

How to Recruit, Retain and Organize Volunteers

BY: [Margaret Steen](#) | September 15, 2014

There are times during disasters when first responders will be overwhelmed and unable to do all that needs to be done without help from volunteers, who will do much of the work either in an organized fashion or spontaneously.

Volunteers are an important cog in disaster response, and developing a volunteer program before disaster strikes can be invaluable. It allows emergency responders to focus on some of the more major tasks as volunteers handle easier work like traffic control and light search and rescue.

Developing a volunteer program “saves lives and money,” said Karen Baker, California’s chief service officer and head of [CaliforniaVolunteers](#), part of the governor’s office.

A good volunteer program needs up-front planning and recruitment, and it needs to keep volunteers engaged in between emergencies. A first step for local emergency management professionals who think they need a volunteer program is to decide what they want volunteers to do.

“Some people just want to train the local community to be sure people know what to do in an earthquake [or other disaster],” said Suu-Va Tai, a disaster program specialist with [CaliforniaVolunteers](#). “They’re just training them — they don’t see them again. They don’t have the infrastructure for volunteers.”

Other departments need help regularly, not just during emergencies, he said. Especially when they have been hit hard by budget cuts, agencies may want volunteers to answer phones and do other routine tasks.

Whether just training locals or developing a program, it’s important that it be defined as such. “You need a job description,” said Dave Nichols, medical reserve and workforce deployment manager for [Public Health of Seattle and King County](#), Wash. A big part of Nichols’ job is managing volunteers, and he is also a volunteer with [ShelterBox](#), a British nonprofit that responds to disasters around the world. “If you just recruit people and don’t do anything with them, they’ll disappear.”

Nichols offered suggestions for where to find volunteers:

Colleges and universities are good sources, especially if they have training programs for doctors, nurses, pharmacists and veterinarians — all people with skills that are valuable in emergencies. Churches and fraternal organizations like the Rotary or Lions clubs are also good places to ask: They have members who know the community and are often seeking opportunities to help others.

Ask other emergency response groups such as the [American Red Cross](#). “What might be a disaster for us, might not be a disaster for those groups,” Nichols said.

Approach the private sector, since many companies match dollars for volunteer hours to encourage community service.

Retirees are another good source — with the baby boomers leaving the workforce, there are a lot of skilled people who may be interested in volunteer opportunities.

After developing a roster of volunteers, it’s important to train them to the job description, perform background checks on those who may end up working in situations where that’s necessary like a hospital, and create a database to keep track of them.

Ideally every participant is an affiliated volunteer — signed up, given a background check and trained in certain areas, said Barbara Nelson, a community educator with [Pierce County Emergency Management](#) in Washington. Nelson’s office also tries to associate volunteers with agencies or organizations that can use their help. “For example, when we have donations in our county, the Salvation Army is in charge of that,” she said. “We can support them with people trained to support them.”

Shelter volunteers work with a variety of groups, including churches that open emergency housing when necessary. “All of these people are background checked, and they’ve had specific training for how to open a shelter,” Nelson said. “We know where they’re from and what their capabilities are, and we can put them to work right away.”

Once the list of volunteers is developed, it's also important to keep participants engaged. If volunteers are recruited for just a one-time event, they may not respond the next time unless they're continually engaged, Tai said. "You need to find different activities to engage with them and keep them training."

Nichols' program includes a reserve corps of 700 active volunteers who are used frequently in the community. About half are medically licensed, and the rest are support volunteers who can handle logistics. To become a volunteer, a person must attend an orientation and take two FEMA courses. Then, after a background check, they receive a badge and vest that identify them as volunteers.

Nichols' department uses volunteers to test its ability to handle mass vaccinations by giving flu shots to the uninsured. He also calls on volunteers to support the American Red Cross when it opens a shelter.

"I spend a lot of time trying to find things for my people to do, not make-work but real stuff," Nichols said. "That keeps them engaged, plus it adds people to our pool."

It's helpful to have volunteers working regularly, and it's crucial to know both how to activate the volunteers and what they will do when disaster strikes.

California is developing a statewide [Disaster Volunteer Network](#), an online tool to help local programs manage their volunteers. "If you're an emergency manager at a county level who wants to understand the footprint of Spanish-speaking CERT volunteers that have had training in traffic control, you can find out," Baker said.

Debbie Goetz, community planning coordinator with the Seattle Office of Emergency Management, said her office coordinates volunteer ham radio operators. In case of disaster, a few of them are designated to report to the EOC, where they will receive information from others in neighborhoods around the city. "They would start doing field reporting," Goetz said. Looking for problems with bridges and the transportation system, for example, or places where large-scale rescues are needed.

Nichols' office uses the [WAserv](#) (Washington State Emergency Registry of Volunteers) Web-based system to reach volunteers, though they must have Internet access to see it. The organization also is creating a plan to use ham radio operators to contact volunteers if necessary.

It's important to plan realistically, as well. "In a catastrophic event, we expect not to have 700 volunteers — some will be affected by the event and some will be out of the area," Nichols said.

In addition to the volunteers who were scheduled but can't make it to help, there will be spontaneous volunteers who show up. Their motives are good, and in the right situation they can be helpful. But they can also create complications and be a distraction during the middle of an emergency, which is not the time to figure out who people are. However, since these volunteers are inevitable, it's important to think through what they will be able to do and have a plan for that. For example, spontaneous volunteers are perfect for certain jobs, such as filling sandbags and clearing rubble, where a background check isn't necessary.

The effort invested before an emergency is invaluable. "We spend a lot of time and effort trying to get people signed up ahead of time," Nichols said. His office is working with local hospitals to develop a system so that emergency workers could recognize hospital employees' badges and know which badges mean the person has had the proper background checks.

One way to handle volunteers is to set up a reception center. Ideally the center should be away from the area impacted by the disaster, so volunteers can be organized and assigned to appropriate jobs before being bused to the site, according to Nelson. "When you have a situation where you have a lot of people coming in and offering to help and you don't have any idea who they are or what their capabilities are, that's when we open a volunteer reception center."

Continue to [page 2](#) to read about the seven tips for creating a successful volunteer program.

Plan for Success

Beyond initial planning and recruiting, experts offer these tips for creating a successful volunteer program:

Affiliate with statewide or other organizations. The first responders to a disaster are local, with the state providing resources when local resources can't meet the needs. CaliforniaVolunteers has a seat in the state operations center, said Karen Baker, chief service officer for California. She leads CaliforniaVolunteers, and it can help mobilize extra resources for a community in need. "The state has your back, because it can tap volunteers in the community or in a neighboring community to immediately come to the aid of fellow Californians," Baker said.

Make local connections. Barbara Nelson, a community educator with Pierce County, Wash., Emergency Management coordinates efforts not only of official volunteers but also of local organizations, including the Red Cross, the American Legion and churches that respond to disasters. "We started at that point of trying to identify who is available with what sort of resources," said Nelson. "We wanted to make sure we did this in an organized way."

Don't overpromise. "If the bottom line is that you need help with data entry and traffic control, and you recruit someone to become part of the fire team, you're going to attract someone who's going to want a high activity level when you want administrative support," Baker said. "Don't do false advertising — be accurate with what kind of volunteer experience you can promise, deliver and support."

Learn about liability. Volunteer coordinators should learn what the laws are in their state regarding liability coverage for volunteers who are injured while helping in a disaster, said Suu-Va Tai, a disaster program specialist with CaliforniaVolunteers. With proper training, they can assess the need for waivers or additional insurance.

Track volunteers' hours. Knowing how much time volunteers put in helping after a disaster can be helpful later on, because they can be translated into local hours and count toward federal matching funds, Nelson said. It helps to have detailed sign-in and sign-out sheets, and also to document what the volunteers are doing so an hourly rate can be assigned.

Use volunteers for a variety of activities. "It's important that you don't create a response junkie; you are going to need them in all phases," Baker said. "Ensure your volunteers understand out of the chute that they are going to be needed for a variety of tasks."

Show volunteers they're appreciated. "If you have a great volunteer coordinator, you will be amazed at the lengths volunteers will go to for that person," said Tai.

This article was printed from: <http://www.emergencymgmt.com/training/How-to-Recruit-Retain-Organize-Volunteers.html>