



Coordination of Volunteers and Donated Supplies in Disaster Response

Contributed by the Gulfport CARRI Team

The Issue

One important lesson from the Gulfport community's post-Katrina experience is that communities and regions need to have clear systems in place to coordinate volunteer services and distribute donated supplies in the aftermath of a disaster. The city of Gulfport and its surrounding communities were fortunate to have many volunteers and voluntary organizations come to offer assistance after Hurricane Katrina. Some 20,000 volunteers began arriving on the Mississippi Gulf Coast immediately after the storm offering a wide range of assistance, from clearing debris and making repairs to providing medical care and disbursing clothes and supplies. However, the community lacked a comprehensive plan or system for matching outside expertise and supplies with local needs. The whereabouts, expertise, and intentions of volunteers, both groups and individuals, as well as the resources available, were largely unknown. In addition, the community lacked comprehensive information about specific needs for assistance. The result was a situation in which



volunteers were not always able to assist in a targeted and efficient manner those in greatest need of their skills and resources.

Lessons Learned

Representatives from all sectors of the Gulfport community have identified a number of ways to enhance the positive impact of volunteer services and donated supplies in future disaster response scenarios. Local insights suggest that state and local governments, working together with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), faith-based organizations (FBOs), and the private sector, should establish plans and systems for future disasters that account for the following aspects of volunteer coordination and distribution of relief supplies.

- Designation and coordination of specific roles for state and local agencies, private companies, NGOs, and FBOs
- Registration of volunteers, including inventories of their expertise and supplies
- Identification of specific needs, by location, for certain types of volunteer expertise
- Information systems and identification technologies for disbursing volunteers and supplies to match community needs
- Credentialing of volunteers who enter the zone of impact to provide professional services
- Tracking the whereabouts and activities of volunteers
- Housing and feeding volunteers and/or guidelines for self-sufficiency

Responding to the desires of Gulfport, Mississippi, citizens to share their Hurricane Katrina experience with other communities, the CARRI Gulfport Team, including researchers at The University of Southern Mississippi–Gulf Coast, worked with community members to document their stories. The essay presented here, part of CARRI's Gulfport Resilience series, captures a key lesson learned from the Gulfport community's daunting experience with the hurricane.

Illustrative Examples

The more coordinated and focused the efforts of volunteers are, the more effective they will be in delivering appropriate services and supplies to points of greatest need. City of Gulfport staff noted that volunteers were most helpful after Katrina when someone was available to match their specific expertise with outstanding needs. Many volunteers were adept at fitting into the city's chain of command while simultaneously taking appropriate initiative and possessing enough supplies to be self-sufficient. The key was integrating outside volunteers into an overall system and delegating responsibility in an organized fashion. For example, municipal firefighters arrived with stocked vehicles and were directed to support the Gulfport Fire Department.

The credentialing of volunteers bringing regulated expertise (e.g., construction contractors, medical personnel) to the area was also a major challenge in the wake of Katrina. In retrospect, local agency staff suggested that licenses for credentialed personnel should be coordinated outside of the zone of impact to prevent unnecessary stress on coordinators in the disaster area. Some suggested that such a process might also help ensure that volunteers entering the disaster area are properly immunized and provisioned. Such a credentialing system would require coordination among municipalities and state agencies, including law enforcement, which would be in charge of facilitating and enforcing the system.

Memorial Hospital at Gulfport also would have benefited from a centralized system for



coordination of volunteers and donations. Many physicians and nurses showed up wanting to help after Katrina, but Memorial Hospital was already well staffed based on its emergency operations plan. For the most part, the volunteer medical professionals were needed more to provide primary care throughout the community rather than at the hospital itself. In the future, hospital administrators would prefer to communicate their needs to a central coordinating center or clearinghouse that could in turn dispatch people with particular medical expertise and professional skills to locations where they are needed most. Memorial Hospital was also overwhelmed by the volume of undesigned donations of medical and pharmaceutical supplies, food, water, and clothing given directly to the hospital. Hospital officials said that in the future it would be helpful to be able to direct undesigned donations to a central clearinghouse that could match them to the community's needs. The location and contact information of such a clearinghouse could be widely publicized so that the people would know where to direct their contributions.

Addressing the Issue in Recovery

A variety of efforts have taken shape in the years since Katrina to address the issue of volunteer coordination during the ongoing recovery of the Gulfport community. Within 2 months after the storm, the Mississippi Commission for Volunteer Services began working on the issue of volunteer coordination and asked the United Way to assume a leadership role. For volunteers currently assisting with long-term recovery, two independent volunteer service coordination centers are now in place—Volunteer Gulf Coast and Hands On Gulf Coast.

Volunteer Gulf Coast is associated with the United Way of South Mississippi and utilizes the web site 1-800-Volunteer.org as its volunteer management system. It now manages volunteers engaged in Katrina recovery work, placing individuals who want to volunteer and

coordinating efforts with companies whose employees want to volunteer. Volunteer Gulf Coast does not coordinate construction supervision and has no housing for volunteers.

Hands On Gulf Coast (HOGC), a program of Points of Light Institute, also works with Katrina recovery volunteers and manages construction projects and other efforts. For 3 years after Katrina, HOGC managed a volunteer camp as well as disaster recovery projects in construction, youth development, and environmental rehabilitation for out-of-state volunteers and AmeriCorps members. HOGC is registered as a locally based 501(c)(3) volunteer management organization.

At the state level, Governor Haley Barbour established the Mississippi Hurricane Recovery Fund to serve as the state's central clearinghouse for corporations, organizations, and individuals to make financial donations to assist Mississippians through the long-term recovery from Katrina and future hurricane-related disasters. The Recovery Fund office accepts donations and offers of volunteers and coordinates with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and Mississippi Emergency Management Agency (MEMA) to direct these resources to citizens and communities in need. The Gulf Coast Community Foundation is a regional public charity that manages the Recovery Fund that oversees the disbursement of grants to support relief and recovery efforts on the coast.



Addressing the Issue for Future Response

While these organizations represent significant improvements in the coordination of volunteers assisting in the ongoing recovery from Katrina, the Gulfport community has also made progress in establishing processes and systems for coordinating volunteers in responding to future disasters. However, there remains a need for coordination and collaboration *among key sectors* to share information regarding expertise, available resources, and gaps in services so that governmental and non-governmental entities can work in harmony and ensure that incoming agencies and volunteers are most effectively meeting basic needs and filling gaps throughout the community during a disaster response.

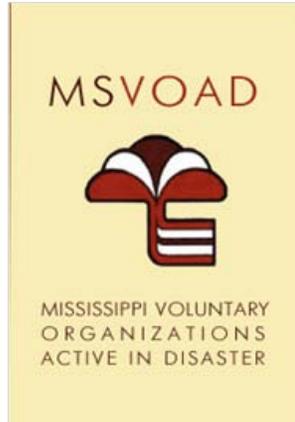
After Katrina, the city of Gulfport established the Hurricane Emergency Logistics Providers (HELP) Team to coordinate the logistics of donated resources provided to Gulfport for its employees, citizens, and the city itself after a declared disaster. The HELP Team is responsible for development of an after-storm resource guide, which will contain profiles and contact information of organizations (federal, state, non-governmental, faith based, etc.) that have capacity or expertise to help the city and its citizens in the wake of a future disaster. The HELP Team is charged with contacting all of the groups at the beginning of each hurricane season to validate contact information and check in about planning efforts. The city has outlined a number of potential repository and distribution sites for donated goods, as well as communications, media, and volunteer registration strategies to employ during response. One significant piece of this plan is the institution of a Public Information Officer (PIO) who will be the point of contact for information about donations, receiving and distribution processes, and other services.

The Mississippi state chapter of Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (MSVOAD) was also established after Katrina. MSVOAD serves as an umbrella organization for many distinct

organizations active in disaster response throughout the state of Mississippi. It serves to bring organizations together and enable them to understand each other's work and collaborate smoothly while eliminating duplication of effort.

One goal is to facilitate access to available resources and services so that the people of Mississippi affected by a disaster receive effective services. The MSVOAD's key principles for achieving its mission are communication, coordination, cooperation, collaboration, convening mechanisms, outreach, and advocacy. MSVOAD works closely with MEMA and FEMA to prevent duplication of effort and promote effective distribution of resources in times of emergency.

The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina catalyzed a wide range of activities within the Gulfport community that clearly demonstrated



recognition of the need for new and efficient systems to coordinate volunteer services and disburse donated supplies immediately after a disaster. The important developments described in this paper all represent key strides toward enhancing the Gulfport community's resilience. Achieving and maintaining a highly effective system to coordinate volunteers and donated supplies in the aftermath of a future disaster will require *ongoing dedication to collaboration and information sharing* among entities from different sectors of the community as well as state and federal agencies.

For more information, please visit the following web sites:

- www.1-800-volunteer.org/1800Vol/VolunteerGulfCoast/vindex.do
- www.handsongulfcoast.org
- www.mississippirelief.com
- www.gulfcoastfoundation.org
- www.msvoad.org