

This article examines the management of the thirty thousand or more spontaneous, unaffiliated volunteers who converged on New York City following the 11 September terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. It looks at: how effectively these volunteers were managed; who participated in their management; the lessons learned; and whether policy regarding the management of unaffiliated disaster volunteers has been changed. It concludes by comparing the likely effectiveness of New York's draft plan for the future management of such volunteers with that of similar documents from other sources.

Averting a disaster within a disaster: the management of spontaneous volunteers following the 11 September 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York

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At 8.42 a.m. on Tuesday 11 September 2001, two planes collided with the World Trade Center towers in downtown New York City. By the end of the day, 2792 people were missing (later to be confirmed dead), hundreds more were injured and nearly everyone with a television had watched millions of tons of concrete and steel collapse over the 16 acres of downtown Manhattan. Within

minutes, the disaster was recognised as having been the worst attack on United States soil since the bombing of Pearl Harbor. The American public took it personally: a wave of patriotic generosity gripped not just the city of New York but the entire country, inspiring hundreds of tractor-trailers filled with donations and thousands upon thousands of individuals to converge upon New

York City in the hope of lending a hand. By noon of that same day, potential blood donors were already being turned away from the hospitals, which had previously been desperately short of blood. By nightfall, pallet after pallet of bottled water lined the streets, and trailers were parked outside grocery stores all over the country, waiting for the canned goods and boxes of cereals destined for New York. In downtown Manhattan, volunteers commandeered abandoned fast-food restaurants in order to feed the rescue workers, while deserted buildings became makeshift (but little-used) sleeping quarters. Within less than a week, thousands of individuals had desperately tried to lend a hand, and a heart, to the rescue operation. Whether travelling from around the corner or across the globe, these spontaneous volunteers converged on the city of New York in a show of generosity that very nearly led to a secondary disaster.

This article will look at the management of the thirty thousand or more spontaneous, unaffiliated volunteers who converged on the city of New York following the World Trade Center disaster. How effectively were these volunteers managed? Who participated in their management? What were the lessons learned? Has policy regarding the management of

unaffiliated disaster volunteers been changed and, compared with similar policy initiatives, will New York's plan be successful in the future management of such volunteers? Having participated in the recovery operation as an employee of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the author has supplemented her first-hand experiences with accounts from key individuals and spontaneous volunteers, as well as collateral media coverage. It is hoped that this case study, although specific to one disaster, will fortify the meagre body of knowledge on spontaneous disaster volunteers. The lessons learned on 11 September 2001 are invaluable to any community eager to avert a potential 'disaster within a disaster'.

Disasters are a particularly intense form of collective stress, encompassing events ranging from simple house fires to severe hurricanes (Curtis *et al*, 2001). Whether large or small, disasters require comprehensive action on the part of the community to prepare for and respond to the widespread disruption they cause (Britton, 1990). Often such action takes the form of voluntary activity. While federal, state and city governments have succeeded in educating voluntary agencies and the business community about disaster

preparedness and response, disaster volunteerism rarely receives the same treatment. This lack of understanding of disaster volunteerism is found not only in the field but also in the literature. Although a few academics have addressed the work of permanent disaster volunteers (Barton, 1969; Britton, 1991), little has been written about those individuals who often contribute much to disaster response yet regularly remain anonymous: the spontaneous, or unaffiliated, volunteers.

Method

The research was conducted in the form of a case study. This method was chosen because it is appropriate for studying complex social phenomena within their real-life context. The 11 September attack would be particularly difficult to study apart from its context, for three main reasons:

- The high profile of New York City in national and world media.
- The fact that the disaster was quickly internalised as an attack on the American way of life itself.
- The victims of the attack came from ninety countries, which meant that millions of people felt connected to the tragedy.

The evidence for the case study was drawn from a variety of sources:

- Face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with seven key individuals selected to represent the variety of government departments and agencies participating.
- A survey, asking questions similar to those used in the interviews, e-mailed to 345 individual subscribers to the New York City Voluntary Organisations Active in Disaster (NYCVOAD) electronic discussion group.
- The author's first-hand observations during an eleven-month tour of duty with a governmental disaster relief agency.
- Archival material, including existing plans for the management of spontaneous disaster volunteers.
- Newspaper articles focusing on the participation of spontaneous volunteers.

Who are they? Identifying and defining the unaffiliated disaster volunteers

Disaster volunteering often conjures up images of kindly helpers in red and white American Red Cross aprons distributing food to victims, or of caring Salvation Army soldiers setting up mobile canteens – in other words, the hundreds of thousands of permanent, affiliated and trained volunteers that make up the reserve army of the national and

international disaster relief agencies. These volunteers are ready to travel to a disaster at a moment's notice, armed with precious experience and training on topics ranging from mental health counselling to donations management. These volunteers are the worker ants of the disaster relief industry, without whom few organisations would be able to provide their much-needed services. The American Red Cross, for example, relies on its permanent volunteers to make up 97 per cent of its workforce, with over 175,000 volunteers responding to nearly 64,000 disasters every year (<http://www.redcross.org/services/volunteer>). In Australia, permanent disaster volunteers comprise 87 per cent of the total emergency and disaster services personnel, providing an invaluable resource in the fight against brush fires (Britton, 1991). However, most disaster relief efforts depend not only on the permanent disaster volunteers flown in by their respective organisations, but also on an army of ordinary citizens who form the bulk of the volunteer population in nearly every disaster (Hashimoto, 2000).

According to the Points of Light Foundation (2002, page 3), 'spontaneous or unaffiliated volunteers are those who arrive unsolicited at the scene of disaster,

who may or may not be a resident of the affected community, who may or may not possess skills necessary to respond to the current disaster, and who are not associated with any part of the existing emergency management response system'. However, the majority of these unskilled, untrained and unaffiliated volunteers are individuals who simply want to help their community to recover. These volunteers often band together, creating *ad hoc* groups that can range from the highly organised to the amorphous, and can exist for days or for months, depending on the task at hand (Britton, 1990).

What distinguishes these individuals from the trained and affiliated disaster volunteers is simple: their role is an ephemeral one, created at a moment's notice for the single purpose of disaster relief, and often discarded just as quickly when their duty is done. Yet what is it that causes so many individuals to take on this role?

Why do they emerge? Convergence theory, the media, and the need to act

Barton (1969) was the first to identify the 'mass assault' by volunteers that follows a disaster as a legitimate and predictable convergent behaviour. Barton (1969) found that,

on average, 60-90 per cent of disaster survivors engage in volunteer activities during the relief operations. He also claims that:

Several features of disasters make volunteering after a disaster fundamentally different from volunteering during the normal course of events (page 412).

Not the least of these is that disasters tend to draw volunteers through the process of convergence for reasons that are unlikely to be related to human, social and cultural capital, rather it is the attitude of the volunteers that predisposes them to such behaviour. For most citizens, a disaster is a profoundly traumatising event culminating in a complete loss of control over daily life (Taylor et al, 1970). Survivors and citizens often feel a pressing anxiety coupled with an urge to help – a desire to do something, anything, to attack the disaster and regain control over their lives. Adopting the role of volunteer allows community members and disaster survivors to exist in a world of moral absolutes where the disaster is 'bad' and the act of helping others is 'good', allowing them to 'make sense' of the tragedy, and give purpose to their survival (Taylor et al, 1970). Anything or anyone that stood in the way of adopting the role of volunteer was regarded as

inappropriate, including jobs, families, social commitments and bureaucratic relief organisations that were slower to organise. This tremendous urge for action on the part of spontaneous volunteers is the main reason for the mass convergence of ready, willing and able bodies on disaster sites everywhere. Furthermore, as Kreps (1978) argues, the scale of the convergence is directly related to three factors surrounding a given disaster:

1. The greater the size, density and proximity of populations to the area of impact, the more emergent groups will develop.
2. The more extensive the media used in interpersonal and group communication, the more emergent groups will develop.
3. The greater the intensity and scope for impact of an event, the more normative will be the environment for mutual help and for emergent groups.

Note that Kreps only addresses the scale of the convergence, rather than its occurrence, which he and Barton take to be inevitable. The transformation of community priorities and values that follows disasters leads to a heightened emphasis on disaster relief and mutual support of the victims, such

that convergence of volunteers is inescapable (Wenger and James, 1994). By encouraging social participation at the expense of production, distribution and consumption, the relief efforts serve to free individuals from their traditional everyday roles, allowing them to participate in emergent volunteer behaviours. Such groups and individuals can provide much-needed manpower for disaster operations if they are integrated into the existing emergency management systems, but they may interfere with operations if they are not organised and used effectively.

What do they do? Helpful vs. harmful volunteers

In many post-disaster situations, bystanders form a very significant organised force (Britton, 1990). Their adopted role of disaster volunteer encourages heightened activity and a near militancy in fighting the destruction, resulting in a remarkable spirit of community cohesion. The instantaneous influx of unselfish, often heroic and frequently nameless volunteers and helping professionals contributes strongly to this ethos of common fate and united struggle for survival. They instil hope and serve as a reminder that humanity has not ended. They help the victims to 'get going' and to believe that the nightmare will indeed end. And

spontaneous volunteers often contribute the manpower and variety of skills needed to assist public and private agencies in the response and recovery process, resulting in billions of dollars worth of service every year (Zakour and Gillespie, 1998).

After the January 2001 earthquake in the Gujarat region of India, the spontaneous response of the survivors was immediately to begin the search and rescue operation, removing injured and buried people from beneath the rubble long before the government resources could be deployed (Ray, 2001). The report of the inquiry into the 1999 Ladbroke Grove train disaster described the behaviour of the survivors as altruistic, thoughtful and intelligent – pulling people out of fires, helping passengers to escape and keeping calm (Shaw, 2001). Shaw concluded:

The assumption that people are incompetent, selfish, panic-stricken or useless in a crisis needs challenging for, if these beliefs are perpetuated, then much valuable planning and implementation time will be wasted. The generality of people will not only not behave illogically, they will be supportive, helpful and altruistic (page 5).

Indeed, the literature indicates that spontaneous volunteers will not only

present themselves following a disaster, but will also provide necessary and meaningful assistance to the recovery process, often well ahead of any organised disaster or government agencies (Britton, 1990; Taylor et al, 1970; Waugh and Sylves, 2002; Wenger and James, 1994).

However, if left unmanaged and unsupported, spontaneous volunteers can also hinder disaster relief. All too often, volunteers who arrive spontaneously at a disaster scene to perform initial search and rescue operations become overwhelmed by the emotional impact of their efforts and their proximity to the disaster. Since exposure to graphic scenes of devastation and multiple casualties or deaths can have a deleterious effect on even the best-trained or most experienced emergency responder, it would be negligent not to make allowances for the psychological impact on unaffiliated and untrained individuals (Steinberg, 2002). Concepts such as 'compassion fatigue' and 'vicarious traumatisation', often addressed in the planning of support services for professional and affiliated disaster relief workers, are rarely considered in the management of unaffiliated spontaneous volunteers. Left to provide their own self-care, these volunteers can in turn become traumatised, and by becoming

victims of the disaster, may require the very services that they sought to provide (Kaul, 2002; Steinberg, 2002).

Findings

During the weeks following the World Trade Center disaster – as a consultant employed by the volunteer management agency New York Cares in its disaster volunteer programme, recalls – tens of thousands of people from throughout the region, the rest of the country and the rest of the world converged on New York City in the hope of lending a hand. The interviewee admits:

The highly disorganised attempts to manage these spontaneous volunteers may in some ways illustrate the organisational weaknesses that existed prior to the disaster, a 'failure of imagination' if you will, to foresee not only a disaster on the scale of September 11, but also realize the convergence that would follow.

However, he concedes that he can't imagine:

even the largest corporation in the world being able to handle the simultaneous appearance of thirty thousand job applicants showing up on your doorstep, all demanding a position.

This interviewee is not alone in his perceptions. An underlying self-reproach flows throughout nearly every interview and survey, admitting a failure to plan yet pleading that no plan would have been adequate against such a deluge of spontaneous volunteers. Not surprisingly, therefore, many of those interviewed expressing mixed feelings about the effectiveness of the thousands of unaffiliated volunteers.

Back off! – the convergence

On 12 September 2001, the New York Daily News reported that thousands of volunteers were lining up on the streets around Bellevue, Beth Israel and other hospitals and the Red Cross to give blood, yet all were being turned away (Ferraro, 2001). By 15 September 15, the same newspaper reported:

The public response to calls for help in the World Trade Center disaster has been so overwhelming that officials were forced to turn volunteers away yesterday (Singleton, 2001).

The number of volunteers reached the tens of thousands by the end of the first week after the disaster; they included Korean search and rescue teams, an Argentinian merchant mariner on vacation and a couple on a cross-country trip who made a

special detour to come to New York and volunteer (Ojito, 2001).

The clinical director of an organisation involved from the very beginning in managing the provision of mental health services to the victims and survivors of the disaster, interviewed for this case study recalls the convergence of spontaneous volunteers as being 'destructive'. The volunteers who constantly flocked to the Family Assistance Center, an area devoted to the care of the family members of the missing and killed, were highly disruptive, as they often required the director and others to interrupt their counselling work in order to accommodate their needs:

The thing with spontaneous unaffiliated volunteers is that they often don't see the whole picture, they only see their little microcosm and that microcosm is not indicative of the whole disaster, and what they decide to do is based on this microcosm view and not on the needs of the disaster effort as a whole.

Several other interviewees expressed a similar sentiment: one recalls that 'a lot of people wanted to jump in and make their own solutions and disregard authority', while another remarks that 'people say "I want to help" and the emphasis is on the "I" sometimes and not on the "help"'.

One of the biggest tasks that arose was the necessity to feed the rescue workers at the disaster site, quickly named Ground Zero. Over the weeks that followed the disaster, everyone in New York seemed to be donating food, cooking it or feeding it to the volunteers, ranging from the grandmother on the corner to celebrity chefs and movie stars. Ms McCann of the New Jersey Food Bank observed:

People are feeling helpless, they want to make food, they want to feed it right to the rescue workers. With all this generosity, though, we're almost creating a mini disaster (Dwyer, 2001).

Tired of watching television, being turned away at volunteer centres and having the health department shut their feeding sites down, frustrated individuals began to toss socks, cigarettes, toilet paper, shirts, sandwiches, water and anything else they could think of at the rescue workers. The majority of these gifts remained unused or uneaten, eventually attracting rats and thus creating an additional health hazard (Dwyer, 2001). One interviewee concluded (2003):

The second disaster is the help you get. I wish people would back off and pace themselves, because there's going to be work to do for months.

The good, the bad and the burnt-out – the volunteers

The convergence of spontaneous volunteers on New York City may have caused frustration among the disaster management professionals, yet the volunteers themselves offer a different view of the attempt – or lack thereof – to deploy them effectively. One previously unaffiliated volunteer answering the e-mail survey for this study, recalls that initially no serious effort was made to manage the unaffiliated volunteers:

We mostly organised ourselves, [due to the fact that] the city and most 'official' bodies did not recognize our work.

Another volunteer recalls:

Most local, state and federal government agencies as well as voluntary agencies were sceptical about the volunteers.

Other respondents reported tremendous frustration among the volunteers because of the lack of official instructions and because they were being turned away from traditional volunteer agencies such as the American Red Cross and The Salvation Army. The management of spontaneous volunteers was 'highly disorganised to the extent that it was

organised at all', recalls one interviewee, yet nearly all respondents agreed that the resources needed to manage the volunteers were not available because they were needed elsewhere in the disaster operation:

They [the government and city agencies] had more important things to do with their time (unaffiliated volunteer).

Despite the lack of communication and the apparent disorganisation, many spontaneous volunteers succeeded not only in organising by themselves, but also in contributing to the relief efforts. One volunteer recalls her experience with a group of spontaneous volunteers located near the Jacob Javitz convention centre as highly successful, praising her colleagues for their flexibility and resourcefulness in organising the donations that arrived in their staging area. In addition to using laptops to manage their donations inventory, the group began to manage additional spontaneous volunteers to meet the needs of the police and fire departments. Another volunteer's group, which began by feeding the Highway Patrol officers, also diversified into donations management, obtaining warehouse space all over the city and supplying the leading disaster relief agencies

such as The Salvation Army. This volunteer recalls that, although there was no official effort to manage the unaffiliated volunteers, most of the emergent groups succeeded in making connections with individual members of the rescue and recovery efforts, such as fire fighters or police officers:

We were met initially with resistance, but once we established credibility we were welcomed as part of the team ... what made us effective is that we were not representing any single agency, which gave us the ability to solve problems without the need to worry about the usual command chains which were regarded as slower by the rescue workers.

A FEMA employee assigned to control the volunteers gathering at the Javitz Center, agrees that, during the days immediately following the disaster, the spontaneous volunteers were invaluable. Quicker to organise than the traditional disaster relief agencies, they provided the basic services of mass care and donations management long before the American Red Cross and The Salvation Army established their efforts. However, disaster volunteering involves more than just making sandwiches and moving boxes, and many of the volunteers were not prepared for the additional

demands of their assignments; others, it seems, could not tear themselves away from the carnage.

A *Daily News* article of 17 September reported on the two people on a motoring trip through New England who cut their holiday short and came to New York City:

They have bunked in the corridors of evacuated buildings and in a flower shop in the American Express building. They have been wearing donated clothes. With no cell phone, they have yet to call home (DeMarco, 2001).

These two people were among the many who were told that their help was not needed and that there were already too many volunteers at the scene. Yet instead of returning to their holiday, they sneaked in with supplies and remained entrenched in the evacuated buildings surrounding Ground Zero. 'What can we do on the outside [of the restricted zone], that can be as important as what we're doing inside?' they asked the interviewer (DeMarco, 2003). Yet the 'inside' was still grey with the dust of pulverised steel, concrete and glass, the fires were still roaring at Ground Zero and the race was still on to find any survivors. A volunteer spoken to for this study recalls:

This was no place for regular volunteers. There were a lot of reports of volunteers who wouldn't leave, who became obsessed, who would try to hurt themselves because they haven't slept in days ... we had one guy who began to repeatedly hit himself in the face with a hammer, another guy tried to set himself on fire, because he failed, he left before they found anybody.

A less drastic but more common danger was the vulnerability of spontaneous volunteers to post traumatic stress disorder. The clinical director of a disaster psychiatry outreach organisation recalls how even the mental health professionals began to:

show signs of [vicarious] trauma pretty early on. If you are not trained in disaster work and can't distance yourself [from the victims] then you can easily end up a victim yourself.

Unfortunately, without proper training, many volunteers, including professional mental health workers, are likely to burn out, some in only a matter of days, thus creating additional strain on the recovery effort, not only by reducing the available human resources but also by placing demands on the care resources of other mental health professionals.

I don't think people are fully aware of what drives volunteers, especially in a mass casualty event. I mean, there is a lot of generosity on people's part, but I also think that there is a drive for people to do something, and I think that if it is not addressed and channelled properly it can hurt them and others (Director of disaster psychiatry outreach organisation).

In a perfect world – the lessons learned

Three themes emerged from this research:

- the need to train the volunteers;
- the need for sites at which to register convergent volunteers;
- most importantly, the need to have a co-ordinated message addressing spontaneous volunteers from the moment disaster strikes.

One interviewee, an expert in the field of disaster psychiatry, was particularly concerned about the lack of training for professional and non-professional volunteers. He says of professional volunteers: *[Although] they say they're doctors ... but you just don't know ... just because they are a psychiatrist or a social worker, it doesn't mean they know how to do disaster [mental health] work.*

He was also concerned about the lack of training for non-professional spontaneous volunteers:

Most of the training is on how to volunteer, what to do if this or that happens, where to go, etc, but no one talks to them about what they will see and what they will hear in a disaster.

The lack of such information could cause the volunteers themselves to become traumatised.

These views about the importance of training were echoed throughout the literature, and particularly by The Citizens' Group in its evaluation of the management of unaffiliated volunteers following the Kobe earthquake in Japan. The evaluation claims that the lack of appropriate disaster relief training for spontaneous volunteers created an additional liability for the relief efforts:

Whether in search and rescue techniques or crisis counselling, untrained volunteers can unintentionally harm not only themselves, but also others (Citizens' Group, 1996).

However, training volunteers is difficult if no record of their service or involvement exists. Most respondents agreed that a central

location for the purpose of registering spontaneous volunteers was absolutely essential. The clinical director suggested the establishment of separate registration facilities for professional and non-professional unaffiliated volunteers. A volunteer advocated spontaneous volunteer liaisons ready to go out into the field:

For that human interaction, to help speak with them, create an understanding and refocus them on to other tasks that maybe they can do.

One disaster organisation worker was concerned that, in order 'to manage volunteers, you need volunteer managers, and where does that population come from?'

The third and most prominent theme in the responses was the need for a co-ordinated response. One volunteer said in her interview that 'there was no clear message delivered to volunteers, no single source of information'. She suggested:

There needs to be one source of information, and the media needs to be given that one source of information so that people are not being given conflicting information on what to do.

Another was concerned about the role of the media in disseminating such information to the public, stating that 'it would be great to have some kind of training for the media to help them know that they can create a secondary disaster' and to provide them with accurate information about emergent volunteers. The clinical director concluded that, in order to provide that simple single message, one person must be responsible for the management of spontaneous volunteers:

There is no time for democracy in disasters.

What about next time? The New York City VOAD Disaster Volunteer Mobilization and Management Plan

Just before 11 September 2001, New York City's Office of Emergency Management had been practising its response to a severe hurricane disaster. Two years previously, in 1999, Hurricane Floyd had just missed the island of Manhattan, causing major flooding and millions of dollars worth of damage in New Jersey. Manhattan's near miss only served to reinforce the disaster managers' mantra of preparation. Having participated in the practice, the author recalls little discussion about unaffiliated volunteers, their

motivations and the convergence that would probably occur after a large disaster. But on 11 September 2001, 'spontaneous volunteers hit the country's radar screen', spurring organisations across the USA to convene a national conference on the issue (Points of Light, 2002, page 2). The New York City VOAD followed suit, publishing its Disaster Volunteer Mobilization and Management Plan a year and a half after the disaster. This six-page document, marked 'temporary' and the result of months of deliberation by the twelve members of the NYCVOAD Disaster Volunteerism Leadership Committee, is at best out of touch and at worst completely useless. It designates New York Cares, a non-profit volunteer management agency, as the lead organisation for disaster volunteer management, and proposes to manage future spontaneous volunteers by asking them to register for assignments via the New York Cares website (NYCVOAD, 2002). The establishment of a call centre and a walk-in registration area are relegated to Appendix II, under the heading 'Issues to be addressed in the final plan' (NYCVOAD, 2002, page 6). The last item on that list, and the very last sentence of the document as a whole, calls for the creation of a 'comprehensive plan for managing convergent volunteers' (NYCVOAD, 2002, page 7).

Throughout this research, the NYCVOAD Disaster Volunteer Mobilization and Management Plan provoked a variety of reactions, from harsh criticism through ambivalence to strong support. Many of the people interviewed were unaware of the existence of the Plan, or indeed of any other attempt to prepare for an organised response to convergent volunteers. This is most disconcerting, as these same individuals were spontaneous volunteers during the 11 September disaster. One volunteer expressed this best, saying that while he was unaware of any such plans, 'I do know that the unaffiliated volunteers are ready to act'. Another was more critical of the plan, claiming that the website would be an ineffective means of volunteer registration, and pointing out that 'a lot of people talk about spontaneous volunteers hoping to control them or get rid of them' rather than work with them – a feeling echoed by many of the past volunteers who responded to the survey. Britton warns that such indifference towards spontaneous volunteers and their motivations for converging:

not only inhibits disaster managers from appreciating the social dynamics of disaster, but it actually prevents managers from engaging concerned citizens practically (1990, page 92).

It is unfortunate that not everyone takes the same view. An interviewee working for an emergency management agency, for example, is impatient with the idea that 'volunteers have this need to volunteer, as if this is a need that should be properly addressed as a need caused by the disasters, people's need to volunteer, and I don't agree with that,' warning that 'we shouldn't let the tail wag the dog by being able to satisfy everyone who wants to volunteer whether they are needed or not'. His views were echoed by a volunteer, who called for the complete pre-affiliation of all disaster volunteers. Showing a lack of concern for the motivations of spontaneous disaster volunteers and a lack of understanding of current convergence theories, the influential members of the NYCVOAD Committee, in partnership with government agencies, chose to plan for the future by not planning at all. After all, the daily operations of New York Cares currently include all the activities illustrated in the plan, including online registration of volunteers and online referrals to volunteer opportunities. Unlike its counterparts in other areas of the country, New York Cares appears to regard disaster work as 'business as usual'.

Twelve years before 11 September

2001 and more than three thousand miles away, the San Francisco Bay Area experienced its own wave of convergent disaster volunteers as they responded to the Loma Prieta earthquake. As their response, the five volunteer centres of the Bay Area joined together to form Prepare Now, a disaster response initiative (www.preparenow.org). In addition to their many collaborative efforts, the five Bay Area centres drafted a single Volunteer Center Disaster Response Plan to be used either individually or simultaneously by all five centres. There are several key elements of Prepare Now that are in stark contrast to the NYCVOAD plan, but the most apparent is the tone it adopts when referring to spontaneous volunteers. Rather than attempting to discourage such volunteers, the plan emphasises that employees:

need to recognize that there will always be spontaneous volunteers, that with their talents and enthusiasm they are truly a blessing, that they will vastly outnumber paid workers and pre-trained volunteers in most disasters, and that for all these reasons we need to prepare for them (Prepare Now, 2003).

The Bay Area's plan clearly outlines staff roles and responsibilities, and provides for a free phone number, usable all the year round, for

volunteer registration. Most importantly, it addresses the issue of a volunteer registration site, insisting that the location(s) include not only clear stations for registration, but also an area where volunteers can relax and be helped to fill out their applications (Prepare Now, 2003).

New York Cares may be the city's premier volunteer management agency, with unmatched expertise in the field, but its resources are severely limited. It would be rash to assume that it could single-handedly operate a disaster volunteer centre in New York. The only entity that has the resources needed for such an undertaking would be the New York City government. Only it could acquire the space needed at a moment's notice, only it could buy hundreds of computer terminals for the registration and only it could provide the security needed to keep the convergent volunteers safe and calm. It is unfortunate, therefore, that although the federal government adopted a policy to tackle excess donations four years ago, it has yet to follow this up with an effective initiative to manage spontaneous volunteers, delegating its responsibility to the often cash-strapped volunteer centres and non-profit agencies (FEMA, 1999). This gamble may have paid off in cases such as the Owensboro tornado,

which attracted only eight hundred spontaneous volunteers, but can the government truly expect a single non-profit agency such as New York Cares to tackle a wave of tens of thousands of volunteers?

The emergency management worker interviewed pointed out that 'volunteer recruitment and management is an art', and in day-to-day life it may well be. Unfortunately, during a disaster, the management of convergent spontaneous volunteers becomes a very real necessity, art or not, that demands inclusion in the government's overall disaster relief operation:

Though spontaneous, unaffiliated volunteers can be a significant obstacle for disaster response operations, our society can ill afford to ignore the potential capacity of its citizens to help improve conditions in their communities, especially in times of disaster (Points of Light, 2002, page 3).

Conclusion

Every aspect of New York City's response to the 11 September 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center will be analysed for years to come, from the firefighters' ascent into the burning towers to the cash awarded the victims' families. The discipline of

disaster management will thrive on these evaluations, as it does following the analysis of each and every disaster. However, few of the evaluations will concern themselves with the management of disaster volunteers; and even fewer will provide the same kind of information regarding spontaneous disaster volunteers. The present case study, although specific to New York City's response to what is hoped will be a unique disaster, aims to shed some light on this insufficiently studied population. The author concedes that the limited sample size limits the reliability of this case study, but hopes that it will encourage further research into this important, but overlooked area of disaster management.

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