

# **Integrating Non-Government and Volunteer Agencies into Disaster Response**

## **Introduction**

The activities of private and voluntary organizations in disaster response are widespread, but there is little to no scientific information available that quantifies their roles, qualifications and limitations. . The US Government has recommended that efforts be made to better integrate these organizations into the formal emergency response structure and specifically mentioned National Volunteer Organizations Active in Disaster (NVOAD) as a possible coordinating body for these organizations. As a result the Department of Homeland security, through a University Center of Excellent grant, has sponsored this project to better integrate NVOs/NGOs. We have been working with NVOAD to assess current status of organizations and make recommendations for better integration of volunteers into the response.

Based on preliminary findings, we have developed proposed standards for organizations who respond to disasters. The purpose of this round table is to determine the potential effectiveness of these standards and whether they are practical for these organizations.

Activities have included:

- A review of the existing scientific and government literature on the role of NVOs/NGOs in disaster response
- Qualitative analysis surveys of NVO/NGO leadership to assess their organizations role, experience and recommendations
- Collaboration with the National Volunteer Organizations Active in Disasters (NVOAD)
- The development of proposed metrics/standards for NVOs/NGOs that respond to disasters.
- A survey all NVOAD members to assess their roles, barriers and recommendations for improvement.

The next step is to discuss these findings with governmental leaders and disaster managers to finalize the metrics and identify other means of better integrating NVOs/NGOs into planning and response activities.

## **Session Description:**

This session will focus on discussing the roles and integration of NVOs/NGOs into disaster activities. The preliminary results of the findings thus far will be briefly presented. The proposed metric will then be presented, and each one discussed by the participants. Finally a structured series of questions will be asked to engage participants in a discussion about the roles and limitations of NVOs/NGOs. The feedback will be used to finalize the metrics and the recommendations presented to DHS and FEMA.

## **Nongovernmental Voluntary Organizations (NVOs) responding to disasters recommendations for improving response coordination**

A series of focus groups of NVO leaders was held to identify what they felt to be their organization's role in responding to disasters and to identify constraints and make suggestions to improve their integration into the governmental response.

### **Impediments to NVO Activities and Service Provision**

- Inadequate communication with Governmental Response Agencies (GRAs).
- Frequent personnel changes at local, state and federal levels.
- A general sense of distrust between NVOs and the government (e.g., becoming too closely tied to the governmental response may lead to a loss of NVO response flexibility, identification of undocumented disaster survivors and lack of reciprocity in information sharing from government response agencies).
- Legislation (e.g., Health Information Portability and Accountability Act or Stafford Act) often prevent effective collaboration.
- The application process for requesting federal assistance is difficult due to issues of complexity and inconsistency.
- Governmental Response Agencies (GRAs) consider FEMA VALs less important than NVOs which feel FEMA VALs are a very important coordination tool.

### **Needs of National Volunteer Organizations to increase coordination of NVO and GRA services:**

- Improve access to impacted areas for NVOs and their volunteers, who are often barred from the response zone because of the lack of approved credentials.
- Improve legal requirements and regulations (e.g., easier access to disaster credentials for NVO responders, assurances protecting undocumented disaster survivors assisted by NVOs, and legal protections for NVOs contributing to disaster response efforts).
- Improve local communications through the use of unified, dependable mobile communication devices.
- Increased efforts to raise money for disaster relief, sharing of disaster-specific tools and supplies, and affordable translation services.

### **Recommendations for Improving Integration**

Recommendations for GRAs:

- *Disaster planning and preparedness:* raise awareness of NVO activities, include NVOs in disaster plans and have NVOs actively participate in disaster drills and exercises.
- *Communications:* enhance user-friendliness of automated telephone assistance system, collaborate to develop culturally-appropriate risk communication materials, improve disaster-specific information dissemination to NVOs, and improve the process for communicating needs of affected communities.
- *Coordination:* expand the *AidMatrix* so NVOs and GRAs can better synchronize donation, volunteer, and warehousing services; make FEMA VAL positions permanent and expand their decision making capabilities; include NVOs in the Unified Command System; participate in the Coordinated Assistance Network; and simplify the structure of the Essential Service Functions in the National Response Framework.

- *Funding*: increase the accuracy of damage-related cost estimates, place fewer restrictions on funding to NVOs providing short and long term recovery assistance, and extend small business recovery grants or loans beyond one year
- *Resources*: decrease GRA's over-consumption of available accommodations (primarily hotel space) surrounding disaster areas, improve contracting regulations to expedite access to needed resources, improve family reunification services, and assign permanent case workers to eligible disaster survivors.
- *Training*: provide guidance on sustaining a volunteer network, disaster preparedness training (e.g. risk assessment, incident command and control, logistical operations, terms and conditions of resource deployment), and a common and trusted source for web-based preparedness and response information.

**Recommendations for NVOs:**

- Post a liaison in the Joint Operations Center/ Emergency Operations Center during disaster response activities.
- Coordinate disaster-specific functions with other NVOs and public health service agencies.
- Better inform GRAs of their capabilities and how they can provide assistance.
- Remain flexible in response activities to adapt to changing needs and regulations.
- Establish effective working relationships with FEMA VALs and GRA officials who can help overcome barriers to service delivery.

## **Discussion Question Starters**

1. Do you feel that there is a problem with the way that volunteers and NVOs are currently integrated into the disaster response?
2. Do you have any suggestions on the better integration of volunteers and NVOs?
3. Are the recommendations representative of the activities, services and organizational characteristics of NVOs?
4. Do you feel that these recommendations are appropriate for the goal of better integration?
5. What other recommendations should we consider?
6. What NVO-services/ supplies are most often used during a government response to a disaster?
7. What are the barriers to effective partnering and integration of NVOs and GRAs?
8. What actions are needed by NVOs and GRAs to improve partnering/ integration?
9. How can GRAs improve facilitation/delivery of NVO-response services?
10. Do you have any other comments?