

Assessing Volunteering Work during Disasters: The Benefits, the Downsides and why the  
Practice is Inevitably Important

Abstract

Disasters are a common occurrence. They could be fires, earthquakes, mass shootings, floods, building collapse, industrial explosions and any kind of danger that threatens human life in a huge scale. Often no year passes without the country experiencing a disaster in one form or the

other. In the event of any disaster, a common observation often is expected –volunteers coming in to complement the work of disaster response teams. Though volunteers are of valuable help to disaster situations, their participation can also hinder disaster mitigation efforts if they are untrained in their line of volunteering. Disasters are also danger zones; therefore, it is within logic to look into whether it could be right for persons to volunteer in situations where their lives are put at risks of harm and death. This work seeks to find means through which volunteer participation in disasters can be encouraged positively while eliminating the downsides volunteering poses. Huge referencing is done to volunteering regulations in the country and thought logic.

### Assessing Volunteering Work during Disasters: The Benefits, the Downsides and why the Practice is Important

Though desired by many, volunteering also can come at negative costs that are revealed by people on the receiving end of it. For instance, individuals who volunteer for sensitive

disaster fields such as medical emergency may not have the right skills for that kind of job and thereby hurt the persons for whom they deliver their services. Due to such risks, it is important to draw a boundary on when voluntary work is acceptable and when it should be avoided. Just because of the goodwill of their work, volunteers should not be criticism-free. They should responsibly answer for any of their actions that endangers the public. The United States laws recognize both the importance and downsides linked to volunteering. Laws such as the Volunteer Protection Act of 1997 promote volunteering. It does so by eliminating barriers that prevent most people from freely offering their services for a social cause. For instance, the Act limits a volunteering individual's risk of tort liability when the volunteering person is acting on behalf of a government agency or a non-profit organization. Besides promoting volunteering, Volunteer Protection Act also ensures that in cases of negligent actions during a volunteering work, a volunteer can be faced with civil liability suit (Goble & Brudney, 2015). Volunteering should be promoted for it adds valuable help in situations of emergency but should also be regulated so that volunteers are prevented from harm disasters pose.

### **The Motivations for Joining Disaster Rescue Teams**

Volunteers have their individual motivations that drive them into being part of disaster volunteer groups. For most volunteers, the reasons are understandable while for some there exist hidden motives (Nave & Arminda, 2013). Many volunteers cite the need to show social responsibility as a reason for volunteering (Nave & Arminda, 2013). Such volunteers recognize that law enforcement, medical and fire department teams when acting alone cannot respond well to a disaster. Volunteers join the teams with the hopes that their efforts can lessen the emotional and physical burden disaster mitigation works often constitute. Also, this particular group of volunteers feels that it is their obligation to keep things in order should they be disoriented by a

disaster. Their satisfaction comes in the sense that their work gives them a sense of social awareness (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2016).

Many graduates from different area of expertise or field sometimes find it challenging to find well-paying jobs. That happens when employers demand some professional experience, even from job candidates who are recently done with their college education. Some graduates, therefore, join volunteer groups with the hopes that their efforts can be recognized as some professional experience that can give them advantage when pursuing jobs (Topp et al., 2015). For such volunteers, their volunteering is tied to their career expectations.

The sites of many disasters are often complex that make it challenging for law enforcement officials to impose order. In some situations, there is no organized structure which volunteers follow to be part of a disaster mitigation plan. For such cases, leadership is missing and that potentially presents the danger of volunteers engaging in actions that have no approval from a quality-control authority. Unorganized volunteers may also lack an idea on what to do during a disaster situation because of absence of order-giving persons (Lowe & Fothergill, 2003). Though most volunteers join disaster response teams with the right intentions, their actions may produce results or outcomes that are not desired. That therefore implies that it is within logic to vet individuals who offer themselves for disaster volunteering to ascertain that their motivation is driven by good deeds and not malice. It is best if volunteers can be organized into verifiable groups that have given specific roles that are approved to be more benefitting than a detrimental (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2016).

Volunteering work is a common phenomenon among many Americans. The motivations for this kind of work are many. Some feel volunteering is a way of expressing “care” while some do it as a duty of protecting the nation’s devotedness. Data from Corporation for National and

Community Service expresses the thought that one out of every four adult Americans volunteers through non-profit organizations. The data means that about 62.6 million American adults are into volunteering work. The value of their work is estimated to be about \$184 billion (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2016). The work is of expected help during trying times such as wildfires, tornadoes, earthquakes, terror, and all kinds of disasters that warrant people's attention. Cities and towns all over America employ disaster response teams. Still, many Americans feel the need to offer themselves voluntarily to counter disaster effects. That means there could be something special with this type of volunteering. Perhaps the main drive is to keep America safe by having a social sense that people care for what others go through and use the means available to them to position disaster disarray into order.

### **The Benefits Volunteers Offer in Times of Disaster**

Whenever disasters strike, most people turn to law enforcement officials and departments such as fire/medical response teams to offer their help. The teams are helpful in number of ways. However, they tend to be few yet the populations they serve are too huge. Volunteers recognize the personnel gap that exists in the teams employed to respond to disasters and decide to fill that gap all by themselves as well as there are volunteers who really want to serve in disaster. The outcome of the volunteering is benefit to a community.

#### ***Volunteers help to accelerate disaster rescue efforts***

Many administrative units are usually better prepared for the disasters they anticipate, both in terms of personnel and equipment. However, sometimes disasters can exceed the preparations meant to contain. In the United States, there are many disaster examples that far exceeded the preparations of government and volunteers. California Department of Forestry and

Fire Protection employs around 6,100 full-time personnel and has all types of tools needed for fire mitigation (California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, n.d.). However, the 2018 wildfires far exceeded the capacity of the disaster personnel employed by the state – California used about 14,000 firefighters and even went as far as paying 2,000 inmates \$1 per hour each to deal with the sporadic fires (Hess, 2018). The many personnel California needed to contain the wildfires gives an affirmation that in situations of disasters any help is of importance. Employing too many personnel and having way too much equipment are economically unfeasible when preparing for a disaster. That thereby means that volunteers' participation is necessary in situations of disasters. Volunteers help with bridging human personnel gap that may exist if a disaster becomes way too heavy on the personnel and it is expected to normally respond to it.

Disasters such as fire sometimes affect many places simultaneously. With a disaster of that nature, it may be impossible for only a few groups of disaster response to respond to all the disasters happening simultaneously. In such a situation, volunteers become of foreseeable help. They can spread to zones that are hit by disasters and mitigate the disasters before the disaster become catastrophic. If they are not proper trained firefighters, they must help the professional firefighters by assisting them. If disaster management teams are allowed to respond to disasters just on their own, their work may get way too huge for them to handle (Nave & Arminda, 2013). Volunteers therefore offer supplemental efforts to existing government and organizational efforts during a disaster (Corporation for National and Community Service, n.d.). By involving volunteers, a disaster gets to have many people acting against it and that creates a possibility of disaster manifesting in just a short time. It is not in the interest of any person that a disaster occurs and brings its destruction. Having that thought in mind, any effort against a disaster should be welcomed and that too includes appreciating the role of volunteers.

***It Costs Way Too Much To Mitigate a Disaster Just on Employed Disaster Mitigation Teams***

In a typical American city, a disaster response team consists of law enforcement officials, the fire department and medical teams (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2016). Usually, these professionals are employed in small numbers due to cost considerations. City councils also recognize that some disasters may be uncommon hence there is no need to have a regularly recurring budget for them. In cases a council employs too many disaster response personnel, it may struggle to keep them for it costs a lot of money to have the personnel paid well and given the right tools of work. Because of the reasons, many administrative units have no choice but to keep a small number of disaster response teams (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2016). On a bad note, some disasters manifest in ways that are too unpredictable in that their severity scale dwarfs by far the number of personnel that should be responding to them.

There are many disaster events which can give a real-life illustration of how volunteering can save lives and lessen the severity of disasters – Hurricane Katrina and the 9/11. The incident of 9/11 caused huge negative effects on the mental and physical health of Manhattan (Corporation for National and Community Service, n.d). The people were in fear of attack and psychological stress. The attack on the World Trade Center resulted in huge loss of lives and money. Hurricane Katrina cost around 81 billion dollars to the U.S and thousands of precious lives. Nearly 80 % of New Orleans was under water. In both disasters, the effects were so huge that they overwhelmed the disaster response personnel the individual cities employed. It is the volunteers' participation that helped the situations (Handy & Srinivasan, 2004). Volunteers often offer their efforts for no cost yet in most instances their service delivery does the same kind of job as those employed to respond to disasters (Handy & Srinivasan, 2004). That in return helps

to cut on the costs an administrative unit can incur in managing a disaster. The best thing to do with volunteers is to encourage their participation in times of disasters (Hess, 2018). They are proper trained in situations a city faced by a disaster might be unable to hire paid individuals whose role is to respond to disasters. Their existence helps administrative locations to have a proper balance of the economics of keeping a small number of disaster response team whose wages do not eat way too much into a city's coffers.

### ***Volunteers Play an Important Role in Spreading Awareness about Impending Disasters***

Contrary to a widely held belief, volunteers do not only offer their efforts when an actual disaster manifests. Some volunteer organizations diversify their roles to include public education on the kind of disasters to expect and how to mitigate them. Though volunteers tend to be viewed as individuals who offer their help at times of a disaster, there are also organizations whose volunteering efforts can include equipping groups, transportation, and infrastructure building for individuals affected by a disaster (Aminizade, 2017). By involving volunteers' efforts in disaster management, awareness of disaster is spread far and wide. That in return makes a community even more prepared for the kind of disasters it should anticipate. For people who serve good roles as volunteers, it is important to nurture their actions by increasing their participation.

By having volunteers, it becomes possible to respond to a disaster even the professional disaster response team or firefighter team is prepared to act. That is because volunteers trained by the firefighters and red crescent understand disasters well – they know the consequences if mitigations are not done and are also versed with some techniques of responding to a disaster. When a disaster strikes, it ravages a community. Volunteers are members of a community who have a sense of responsibility – making sure that things are put in order should a disaster strikes a community. In that regard, it is sensible to encourage that responsibility and with that disaster

volunteers come out as individuals whose roles should be recognized and so in ways that are positive.

### **The Downsides of Having Volunteers Responding to a Disaster**

It is undeniable that volunteers offer commendable rescue services anytime they may respond to a disaster. Also, some volunteers may offer themselves freely for a disaster mitigation effort while harboring plans that are a contrast to what is expected of rescue efforts volunteers.

#### ***Little to no professional experience on the part of volunteers***

Volunteers on many occasions have little to no training in their disaster fields for which they make their help available. That situation is potentially a danger. People dealing with disaster items about which they know little means they may not offer the right kind of help (Twigg & Mosel, 2017). Volunteers' presence may alter priorities of a disaster response program (Twigg & Mosel, 2017).

In case of any disaster, many people are usually into helping a situation at hand. Disaster management and response teams should ensure that persons who volunteer are given permission to do so. Before a permission is awarded, disaster response teams should ensure that the volunteers are given basic training on the right skill that can ensure that their efforts on a disaster field are at the very least professional and are indeed helping to contain a situation with regards to identifying disaster needs, planning, and listening (Lueck & Peek, 2012). The training can extend to how to use the safety items for containing a disaster such as fire if a disaster exceeds human efforts applied against it. With such kind of training, volunteers get to learn skills which they can confidently use when faced with different disaster scenarios in the future which they can confidently use when faced with different disaster scenarios in the future.

***Sometimes participation of volunteers worsens a situation way more than helping it***

There are disasters that are works of criminal intent. Cases of arsons on buildings in some cases turn out to be crime intents such as business rivalry or having the thought of making important items such as court evidence disappear in flames (Sauer et al., 2014). The complex aspect is that in such situational examples some volunteers themselves could be the persons who cause the disasters. In cases where volunteers have criminal backgrounds, they can participate in actions that are a liability (Sauer et al., 2014). Because of such fears, volunteers' participation in a disaster should be properly controlled. Before allowing volunteers, a disaster team should check whether the personnel and equipment available to it is enough to control a disaster situation. If not, that is when the role of volunteers should be appreciated (Liu, 2013).

It is important to be selective on the kind of volunteers a disaster response team welcomes to provide further help. Disasters cause confusion among the public and bad societal elements such as thieves may disguise as volunteers just to take advantage of a disaster situation. Disasters are also a source of many health risks which sometimes can lead to immediate deaths of volunteers and other people close to a disaster vicinity. In that regard, any help a disaster response team should at first be vetted. Persons with certain criminal backgrounds such as arson for instance should be prevented from helping disaster situations involving fire. Health wise, persons who are mentally disabled or in bad physical health should not be allowed to turn themselves in as volunteers as it would be quite difficult to handle the situation physically but people with healthy mental state but disabled physical state might help the victims by comforting them with condolences. Volunteers should be picked based on their skills so that their non-professionalism does not lead to health issues after handling the disasters for which they are volunteering (Liu, 2013). Vetting of volunteers therefore ensures that only the right persons,

people with the right mental, legal and physical capacity to help are given the chance to help others affected by a disaster.

***Volunteers Can Risk Their Health by Not Having Comprehensive Health Insurance When Volunteering to Mitigate a Disaster***

Insurance coverage helps a lot in situations where an individual suffers a health problem. In many disaster response cases, many volunteers do not have insurance coverage of their own (Rolf, 2007). If harm happens to volunteers without insurance coverage, their volunteering becomes more of a problem than a good in their lives. Such individuals may incur a debt of their own to treat injuries they may get from disaster sites. It is not ethical to expose volunteers to dangerous disaster situations knowing that their participation can pose a potential detrimental in their living after a disaster. Because post-disaster harms such as injuries are unavoidable, it is logical to screen volunteers so that those without health insurance are barred, the intention being to protect them.

**Conclusion**

People volunteer for disaster mitigation for a variety of reasons. Some feel a sense of social awareness when their efforts help people in a disaster. Others volunteer so that their efforts can transform into employable professional skills. For some, volunteering offers an opportunity to hide malice such as theft or confiscation of criminal evidence in disaster sites. Many administrative units maintain a relatively small number of disaster response personnel. The teams, due to their smallness, can be overwhelmed in situations of big disasters. When volunteers are available so that they complement the work city's disaster response teams and in the process lessen the burden of work they have. Some disasters such as fire manifest

simultaneously in many places. For such disasters, it may be cumbersome for city's disaster response to maintain adequate presence in all locations that are disaster hit due to shortage of personnel. By having volunteers, it is possible to simultaneously spread their efforts and that helps to quickly contain a simultaneously acting disaster. It is noticed that some volunteers do know very little on the disasters for which they volunteer. That means that the volunteers may engage in actions that worsen instead of containing a disaster. Disaster situations are full of risks. Because volunteers are not well trained on matters to do with disaster mitigation, their volunteering may expose them to risks of injuries and deaths. Sometimes insurance companies have to pay for injuries that volunteers suffer when in disaster volunteering jobs. Such arrangements have been proven to be unfairly acting against the economic interests of insurance firms. Though volunteers offer good help when responding to disaster situations, they are also at some risk. It is important to vet individuals who want to volunteer for a disaster response initiative. Vetting can ensure that only individuals whose physical health, criminal records and intent are good enough and allowed to volunteer.

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