

Don't Wait for an Emergency: Volunteer Now

It is natural to want to help other people when disaster strikes. How much your willingness to help will be appreciated depends on how you are received by the professional responders. They know that spontaneous helpers can be a “disaster within the disaster.” People who just show up to help can drain precious resources for food, water, and shelter. They may be unskilled for the tasks at hand. Working without orders, self-deployed volunteers can delay or undo relief efforts. That is why joining a recognized organization is the first step to being welcomed when you arrive at an emergency. If you want to pitch in, the time is now.

Professionals consider faith-based community groups to be the backbone of the relief structure. Whether the Salvation Army, American Red Cross or Adventist Community Services they generally accept anyone who wants to learn the procedures of emergency management. That is independent of any religious commitment. This is because they are empowered by MOUs (memoranda of understanding) with local civil authorities.

Your local city police or county sheriff may sponsor an organization such as CERT, the Community Emergency Response Team, or a citizens' police academy. The Amateur Radio Relay League (ARRL) and the Information Technology Disaster Resource Center (ITDRC) are recognized responder cohorts for technology professionals. Those agencies and others—Red Cross, Goodwill, United Way, Meals on Wheels, and more—often coordinate through a VOAD (Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster). VOADs exist at the local, state, and national level.

The Corporation for National and Community Service is a federal agency. Their central programs are Senior Corps, AmeriCorps, and the Social Innovation Fund. Their website www.nationalservice.gov offers a large array of opportunities and contacts. While national in scope, their focus is local. You can find other opportunities on www.Volunteer.gov, “America's Natural and Cultural Resources Volunteer Portal.” It is run by the Federal Interagency Team on Volunteerism (FITV), created by President Bush in 2002. President Obama's service initiative is “United We Serve”; their website is www.serve.gov.

When you work with a recognized organization, your community gains twice. In addition to the benefit of your labor, the local government can tally your time toward a recovery grant from FEMA, the Federal Emergency Management Agency. In a federally declared disaster, FEMA will reimburse a local government up to 75% of the actual recovery costs. (The funds go to the state government for distribution downward.) Accountants tally donated time as a “soft match” for FEMA funding. Right now, volunteers are worth about \$20 per hour to a local government. (The rate depends on local economic standards. In Washington DC, the figure is about \$38 per hour.)

Donations are more common than volunteers—and more problematic. Responders must deal with mountains of unwanted stuff that is passed off and handed down—and often of little value. To clear it out, relief agencies establish open warehouses from which anyone can take anything. This tends to be a bonanza for opportunists. It may seem ungrateful, but it is the only practical way to manage mountains of unneeded household goods and personal items.

Someone has to categorize and inventory material gifts in kind. That goes easier before they become critical to someone else's survival. Goods are best donated ahead of the catastrophe. Yet, those needs often remain long after the event has fallen off the news cycle. Therefore, community groups run continuous programs for assembling and distributing goods-in-kind.

Money is always the best donation because it is the most versatile. Needs change during a recovery. Backed by cash reserves, the coordinators on-site can direct resources to meet those new conditions. Money is also the easiest thing to offer. Trucking and transportation is not needed for monetary donations.

Whether you donate cash, materials, or labor, you give more when you plan ahead. You may have to browse the web, leave some email, and make a few calls. Compared to serving during a disaster recovery, that is the easy part. Always check www.volunteertx.org for Texas information during a disaster.