



ARMADA

Navigating Preparedness & Protection

“Volunteer Management”

Lee Foster

Senior Consultant, ARMADA Ltd.

They are well intentioned, wanting to help in times of great need, but history has shown us one thing: spontaneous volunteers, if not prepared for, can cause a disaster within a disaster.

September 11th, Hurricane Katrina, and Joplin, Missouri represent just a few of the catastrophic events we have seen in the past fifteen years. Each event has presented responders with unique challenges that even the most detailed planner couldn't have prepared for. However, one challenge that was present in all of these events that could have been avoided was what to do with the influx of good Samaritans who wanted to help out.

FEMA has dedicated trainings on the topic of spontaneous volunteer management. Before we continue, let's define spontaneous volunteers. Quite simply, these are individuals who desire to volunteer to help in response to a disaster who have not previously been involved with a volunteer organization (i.e., Red Cross, Salvation Army, CERT, VOAD, etc.). The management of spontaneous volunteers requires detailed planning along with some minimal in-place infrastructure.

For those with emergency management responsibilities in their community or organization, the first step in preparing for spontaneous volunteers is to learn about the process of establishing a volunteer reception center (VRC) in your community. A volunteer reception center is a place (brick and mortar or virtual) that individuals can visit to learn about needed volunteer support in the community in response to a disaster. Whether you chose a brick and mortar or a virtual VRC, having a close working relationship with your local emergency management, public health or first responding agency is important to have prior to an event. Becoming the trusted entity for the management of spontaneous volunteers will be a welcomed endeavor by most with disaster response duties.

However, it should be noted that simply receiving jobs and processing volunteers is not the only responsibility of a VRC. Ensuring that volunteers are properly prepared to volunteer is another important component. The VRC must make sure that volunteers are physically able to conduct the needed assignment and dressed properly. Additionally, the transportation of volunteers to the assigned locations needs to be coordinated; after all, if we don't want spontaneous volunteers flooding disaster sites, why would we want assigned volunteers to drive their own vehicles and further congest the disaster sites? Finally, volunteer accountability is an important task for the VRC. Hours served by volunteers can be submitted with reimbursement claim requests in the event that the disaster rises to the level of a Federally-declared disaster. Also, making sure that all volunteers return home safely at the end of the day is of the utmost importance. If you are a VRC manager and send 30 volunteers out to support operations, you better be sure that 30 volunteers return to the VRC at the end of the day.

In conclusion, volunteers can be a strong force multiplier for any community that is affected by a disaster. With proper pre-event planning, coordination and teamwork, your community can respond efficiently, recover quickly and increase general civic pride.