

Top 15 Things to Know When Managing Volunteers in Times of Disaster



This list is intended for agencies that do not typically handle volunteer management activities, but that may find themselves in such a situation in response to a disaster.

- 1 Meet Basic Volunteer Needs**
Make sure volunteers have access to food, water, and restrooms. Remind volunteers to take breaks to eat, hydrate and call family. Many times adrenaline will take over in disaster situations and volunteers may need to be reminded to take care of themselves and their families. Ensure that standards of health and hygiene are maintained during long shifts and in any public facility. Arrange for sufficient supplies to sustain these standards.
- 2 Orient and Train Volunteers**
Be sure to take time to orient and train the volunteers to both their position duties and roles and to the situation. Volunteers could be in situations in which they may view and/or experience traumatic situations. Volunteers must be oriented not only to their tasks but also to potentially negative experiences. During particularly active periods, the volunteer leader should give frequent updates to keep all volunteers informed of the most current situations.
- 3 Inform Volunteers of Logistics**
Communicate important logistics to volunteers prior to their shift. In addition to directions and shift times, volunteers may need to bring photo ID, gear, and protective clothing.
- 4 Develop Position Descriptions**
Create a position description for each volunteer activity. Keep it short and simple. Be sure that everyone has a position description regardless of the position they fill. Post these positions in a prominent place and provide a copy to each volunteer to set clear expectations for volunteers. Don't forget to create position descriptions for volunteer leaders, those volunteers who can take leadership roles and monitor process, as well as complete tasks on an ongoing basis.

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- 5 Identify and Schedule Shifts**

Identify and schedule appropriate shifts for each position. Note: It is effective practice to identify shifts in two- to four-hour increments. Be mindful of volunteers' needs: To prevent burn-out and fatigue, you should strongly discourage volunteers from filling more than two consecutive shifts. Also, make sure you have at least one volunteer leader (clearly identified) scheduled in each shift.
- 6 Plan for Knowledge Transfer**

Every position description should include an end-of-shift debrief/orientation process whereby the volunteer leaving his or her shift should communicate important information to the incoming volunteer (i.e., what is working well and what is not working, etc.). Volunteer leaders during each shift should ensure that this transfer of knowledge occurs in a timely and clear fashion.
- 7 Protect Your Volunteers**

Make sure your volunteers are only engaged in work in which they are trained. If the scope of work changes, training should be provided to support development of necessary skills and knowledge. Volunteers should be properly identified for ease of recognition by the public and by each other. Make sure that each has the equipment and tools needed to do his or her job.
- 8 Protect Your Agency and Be Proactive about Risk**

Check with your insurance agent to be sure your agency is fully covered during periods of emergency. You may want to consider adding a rider to your policy. Be sure to have volunteers sign in and out of their shift. Make sure volunteers sign waiver and liability forms as well as any other organizational documentation. Document the orientation and training given to each volunteer. Ensuring the safety of life and property is critical. By reviewing the volunteer activities for possible hazards and educating volunteers about safety, you will reduce the chance of someone getting hurt. Keep a first aid kit and automated external defibrillators (AED's) on hand if at all possible.

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- 9 Provide Ongoing Support**

Monitor and support volunteer activities. Thank volunteers for giving their time. If you see volunteers who seem tired and worn out, encourage them to take a break. Remember that disasters may take a heavy toll on the physical and emotional well-being of volunteers and staff alike. Provide resources to volunteers to help take care of their health, such as access to mental health practitioners.
- 10 Identify Volunteer Leaders**

Always make sure you are identifying those volunteers who have the skill set and the drive to manage tasks, processes, and other volunteers. You cannot be everywhere all the time. Therefore, you should leverage the talents of your volunteers and create a communication system whereby you can delegate tasks.
- 11 Create a Call List**

Exchange cell phone numbers with all key contacts and update it regularly. You may also want to secure walkie-talkies for quick communication. Set up redundancies in communications in case cell phones are ineffective. Some suggestions of numbers to have on your call list include, but are not limited to, the following:

 - Emergency contacts
 - Volunteer Leader contacts
 - Volunteer Reception Center contacts
 - Disaster response organization contacts
 - Contacts for organizations that accept donations
 - Media relations contacts
 - Mental health service contacts
- 12 Recognize Volunteers**

Volunteers should be thanked continually. You may not get a chance to formally thank your volunteers until after the disaster response is over so take every chance you get to remind the volunteers that you appreciate them and their efforts to respond to the disaster. After the disaster response efforts have subsided, you can plan a more formal way to recognize them (examples include recognition event, formal email or letter, phone call, etc.).

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- 13 Establish and Maintain Standards of Conduct**

Instill pride in performance but don't hesitate to correct behavior that is counter-productive or even injurious to the good name of your agency or the best interests of the public. On rare occasions, it might even be necessary to relieve a volunteer of duty. Ensure at the outset that all of your volunteers know their terms of service. Keep handy a printed copy of your Volunteer Policy Manual.
- 14 Conduct an Event Debriefing**

Plan for a debriefing for all staff and volunteers at the conclusion of each shift, as well as the end of the disaster operation. Acknowledge the many positives and identify lessons learned that can be addressed for future disasters. Capture recommendations in your After Action Report for future reference and development of next steps for your program. Follow through on the key steps.
- 15 Evaluate Your Efforts**

Always be mindful of organizational reporting requirements and develop processes to capture appropriate data. Tracking volunteer data in times of disaster may assist jurisdictions with in-kind matches for federal reimbursement. Capturing data is also important to tell your story to future funders, to your community, and to your volunteers. Ideas for types of data to capture could include:

 - Number of volunteer hours
 - Number of volunteers
 - Number of meals served
 - Number of houses built
 - Number of families or people served
 - Number of agencies served

HandsOn Network can assist you with volunteer management. Visit www.handsonnetwork.org to find the HandsOn Action Centers nearest you and to find useful information about managing volunteers.

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