary agencies that are involved in long-term recovery activities including rebuilding, clean-up, and mental health assistance. Some voluntary agencies focus solely on the long-term needs of communities, responding in weeks 6-8 of the disaster. In some cases, these agencies will continue to work on long-term activities for several years.



Volunteers from Friends Disaster Service work throughout the recovery phase rebuilding homes after a tornado hit Tennessee in 1995.

Trusted by the Public

Voluntary agencies are trusted for the following reasons:

- Have knowledge and awareness about the local community and its unique circumstances and sensitivities;
- Have volunteers who are qualified to address the unique needs of the affected community;
- Have access to and established relationships with local populations who may not trust the government;
- Have staff and volunteers who are representative of the many different populations in the community;
- Are considered “good stewards” of resources and donations; and
- Are skilled in listening to and respecting the privacy of confidential information such as immigration concerns, family issues, and mental health problems.

By serving as a critical link between the community and the government, voluntary agencies help promote a quick and efficient disaster relief effort.



Nazarene Disaster Response District Director Ron McCormick listens to and encourages home owners following the Little Rock, Arkansas, tornadoes.

Community-Based

Most voluntary agencies work closely with the populations they end up assisting in times of disaster. Voluntary agencies are well grounded in the communities they



Local volunteers from the Christian Reformed World Relief Committee provide rebuilding services in Fort Smith, Arizona.

serve. Often, volunteers within these agencies are friends and neighbors who are committed to community service. Because of this relationship with the community, voluntary agencies are able to incorporate the values, priorities, and spirit of the community in their disaster relief efforts. Additionally, voluntary agencies are frequently able to identify specific individuals, families, or groups who have special needs during disaster, based on their prior experience of working with the community.

Flexible, Innovative, Resourceful

Voluntary agencies are often less hampered than governments by bureaucratic red tape and political considerations. Decentralized, bottom-up organizational structures help ensure that their programs reflect people's needs, and their independence allows them to be more innovative. Because they rely on the trust of private donors, voluntary agencies have a strong incentive to use their resources efficiently. Every disaster, community, and response and recovery effort is different, and voluntary agencies have the flexibility, innovation, and resourcefulness to "think outside of the box" and provide service to the most people in the most effective manner possible.

An Innovative Approach to a Difficult Problem

During a recent disaster, it came to the attention of some voluntary agencies that in the midst of destruction and severe housing shortages, some government-owned properties stood vacant. Voluntary agencies called upon several local attorneys, real estate agents, and construction workers to help identify these properties, make minimal repairs, and move homeless disaster victims into the properties. It took innovative thinking, flexibility, and resourcefulness on the part of the voluntary agencies to accomplish this task and provide housing for the disaster victims.

Complement Government Services

While government disaster assistance programs are critical to the recovery of affected communities, they are limited in scope and range of services. Voluntary agencies can help families make assistance go as far as possible by providing supplementary services where possible, as well as providing advice on how to use the assistance for the greatest gain.

Throughout the emergency management cycle, voluntary agencies assist the government in a wide range of activities including damage assessment, search and rescue missions, mass feeding and sheltering, cleanup and debris removal, construction of temporary housing, and rebuilding private homes. Additionally, voluntary agencies have trained volunteers with unique skills that can't be provided by the government employees. For example, many of the faith-based agencies have clergy and other individuals who are specially trained in providing spiritual counseling to disaster survivors.

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT VOLUNTARY AGENCIES AND THEIR DISASTER RELIEF ASSISTANCE

Myth: Voluntary agencies should be able to address all of the needs of disaster victims following a disaster.

Reality: Voluntary agencies, working alone, cannot be expected to meet the wide array of human needs that arise after a disaster. When voluntary agencies collaborate with their other emergency management partners—local, State, and Federal Government, local business, and the general public—there is a much greater chance of a successful disaster relief effort. In addition, it is important to note that voluntary agencies focus on meeting the needs of the most vulnerable disaster victims, rather than trying to meet all the needs of the entire community.

Myth: Voluntary agencies receive a considerable amount of government funding to provide disaster relief.

Reality: With few exceptions, voluntary agencies receive no government funding for disaster relief. Most voluntary agencies receive their disaster relief funds from private donations. For example, many of the faith-based agencies will establish disaster relief funds to which its member constituencies will contribute.

Myth: The national offices of voluntary agencies and the Federal level of government know best how to respond to disasters.

Reality: All disasters are local and being sensitive to the needs of the locally-affected communities should be a constant priority for all emergency workers. Local emergency management authorities should be supported, not directed, by their national offices. While outside help in a disaster is often needed and welcomed, everyone needs to remember that the goal is to support the local community and not overtake it.

Conflicts may arise when the national teams and the local response teams do not coordinate and collaborate. One example is a national team making a decision on behalf of its local affiliate without understanding the cultural, economic, and political sensitivities of the local community. In this case, the credibility of the local response team may be jeopardized, possibly harming that agency's level of trust in the community, its funding base, and ultimately its effectiveness in responding to the communities' needs.

Myth: If a disaster victim receives disaster assistance from a voluntary agency then they are not eligible for government assistance.

Reality: This is a common myth that causes confusion and, as a result, sometimes a delay in disaster assistance. The government disaster assistance programs are based on a verified need. If a disaster victim has received assistance from a voluntary agency and is still in need of assistance, they should seek assistance from all available sources, including government programs. The sequence of disaster assistance is such that government and voluntary agency programs augment and support each other so that a disaster victim can be afforded the maximum possible eligible programs. As an individual progresses through the sequence of delivery, unmet needs are noted and the individual is referred to the next applicable program. Also noted are disaster-caused needs that are met, so that possible duplication of benefits can be avoided. It is therefore important that anyone who has disaster-caused needs be encouraged to contact the American Red Cross, other voluntary agencies providing assistance, and their local, State and Federal governments.

Myth: Most unsolicited donated goods and unaffiliated volunteers are useless and a hindrance to important emergency response operations and therefore should not be allowed into the area.

Reality: Uncontrolled numbers of donated goods and services can seriously interfere with response operations. However, many of these goods and services can be converted into valuable resources for response and for longer term recovery needs when a State works closely with its voluntary agency partners and addresses the issue rather than overreacting and closing down the supply of these donated resources.

SUMMARY

Voluntary agencies are valuable partners in emergency management because of the unique benefits they are able to provide to disaster victims. Voluntary agencies today are more organized, efficient, and credible than ever before. They are also extremely committed to the values of open communication and collaboration that allow them to serve the needs of individuals, families, and communities most effectively.

In *Unit Two: History of Disaster Relief Voluntary Agencies*, you will be provided with historical milestones of disaster relief efforts in the U.S. You will also learn about the unique histories of different voluntary agencies and how they developed into the organizations they are today.

CHECK YOUR MEMORY

Once you have completed the questions below, check your answers on page E-2.

1. Which of the following is a key theme in the work of voluntary agencies?
 - a. Voluntary agencies provide service to vulnerable populations.
 - b. Voluntary agencies encourage disaster-affected communities to learn and grow.
 - c. Voluntary agencies provide an opportunity for millions of people throughout the country to serve their communities.
 - d. All of the above

2. Voluntary agencies are involved in all four phases of emergency management—mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery.
 - a. True
 - b. False

3. Voluntary agencies typically do not arrive at disaster scenes until after the Federal government.
 - a. True
 - b. False

4. Which of the following is a misconception about voluntary agencies?
 - a. Voluntary agencies receive a considerable amount of government funding to provide disaster relief.
 - b. Voluntary agencies are most effective when working in collaboration with their emergency management partners.
 - c. Uncontrolled amounts of donated goods and services can interfere with the response operations of voluntary agencies.
 - d. None of the above.

5. Voluntary agencies focus on meeting the needs of the most vulnerable disaster victims.
 - a. True
 - b. False