
Working With Disaster Response Volunteers¹

by Linda L. Graff

1.3 Disaster Response Volunteers

The timing of disaster response work is almost always a surprise. Even for groups with a mandate to respond to crises such as the Red Cross, wilderness rescue troops, or marine rescue units, for example, the timing of the next call out is almost always unknown. You know there will be a next event, but you never know when, or exactly what the circumstances will be, or how many responders will be needed. The potential need for large numbers of responders makes these kinds of efforts dependent on volunteer involvement.

The complicating factor about the "waiting to happen" nature of disaster response is that asking volunteers to wait for an opportunity to work can result in higher attrition rates. Experience proves that the initial motivation to volunteer is quite fragile and time limited. If you do not hook them quickly (respond quickly to their initial contact, screen, orient, train and place them without delay), they wander off to pursue either other volunteer work, or any of the million other things they might do with their precious time. So keeping volunteers "on a string" is difficult. Anna Power at the Newfoundland Red Cross² reports that offering training sessions and simulations has been particularly effective in keeping volunteers motivated during non-disaster times.

Time is of the essence in most disaster response situations, and urgency pushes the responding agency to cut corners wherever possible. Waiting for two weeks to receive the results of the police check before placing a disaster response volunteer is out of the question, for example.

¹ This excerpt is from a chapter on working with a variety of special case volunteers where risks may be elevated. Source: Linda L. Graff. (2003). Better Safe ... Risk Management In Volunteer Programs & Community Services. Dundas, Ontario: Linda Graff And Associates Inc.

² Personal correspondence, August, 2002.

However, it is important not to heighten the harm of the crisis by sending in the "wrong" volunteers. Volunteers themselves could get hurt, their actions could lead to the injury of others, slow down the rescue efforts of others, or destroy important evidence.

SENDING THE "WRONG" VOLUNTEERS INTO DISASTER RESPONSE

In disaster response situations, the "wrong" volunteers might include candidates who are

- not skilled or qualified
- not trustworthy
- not able to respect boundaries, accept supervision or follow direction
- daredevils just itching to be heroes

It can also waste preciously short monetary and human resources in the disaster response effort if a flood of good hearted people turn up on-site to offer help. Large scale tragedies such as the Oklahoma bombing and the 9/11 terrorist attacks demonstrate the kinds of risks and additional headaches that can be generated by large numbers of well-intended responders just wanting to help in some way, but who overwhelm those who are, themselves, trying to do the work.

Here are some ideas for managing risks related to the involvement of volunteers and community service personnel in disaster response:

- Have a crisis plan for your own volunteer management function, and rehearse it.
- Include volunteer management in the overall crisis plan.
 - Make sure that there are additional personnel specifically designated and available to manage the coordination of volunteer involvement.
 - Make sure that those persons are professionally qualified managers of volunteers with the specialized knowledge and skills needed to do this work.
 - If the crisis event for which you might be called on to supply volunteers has the potential to require large numbers of volunteers, establish a plan to recruit other volunteer management assistants as your first move. These could be special leadership volunteers specifically trained in advance in some of the skills and techniques of volunteer management most relevant to disaster response. They could be managers of volunteers from other agencies who sign on with your organization to be "on call" in the event of an emergency. An annual meeting of these professionals might be sufficient to maintain their willingness to help and review who is available, willing, and appropriately skilled to perform the various components of the volunteer management function.
 - Make sure that volunteer management has a budget line in the overall plan, and is assigned a designated location from which to mobilize, stage, organize and support large numbers of prospective volunteer responders.
- Include basic principles of volunteer management in the training of other team leaders, managers, and senior responders since in the time of a crisis, everyone will have some responsibility to pay attention to the work of volunteers.

- Have a communication plan, including sample copy, prepared in advance so that the proper messages get out through the media quickly about what kinds of help the relief effort needs and doesn't need, at its various stages; include information on where, and to whom, people should report; the "where" should be easily found while still being a safe distance from the disaster site.
- Put into place a "Screening Intensiveness Grid" by which those who need volunteer help are able to quickly identify the skills and qualities they require in candidates, and by which they can alert screeners to any special qualifications-checking that ought to be performed on candidates before acceptance and placement;³ a blank Screening Intensiveness Grid and a sample Grid that is partially completed to illustrate how the Grid might be deployed are [see below].
 - Screening Intensiveness Grids can be prepared in advance for known or likely recruitment needs; forms should be checked and approved by volunteer program management staff in consultation with the requester when requests for volunteer help come in from the field.
- If you expect that you will need volunteers who are screened to a significant degree and that you will not have the time or the resources to do the screening yourself in the immediate rush of disaster response, consider the following:
 - Establish a collaboration agreement with one or more organizations that have volunteers or staff who are willing to help in a relief effort and who are already screened to the level you need.
 - Ask these partner organizations to "loan" some of their volunteers to the disaster response effort and provide a guarantee that all such volunteers have gone through the degree of screening protocol you would need for various types of positions. There are probably many organizations that would be willing to put up with the problems of not having some of their own personnel - paid and unpaid - for a while if they knew it would contribute to relief efforts.
 - Make sure that the prospective volunteers of those other organizations are periodically canvassed ahead of time so that the list of potential recruits is current, the volunteers have a sense of the kinds of work that might be asked of them, and someone knows how to reach them outside of their normal volunteering shifts. An out-of-date roster is more trouble than help.
- Be prepared to say "no thanks" to those well-intentioned applicants who want to assist now and in their own way, but who do not fit your immediate needs. In a situation like this, you can not and should not take all-comers.

³ Many agencies have "Request For Volunteers Forms" that staff usually complete and pass along to the volunteer resources department when they want to create a new volunteer position. The Screening Intensiveness Grid is a shortened version of that kind of tool, focussed specifically on the critical screening requirements that should not be skipped, even when the urgency of the situation pushes for immediate acceptance and placement of all prospective helpers.

 POLICY

- **Develop a "zero tolerance policy" for substandard performance.**

- It is likely that you will not have much opportunity to "get to know" some of the people you place in a crisis situation. Their attitude, willingness to respect boundaries, and degree of cooperativeness under pressure may be relatively unknown to you, and yet these are exceedingly important ingredients in both the safety and success of volunteer relief efforts.

- Develop and clearly communicate to all prospective volunteers a policy of "zero tolerance" for any form of inappropriate or unacceptable behaviour. The policy would state that in a crisis situation, any progressive discipline process normally in place in the agency will be suspended for the period of the disaster response effort, and second and third chances will not be available to volunteers who do not perform up to standard immediately. **Put the policy in writing and ensure that every prospective volunteer understands it before they sign on. Have them sign an agreement of compliance as part of the intake process.**

 TIP

- Back up the policy with designated volunteer supervisors to act as volunteer squad leaders. These leadership positions may be filled by your regular volunteers who normally do other work but who have been screened and trained to necessary levels. They also may be other interested community members who are attracted to the high level training and the potential to play a significant role in the event of a crisis. Volunteer management assistants and the team leaders must be recruited and trained in advance.

SCREENING INTENSIVENESS GRID

POSITION TITLE	SHORT DESCRIPTION OF DUTIES	WORK AREA*	MINIMUM QUALIFICATIONS & SPECIAL SCREENING REQUIREMENTS**

*** WORK AREA** (Customize this list to your setting)

- 1. People - specify: counselling, comfort, registry, etc.
- 2. Medical - specify
- 3. Transportation - give details
- 4. Equipment - electronic, heavy, etc.
- 5. Communications - specify: internal, external, family
- 6. Housing

- 7. Food - specify: preparation, serving, provisioning; for workers, victims, family
- 8. Security - on-site; remote
- 9. Extraction
- 10. Body Recovery
- 11. Other

Requester _____ Contact #(s) _____ Date of Request _____

****SCREENING REQUIREMENTS:** Provide sufficient detail so initial screeners will know what to ask for and what qualifications should be checked before placement

SAMPLE SCREENING INTENSIVENESS GRID			
POSITION TITLE	SHORT DESCRIPTION OF DUTIES	WORK AREA*	MINIMUM QUALIFICATIONS & SPECIAL SCREENING REQUIREMENTS* *
<i>family updater</i>	<i>communicate all pertinent updates to members of victims' families</i>	<i>people, communications</i>	<i>- counselling in trauma response - certificate - check professional level communications skills - call for references</i>
<i>critical incident stress debriefer</i>	<i>conduct CIS debriefings with emergency personnel, on-site, irregular hours, on call-out basis</i>	<i>people</i>	<i>- must have specialized certificate in CISD and previous disaster debriefing experience - check with issuer of certificate</i>
<i>debris removal</i>	<i>heavy physical labour, including lifting, wheelbarrow, walking on uneven terrain</i>	<i>labour</i>	<i>- physical strength and stamina mandatory -any kind of back problem or mobility impairment is an automatic disqualifier - emotional stability to cope in highly stressful environments</i>

* **WORK AREA** (Customize this list to your setting)

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