

## Getting NGOs and Faith-Based Organizations to the Table

*Presented by Adele Lyons, Biloxi Program Director, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation  
(Biloxi, Mississippi)*

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**Lessons Learned:** Nongovernmental and faith-based organizations (NGOs and FBOs) are essential to complement and supplement government response and recovery operations. Local government leaders must be aware of and actively work with NGOs and FBOs in their communities and include them formally in official disaster planning, response, and recovery operations. A representative of a local affiliate of VOAD (Voluntary Organizations Active in Disasters) may provide the necessary link between an Emergency Operations Center and the NGO/FBO community.

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The Communities Program of the Knight Foundation ([www.knightfoundation.org](http://www.knightfoundation.org)) aims to improve the quality of life in 26 U.S. communities where the Knight brothers owned newspapers. In each of these communities, a program director and a local advisory committee help identify good ideas and transformational opportunities. Adele Lyons, Program Director for the Foundation's office in Biloxi, explained, "Prior to Katrina, the Foundation had done some good work with the symphony, museums, and various educational initiatives. After Katrina, we decided to help the community recover." Since Katrina, Lyons has witnessed that "A big issue for us was the integration of NGOs and FBOs; they were not at the table. The government agencies and officials just took for granted the significant role that the nonprofits and FBOs play in our community. If not for them, we wouldn't be where we are today."

Disaster planning and hurricane preparation have long been practiced in South Mississippi. Each city and county has an Emergency Operations Center (EOC), and they all work together with FEMA and MEMA (Mississippi Emergency Management Agency), yet prior to Hurricane Katrina, the EOCs only involved



governmental agencies. NGOs and FBOs were not represented in the EOCs and were not officially included in the planning or recovery efforts. Hurricane Katrina highlighted the need for collaboration with and among these groups and their integration in official processes.

Lyons explained, "With the catastrophic impact of Katrina, the importance of NGOs and FBOs was obvious very quickly. Katrina showed the need for collaboration and integration; key issues weren't being addressed." Lyons cited three examples of areas where NGOs and FBOs filled gaps in government response and recovery efforts:

1. **Child Care.** Official plans had not foreseen the need for child care before school resumed. Lyons said, “Parents were trying to clean up their homes and report to their jobs to help with the recovery there, but you couldn’t go to work or fix your house and take care of your kids at the same time. The Boys & Girls Clubs stepped up and took on a big role, opening in temporary locations and providing activities. Churches also began developing programs.”

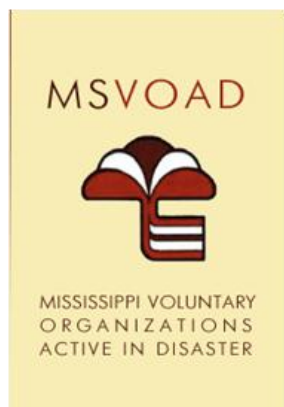


2. **Pets.** Before and during Katrina, pets were not allowed in emergency shelters. Many people would not leave their homes if it meant leaving their pets. Some of these people rode out the storm in life-threatening conditions, but others did not make it. Lyons explained, “Shelters have now been set up that allow pets. The Humane Society is part of the EOC process now, and we have plans for how to deal with pets before, during, and after an event.”



3. **Transportation.** Many people could not evacuate because they lacked transportation. Some either did not have money for gas or their vehicles were unsuitable for a long trip. Consequently, people braved the hurricane, and some did not survive. Lyons described a comprehensive system now available through the Coast Transit Authority that allows people to register for evacuation transportation. They are given times and locations for pickups.

**VOAD Plays a Key Role Today.** According to Lyons, “Through VOAD (Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster), the NGOs and FBOs have arrived at the table. After Hurricane Katrina, many nonprofits and faith-based groups were ‘filling in’ and doing the job of caring for citizens’ needs, including food, shelter, and medical care, when various government agencies had been tasked with the jobs. The NGOs were getting the job done, yet they were still not recognized as a necessary part of the team. Since Katrina, both state and local VOAD chapters have organized, and the individual who is chair of the local and state VOAD now sits at the EOC table in Harrison County. VOAD representatives officially participate in state and county EOC meetings and on committees. Instead of all these different organizations coming to the table, there can be a representative from VOAD. They rally their troops regarding who has what and who can do what.”



Through coordination and communication, VOAD brings key NGOs and FBOs to the table, playing their appropriate roles in an organized way. Mississippi VOAD is a state chapter ([www.msvoad.org](http://www.msvoad.org)) of a national organization ([www.nvoad.org](http://www.nvoad.org)). South Mississippi VOAD (SMVOAD), formed in 2007, has 24 participating organizations. It promotes understanding of each member’s expertise and encourages coordination of activities to avoid unnecessary duplication. SMVOAD also welcomes government agencies and for-profit businesses as affiliates.

Lyons emphasized, “Bringing people together in times of crisis is easy. But you must be able to convince groups to form partnerships, collaborations, and networks in the planning and preparation stages. VOAD has been very successful in getting the nonprofit and faith-based organizations involved with the government hurricane planning and resilience efforts.”

**Coordination Is Critical.** Lyons explained that after Katrina, “Trucks would roll into town without a clue as to where to go. They would try to just park and give out water, food, and clothes – there was not a coordinated effort.” The community has learned the importance of coordination and is now identifying the gaps. Lyon added, “Volunteers, both individuals and groups from around the country, have played a major role in our recovery, but you have to have a system in place to utilize volunteers.” VOAD meetings, networks, and communication efforts have played a major role in improving utilization of volunteers.

**Focus Is on Resilience.** Lyons reported, “We’ve learned new lessons through our CARRI Advisory Group. We learned not to plan just for the most obvious incident (hurricanes) but to plan on recovery and renewal no matter what. That is resilience. We are not there yet. It is hard to think beyond the obvious event.” Another lesson is that it is very beneficial for the full group to discuss an idea before moving to implementation. Lyons shared this experience: “We found that not everyone can be at every meeting, which leaves some holes. An idea on our roadmap was already being done by an agency that had not been represented at several meetings. We were trying to reinvent the wheel, but with full communication we found we didn’t have to.” Lyons reinforced that many of the ideas and lessons reflected in the resilience focus area planning work undertaken by the CARRI Advisory Group is transferable to other communities around the nation. The Advisory Group emphasized these priorities: (1) improving communications and collaboration across sectors, (2) enhancing individual and family resilience and preparedness, and (3) assuring housing affordability.

**NGOs and FBOs Are Vitally Important.** NGOs and FBOs complement one another and the other sectors. Lyons emphasized, “The nonprofit sector is a huge industry, but everyone takes them for granted. They are viewed as the “do-gooders” who will always be around. We certainly recognize their importance in our community and, in particular, at the table when involved in the official planning.” She added, “Most small grassroots organizations don’t have a clue what is involved in applying for federal funds, and we currently have a state organization that is trying to work with these organizations to complete paperwork. We’re about ‘what ifs,’ but I think we have a potential disaster brewing given the current economical situation.”



Mississippi’s current situation shows that NGOs and FBOs play a vital role in recovering communities. Lyons posed two key questions: “(1) How do we keep them alive and well in these hard economic times, and (2) What happens if they fail to exist?”