INTRODUCTION

There are few, if any, emergency response agencies with staffing resources at the level needed to meet the requirements of an event resulting from weapons of mass destruction or terrorism. While there are many approaches to building emergency response capacity, there is limited published information on how to build capacity through volunteer programs. While beneficial, volunteer programs can also present a number of problems (i.e., skills and credentials verification, liability, orientation, training, job processing, and placement). To have a successful volunteer program, a single, integrated approach to managing volunteer resources is needed. One such approach is a centralized Volunteer Coordination Center (VCC) operation. The model VCC concept is designed to serve as a “one-stop shop” prototype for all volunteer activities. The VCC is rapidly deployable, modular, provides for credentials and skills verification, uses local citizens (both preregistered and spontaneous volunteers), and promotes community support for emergency response activities.

The emergency response community’s attitude towards the role and use of volunteers in disaster response is as diverse as the response agencies themselves. It also depends highly on the resources of the community. In large metropolitan communities, most local emergencies and disasters can be handled by trained professional staff or through mutual aid agreements with surrounding communities. Smaller, more isolated communities frequently lack basic staffing and financial resources to effectively respond to disasters beyond the routine. In essence, many communities simply plan on making do with what they have and do not actively seek alternate ways of expanding their response capacity through volunteerism.

Volunteer considerations

There are a number of considerations with regard to the role of volunteers in community disaster response. As previously mentioned, many communities do not have the ability to meet the surge of responsibilities that accompany a disaster and because of financial constraints, many cannot afford to invoke mutual aid agreements, except as a last resort. Another major consideration, which is often overlooked by emergency response agencies, is the best way to channel the great outpouring of community support to the maximum benefit. Responders often do not believe that untrained volunteers have anything of value to contribute to disaster response. Volunteers are sometimes viewed as more of a nuisance than a skilled and talented workforce that can build capacity or ease the burden on the traditional first responders. If large numbers of willing, but untrained volunteers are injected into a disaster without sufficient planning, they can potentially deplete scarce response resources. Volunteer issues, such as liability, credentials, privacy of information, individual skill levels, job training, duty assignments, duty restrictions, security screening, and administrative and logistic support are all important and potentially overwhelming without the proper preparation. With a plan in place to manage spontaneous volunteers (people who have an instinctive driving need to take action during times of disaster), they can speed the community recovery process. In addition, local volunteers responding within their local communities can help build community support for emergency response agencies and services.

Traditional volunteer programs

Volunteers responding to those in need have
played a vital, but largely unrecognized, role in emergency response throughout history. In fact, many volunteer programs involving emergency response agencies can be traced to the cold war years. During this time, policies based on the philosophy of mutual annihilation between superpowers resulted in citizen recruitment for civil defense. Societal needs have been pivotal in the evolution of volunteer programs. For example, programs such as “Neighborhood Watch,” and the familiar “Take a Bite Out of Crime” campaign were a societal response to high crime, drugs, and gang violence.

Traditionally, the average citizens have associated volunteer programs and activities with nonprofit and faith-based agencies, such as the American Red Cross, Salvation Army, Southern Baptist Feeding Units, and other Volunteer Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD). These groups were mainly involved in disaster relief and response following natural disasters, such as floods, tornadoes, or hurricanes.

**Volunteers after 9/11/2001**

Since 9/11/2001, there has been a national push to empower local citizens and ease the burden on first responders by using volunteers. National and local emergency programs are beginning to embrace volunteers through the formation of groups such as the Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT). These teams train volunteers in basic skills that allow neighbors to help neighbors until the professional first responders can arrive. Another new program is the Office of the Surgeon General’s Medical Reserve Corps (MRC), which recruits and trains medical professionals in a variety of response roles. These roles include running clinics for mass vaccinations, or staffing Secondary Assessment Treatment, Triage, and Transport Centers (ST3C) to ease the surge of minimally affected or worried, but well, people flooding local emergency rooms. Ordinary citizens are stepping forward to participate in the Department of Homeland Security’s activities in the war on terrorism and are now actively recruited by many communities to augment response resources that might be inadequate because of budget constraints.

**The rogue volunteer**

The emergency response community can learn from the experience that traditional volunteer agencies have had putting volunteers to work. These agencies have experience with volunteers who arrive at disasters and independently assume the roles and responsibilities of trained professional responders. These volunteers are known as “rogue volunteers.” The incident command or emergency management leadership can find itself diverting needed time and resources to “rope in” these well-intentioned, but misguided, individuals who have assumed authority and attempt to perform tasks that they are ill equipped to handle.

These rogue volunteers can pose significant safety and security concerns that can disrupt operations. The emergency response community will most certainly face the challenge of managing these volunteers, and it must have a plan in place to do so.

**Volunteer Coordination Center Concept**

The East Central Health District-VI (ECHD-6), Advanced Practice Center (APC) for Public Health Preparedness, located in Augusta, Georgia, has developed a VCC program in conjunction with its establishment of a Medical Reserve Corps unit. The goal of the program is to reduce or eliminate the problem of rogue volunteers during an emergency or disaster. The VCC developed by the ECHD-6 APC can be deployed rapidly throughout their 13-county health district in East Central Georgia. It is designed as a centralized processing and command and control center for all public health volunteers (both those already on the volunteer rolls and the spontaneous volunteers who arrive). The VCC is staffed by specially trained public health volunteers who work in the center’s various sections. All volunteers must be processed through these sections before being sent out on a work assignment. Critical to the success of the VCC is prior collaboration with and buy-in from local emergency management and responder agencies, such as police, fire departments, and emergency medical services. To help standardize volunteer management during disasters, maximize volunteer resources, and provide assurance that the VCC is not in competition for
volunteers, collaboration must take place with traditional volunteer agencies, such as the American Red Cross or VOAD.

Essentially, the VCC serves as a one-stop shopping center for volunteer resources used during a disaster. After determining that a large number of volunteers are needed, public service announcements are initiated through public health risk communications channels or through the Emergency Management Agency. Volunteers are directed to the VCC, which can be located at a church, community building, auditorium, school, or other suitable site. The volunteer call-out specifies that preregistered volunteers and those interested in volunteering are to report to the VCC. Upon arrival at the VCC, volunteers can sign in and be processed before getting their job assignment. First, volunteers register by providing their personal information, an inventory of their skills and interests, and any professional licenses and/or credentials, which the VCC verifies.

Next, the staffing and screening process matches them with previously established volunteer job descriptions and skill requirements. This matching process can occur even if the volunteer is not needed for the particular emergency at hand. Volunteers suited to jobs that are not immediately necessary can be called upon later in the response and recovery operation or in later disasters or events. Volunteer jobs come from a variety of sources, including the incident site and multiple locations and agencies that are providing support. After volunteers are matched to job requests, they receive an orientation to the ongoing emergency response operation. During this orientation, they receive copies of their job descriptions and an explanation of the scope of their duties and responsibilities, their supervisor’s name, and information on security, safety, and rules of conduct.

Next, the volunteers receive a picture badge from the security section. Their identification specifies their duty assignment, authorized entry areas, and their dates of work. This VCC badge is the only identification recognized and accepted by the response or support agencies, and all spontaneous volunteers are redirected to the VCC. After completing the security section requirements, the volunteer receives any needed equipment such as safety vests, hard hats, and flashlights from the logistics section, which also arranges for the volunteer’s transportation to and from the work site. Providing transportation can help prevent a flood of personal vehicles on the scene and provide workforce control. Finally, upon completing their assignments, the volunteers return to the VCC for out-processing, supervisor evaluation, and the opportunity to be debriefed by qualified counselors, if desired.

**CONCLUSION**

The VCC program designed by the ECHD-6 APC, for Public Health Preparedness provides a means of centralized command and control of all volunteers. Just as importantly, it provides screening and credential verification, which helps emergency responders build confidence in volunteer assets. The VCC is a flexible response that is mobile, adaptable to all hazards, and testable in drills and exercises. It incorporates the strengths of the local citizens volunteering in their own community. In today’s high-stakes emergency response, which may include weapons of mass destruction and terrorism, traditional response falls short in terms of trained manpower and critical shortage skills. Citizens affected by these events can help fill this manpower shortfall, while at the same time channeling their energy in a positive way. The VCC is a practical application of grassroots involvement by citizens working hand-in-hand with their response community. The VCC builds community response capacity and, just as importantly, builds citizen confidence that their emergency response agencies recognize the value of citizen involvement.

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