The management of volunteers: Recent experience with the American Red Cross in Baton Rouge, Louisiana

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ABSTRACT
Rather than simply watch horrific events unfold, many citizens do everything in their power—immediately—to help; they seek outlets for their energy. Organizations that use citizen assistance, while grateful, often find the outpouring difficult to manage. This article describes a positive experience with the American Red Cross (ARC) as a citizen-turned-volunteer. It notes observations about the organization’s management of volunteers during a two-week deployment at regional headquarters in late November 2005 in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where disaster relief for Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, combined into one disaster relief effort, was scaling down. The volunteer experience was positive because ARC was well organized and catered to expectations. ARC proved to be the natural choice for a volunteer outlet. The ARC can be considered a giant conduit for training, turning bystanders into volunteers and deploying them quickly to disaster relief in the field at little expense.

INTRODUCTION
The September 11, 2001, bombing and collapse of the World Trade Center was the United States’ eighth peacetime disaster to involve more than 1,000 fatalities; Hurricane Katrina is the ninth. Disasters are a “growth business,” experts say, with costs attributed to disasters having increased 15-fold in 50 years and numbers of people affected having tripled in a generation.

This article describes my experience as one of 60,000 newly minted American Red Cross (ARC) relief workers helping hurricane victims in a two-week deployment, from November 29 to December 13, 2005, at ARC regional headquarters in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. At that time, ARC had combined relief for Hurricanes Katrina and Rita into a single disaster relief effort. Some general concerns about volunteers—motivation, isolation, time, cost, training, and satisfaction—will factor into a discussion of volunteer work and ARC management of volunteers.

VOLUNTEERS CAN SWAMP THE SYSTEM
Americans’ per capita expense for international disaster relief is $0.96, while Europeans’ is $1.50. But government tallies do not tell the whole story; citizen volunteers provide in-kind labor for humanitarian efforts in an unquantified, perhaps unquantifiable, effort. Volunteers respond to disasters in droves, and relief coordinators want to tap into that enthusiasm and energy. Volunteers provide needed services—first aid and initial emergency response, for example. Over 31,000 bystanders performed search and rescue after the Loma Prieta earthquake. Volunteers routinely provide transport for victims needing medical care. Using volunteers for such jobs may be a valuable and practical use of local assets, since in a disaster most patients and injuries are noncritical. It may conserve available professionals for critical cases, keep them at their posts, and avoid wasting mismatched resources. Unfortunately, it is difficult to control volunteer forces.

Disasters are not simply big emergencies. One cannot “command” a disaster the way a general commands a battle. Command and control are fragmented. Volunteers, money, and activities “flow” in what is known as “convergent volunteerism.” Converging helpers try to help the process work harder, faster, and longer, but they can swamp the emergency response and must be managed, lest their own
injuries or disorganization create a disaster within a disaster.

VOLUNTEERS IN DISASTER PLANS

Relief efforts may not have plans to handle volunteer crowds, or those plans may require alteration. To coordinate the outpouring of aid from medical volunteers, for example, hotlines are often set up, sometimes only to be shut down the next day. Seeking an outlet for my energy, I called the ARC of Massachusetts Bay hotline and, after several tries, was connected with a live contact. I was able to access online registration for training. My time to deployment, however, lasted nearly four months, while ARC national headquarters mounted an unprecedented effort to train new volunteers for the Disaster Services Human Resources (DSHR) pool. ARC geared up to make 60,000 new volunteers DSHR-ready in a disaster response both quantitatively and qualitatively different from that staged for its “normal” emergencies.

In the federal government’s National Response Plan, ARC is the only nongovernmental organization to figure in. It has a congressionally chartered role to provide mass care (Emergency Support Function #6), accomplishing that role by using, coordinating, and managing a network of nearly one million national volunteers. In training civilians and deploying them as volunteers, ARC builds capacity while it gets civilians out of the way, puts them to work, and ensures continuation of important community services.

WHO ARE VOLUNTEERS?

ARC volunteers come from all states and all walks of life; at Baton Rouge headquarters, I met volunteers from 13 states. In my team of six, ages ranged from 22 (supervisor) to 65 (workers); they were African American, Asian American, and White. During my deployment, I estimated the number of people in headquarters at 128 each day. Volunteers generally had few time constraints in their daily lives; they were largely young people freshly out of college and with no job, or retired older people, mostly nonprofessionals. Professionals with expertise required for disaster relief were also present—information technologists, labor negotiators, operators of large vehicles. There were two disabled volunteers (one with a canine) and several husband-and-wife teams. All volunteers had been deployed a very short time after notification (48 hours in my case), a good indicator of ARC’s organizational strength in providing manpower immediately. In predeployment training, ARC described Katrina relief as large enough that all new volunteers would likely be deployed. ARC used DSHR to identify candidates randomly, meaning that the timing of deployment was unpredictable.

ARC WORK

Functional organization

ARC work was organized according to the role of each activity in the relief operation, functionally rather than occupationally. Every labor function had an acronym, and its headquarters bore a sign. Staff Services, Bulk Distribution, Labor Relations, Client Services, In-Processing, and Out-Processing (volunteers’ sign-in and sign-out), to name some, were all separate functions. Volunteers worked in teams, with no apparent cross-functionality. My assignment was CLS/CC/SA (Client Services, Call Center unit, Staff Associate). Client Services is divided into Call Center, Home Visits, Research and Resolution (R&R), and Appeals. Work assignments had been preassigned by the deploying chapter in consultation with ARC’s national organization, which manages the central database of work needs. Assignments are subject to confirmation upon arrival but in practice do not change, even though the situation on the ground evolves.

Character of work

Call Center work entailed calling clients to inquire whether they had received assistance or if they still needed it (Table 1). An estimated 6,000 client intake forms, completed in early October, had recently been found, apparently unprocessed. Nearly 7,000 checks had been returned uncashed. The missing forms and checks represented about 4 percent of over 300,000 households served by November 30, 2005, when the November 18 deadline to submit an application for assistance passed.
had processed about $247 million for Hurricanes Katrina and Rita by then, compared to ARC’s total relief for Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma: approximately $2.1 billion between 1.2 million families as of February 3, 2006. In eight and a half call days, I was able to ascertain definitive case status for less than one third of my calls to or research on clients. For fully 71 percent of cases, clients were unreachable or information was incomplete. There was enough case research to keep volunteers occupied for weeks calling clients. This record speaks volumes about the amount of work that still needed to be done to locate and assist clients despite the deadline. It also attests to ARC’s strong commitment to helping these clients. In identifying those who still needed assistance, I helped a few people by facilitating their aid. If the proportions in Table 1 were to hold true for all unreachable clients (and if it were possible to reach them), I could have doubled my identifications. Multiplied by all Call Center volunteers over the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Venue</th>
<th>Calls/call slips/client records</th>
<th>Disposition</th>
<th>Disposition number (est)</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Disposition number (est)</th>
<th>Overall percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baton Rouge HQ</td>
<td>90 calls</td>
<td>“Closed”: No answer/left message/disconnected/no longer at address (after one attempt)</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Closed”: Received aid</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Closed”: Did not receive aid, no need</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>22</td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Completed”: Did not receive aid, has need; complete intake form and send to supervisor</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baton Rouge HQ</td>
<td>27 case records</td>
<td>“Incomplete”: Needs a clarifying phone call to client or needs further research</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>73</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Closed”: Received aid, research complete</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Closed”: Did not receive aid, no need (research verified that aid was denied appropriately)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Completed”: Did not receive aid or aid needs to be reissued, has need; complete intake form and send to supervisor</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Possible fraud”: Apparent duplication of assistance or multiple aid applications</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alexandria local chapter</td>
<td>82 call slips</td>
<td>“Closed”: No answer/left message/disconnected/no longer at address (three attempts)</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>78.5</td>
<td>172</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Closed”: Received aid</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Closed”: Did not receive aid, no need</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Completed”: Did not receive aid, has need; complete intake form and send to supervisor</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>199</td>
<td></td>
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<td>296</td>
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</table>
entire relief period, this would have produced a better result. Often clients told me that assistance would have been helpful earlier but to save it for a needier person now. I either called from ARC regional headquarters or traveled to the Central Louisiana ARC chapter in Alexandria, where many evacuees had sought shelter, to call from there. If my home had been set up as an off-site location, I could have worked there without need for travel. ARC had off-site Call Centers, but we performed our function in Baton Rouge.

My two final days were in R&R. Workers there consulted three databases to research client assistance. The client assistance system (CAS)—the major database—was slow and cumbersome, with an unwieldy search function; the others were not linked to it and contained fewer data. All three contained duplicate records.

The financial assistance system was paper-based. Although headquarters and the two national databases, DSHR and CAS, ran on custom software, initial field contacts between ARC workers and disaster victims used paper intake forms. In a disaster of this scope, perhaps it was too complex or unreliable to outfit ARC field workers with a scanner/laptop for data entry. A paper-based intake system was bound to produce duplicate files and misplaced forms.

The Alexandria chapter couldn’t accomplish some parts of its disaster relief mission on its own. Headquarters sent me and another volunteer there to help resolve client-assistance questions. In implementing CAS, the chapter said, passwords had been deactivated centrally and were not reinstated by December 2005. Consequently, it could not access records or make decisions about assistance, an illustration of the principle that the source of problems in emergency response is often not volunteers but responding organizations.

Headquarters was located in a converted Wal-Mart in a mall, well outside the impact zone, with access to backup utilities, supplies, and off-duty staff. Wal-Mart had donated the space. In December, it was visibly emptying of the people and office equipment that had previously filled it so completely, workers told us, that there was nowhere to walk.

Supervisors and managers—the decision makers—were volunteers, too, recruited from the same ranks. Sometimes they were not visible. They did not introduce themselves, so for a week I did not know for whom I worked. From the top down, work appeared organized, but looking from the bottom up it was less so. Paper passed from person to person without any case resolution; volunteers did not get the “big picture” about their work. That client assistance could be so problematic was discouraging, but it made me want to facilitate aid for as many clients as possible.

We finally got our instructions near the end of the deployment. The general impression was of an operation winding down. Nearly four months after Katrina, ARC relief activities were transitioning into the next phase of disaster—recovery—in which federal and community supports resume and ARC no longer plays a role. ARC is a relief agency, not a rescue or recovery agency. ARC believed at that time that the majority of survivors had already received aid, and so the emergency financial assistance program could be scaled back. Not many clients could appeal a rejected aid application successfully. We were given talking points for our calls, stressing the temporary one-time gift of money for basic life necessities. We told clients that federal and state aid were available and that ARC efforts were now being given over to partnering with local organizations. Some activities were predicted to remain in place for years (ARC still performs mental health casework for victims of 1992’s Hurricane Andrew), while others were being phased out. As Call Center and Home Visits closed, they generated work in other functions (R&R and Appeals), typical of a contracting rather than expanding system. It was an interesting backdrop against which to view disaster relief.

**ARC VOLUNTEER**

In managing volunteers, ARC pays attention to volunteers’ motivations, isolation, time, cost, training, and satisfaction.

**Volunteer motivations**

Volunteers enlist for altruism as well as a variety of motivations beyond the desire to help their neighbors. People may want to socialize, or they...
may simply want something to do. They may think that a family member could benefit. Some consider a volunteer assignment as a bridge to employment or an opportunity to gain skills and experience. I met three who fit this latter category, one a former Peace Corps volunteer reintegrating into the working world.

Organizations now try to design experiences to attract more and a wider variety of volunteers, taking a customer-orientation approach. Organizations administer surveys to volunteers to ascertain the best fit for each. Volunteers can choose outlets for (and ownership of) their social capital from many types of experience, varying from traditional religious work to community service to student internships.

No Volunteer Functional Inventory or similar instrument was administered. ARC did not attempt to “attract” me. ARC has executed its mission since its charter in 1905, always providing the same stable of services. With a specific, event-driven mission, it does not have to attract volunteers to quite the same degree as other nonprofits. It has a nurtured brand image, a point driven home in orientation materials. ARC is a clearly defined organization with high visibility. Its volunteers are distinct, and they do not dilute ARC program capacity; in fact, they enhance it. I considered the time-honored ARC to be the best, most logical, and natural choice for me.

Isolation

Volunteers’ experiences are as multidimensional as their motivations. Volunteers internalize their experiences differently. No two volunteers or experiences are alike, even in the same function. Families and friends may uniformly praise a volunteer’s effort but can’t share in the details, and consequently volunteers sometimes do not feel “heard.” Employers understand altruism but may not excuse an employee’s...
absence. In both situations, a sense of isolation can be created that must be managed with care.

Volunteers sometimes feel “bad” about their assignments. Because of their particular duties, some volunteers in my location had been allocated a rental car. With a car, well-stocked provisions, and freedom to drive around the region, one volunteer felt that she was too comfortable compared to the circumstances of disaster victims. Derogatory comments often come from clients and bad press; “ARC is all about serving their workers, not about serving the victims,” was heard. I did not have a single bad-press incident, but I did hear about ARC’s inefficiency from clients.

I expected all volunteers to be deployed, like me, for two weeks. Instead I found that many had been working on relief for several months, and were referred to as “lifers.” For such people, volunteering becomes what they do. They extend their stay many times, only returning home for a brief rest until the next tornado or hurricane season, unable to discon-nect from the volunteer channel. In disaster relief, one can be overcome or have a sense of not being in touch with the world, and one can return home ill.

ARC manages workers’ mental health by trying to lessen isolation. ARC provided ample opportunity to share my experience with other volunteers, out-reaching by telephone, e-mail, Web-based survey, “Welcome Home” groups, and shared contact information and resources. Outreach has continued in the weeks since deployment.

**Time management**

Volunteers on short-term deployments can lose up to four days to travel, orientation, evaluations, and processing. Total effective time in a 14-day stint can amount to only 10 days. A social worker reported that due to poor time management, lack of organization, and a feeling of not being put to good use, no mental health nurse in her rotation extended his/her stay. Sometimes there was a sense of not having enough to do while supervisors sorted out the day’s work. The work day moved in fits and starts, usually with some wasted time. Volunteers adapted to the slow flow but predicted that the resulting work product would be minimal. It was unsatisfying to feel the operation close down. Volunteers complained about not wanting to do “clean-up work” and appreciated getting on the telephone with clients who “always have something nice to say or tell a joke at the end.”

New crops of volunteers rotated into assignments every day, with as many as 150 in a group. There seemed to be little continuity between the work teams, some duplication of effort, and an occasional mismatch between the number of arriving volunteers and shifting work needs. “Be flexible” was the motto for these fluid situations, partly due to late-season deployments and the character of volunteer work. ARC is now reportedly studying time management issues to better configure deployments. It could probably manage volunteer extensions and short rotations better but may not be able to influence the larger issues of timing or the kind of work needing to be done in disaster relief.

**Cost**

My deployment cost $1,345 (estimated) for air-fare, per diem, and shared hotel room. For hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma, ARC deployed 233,760 volunteers, spending $9,052/person. These rough aggregates can’t quantify the humanitarian effort; nevertheless, they are low on a per-volunteer basis. Through vendor arrangements, ARC obtains flights, office equipment, and food at reduced or no cost. The volunteer labor component costs nothing.

**Training and deployment**

ARC is serious about training the volunteer force. In four evenings spaced over a month, I was schooled in “Introduction to Disaster Services,” “Mass Care,” “Shelter Operations,” and “Client Services,” training that was quickly mounted but not hastily put together. Classes were full, with about 50 students in the first three and 30 in the latter. All volunteers report-ed the same story: being moved by events, they wanted to sign up, and once they took their training they were deployed. After the initial courses, I was alerted to additional coursework. Specialized training is encouraged as one moves up in the system, to give the workforce a professional, consultant-like orientation and to keep it current. DSHR tracks the professional
development of volunteers, credentialing them and acting as an incentive system for their candidacy for future deployments. Instruction covered basic skills, as well as more complex issues such as client confidentiality, relations with the media and local residents, common pitfalls, and the difference between talking about one’s experience and revealing confidential information.

Some professionals have advanced the opinion that organizations should use only experienced personnel as volunteers, not bystanders like me. Contrary to this, ARC is fully engaged with regular folk and prepares them well. It recruits from the civilian world and is in tune with it, and it may be in a better position to respond to civilian disasters because of this strength. It provides a mainstream venue into which any and all persons—elderly, retired, young, or disabled—can venture.

**DISCUSSION**

As it appeals to civilians for more and more volunteers, ARC seems poised to continue. Worker efficiency and professionalism may require attention, however. A more cross-functional approach to the division of labor—matching up large numbers of nonprofessional volunteers with smaller numbers of experts, for example—might be more efficient. It might offset feelings of not having the “big picture” or not being put to good use. A higher level of computerization in the field might reduce duplication or loss of records, speed up aid distribution, and make volunteers more effective.

I was fortunate enough to have my experience meet expectations. First, it provided something useful and beneficial to the community, and I felt that I had helped some people. Secondly, it proved that ARC is a flexible, well-organized partner. It waived requirements about minimum deployments and health credentials; I would not have been able to volunteer if the length of stay had not been reduced from three to two weeks or if CPR status were required to be updated. Furthermore, although ARC managers talked up altruism and their love of the organization, ARC did not view my volunteering as something that “should be done” because “it’s the right thing.” My time was appreciated, my assignment planned. The experience was reviewed several times, and feedback was requested. Opportunities to continue my involvement and further my experience have been provided; in short, I was “stoked.” Predeployment organization was so impressive that my family had few qualms about my going. One can’t get lost in ARC. It has standardized planning for the use of volunteers, where they will be sent, and how they will be supervised. It had a job for me to do and provided support. It paid attention to the details of travel and orientation and made use of new technology (electronic debit cards) to ensure daily comfort. I enjoyed being “just a volunteer,” a sentiment shared by others, and so I can be considered a first-rate potential repeat customer.

ARC’s attention to Hurricane Katrina relief is lessening, allowing it to revert back to former training procedures. It is informing new volunteers that deployments are strongly recommended to be three weeks, and proof of health credentials, such as immunizations and CPR, is once again required. Enhancing professionalism and maintaining volunteer quality are ARC organizational aims that are extremely difficult to achieve when requirements are waived. Organizations that waive requirements eventually see negative effects on worker quality.

No matter how much training volunteers undergo, however, their integration into community disaster response plans remains problematic because of fragmented emergency response implementation throughout the country. Even within ARC, program quality varies from chapter to chapter. Until localized plans exist in every community and are more centrally supported and broadly disseminated—a goal that ARC is not designed to accomplish on its own—volunteer efficiency, satisfaction with work, and ultimately ARC’s impact will all be lessened.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Volunteers perform needed services in disaster response, but managing them is a complex undertaking. Ways must be found to integrate volunteers into disaster response. ARC has standardized planning for the use of volunteers. This planning has produced systems that work, evident to me, as a volunteer,

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from the moment that I came into the system until well after my return. Organizations like ARC that have a structure and strategies for training and management of the large, relatively untapped, unpaid citizen workforce stand a good chance of being on the cusp of disaster relief and being able to deploy volunteers out into the field quickly and at little expense.

Satisfaction with work relates to the ability of an organization to deliver on the volunteer experience, and ARC volunteer enrollment continues to grow. Most volunteers shared my opinion that the experience was worthwhile. The benefits of expanding man-power ranks are considerable, nurturing ARC’s ability to respond, solidifying its image, and enabling it to attain a critical mass that can better help impacted communities, both nationally and locally.22

We are somewhat overprofessionalized today. We hear that disaster response is the work of professionals only. ARC is our only national resource for civilian disaster training. With all that civilians can and must do, ARC provides an excellent outlet for social capital. This is especially important in Louisiana today, where large numbers of displaced people want to get back to their old lives. Governmental and bureaucratic inefficiency is paralyzing. The recovery stage of the disaster cycle is a long-term process as complex and fragmented as life. We need to have organizations working in it with the same single-minded purpose and ability to manage the total experience that I saw with ARC. We can help solve recovery problems by organizing people for work.

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REFERENCES

22. Drummond H: Personal communication. ARC of Massachusetts headquarters, November 29-December 13, 2005.