

[News and Hot Topics](#) » Helper Triage: Volunteer Management in Emergencies

# Helper Triage: Volunteer Management in Emergencies

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

December  
2007

A few weeks ago I got a phone call from Ben Arnoldy, a reporter with the *Christian Science Monitor*. He was writing a story about the aftermath of the recent tanker accident and major oil spill in San Francisco Bay. He had attended several emergency meetings between concerned citizens and the various government authorities charged with action in this sort of scenario and was very dismayed at the seeming lack of interest in accepting the many offers of volunteer help.

You can read his article in the November 13th edition of the *Monitor*, "[Oil-spill Helpers Galore, but Limits on Their Use](#)." It opens like this:

*When a shipping accident last week dumped 58,000 gallons of oil in San Francisco Bay, it washed onto shores that are home to a great concentration of America's environmentalists.*

*So it shouldn't come as a surprise that volunteers poured forth to help – yet officials still seemed flummoxed when it happened.*

In a nutshell, here's what happened:

- An emergency with lots of precedence in other locations and involving the jurisdictions of many authorities.
- Immediate media coverage, alerting millions of people about the problem.
- Many people were not only concerned, they also wanted to help (we, of course, know these folks as "spontaneous volunteers").
- No one coordinating the emergency response for the government was charged specifically with considering the question of volunteers – and no one understood the issues. (The one exception being the nonprofit organizations focused on birds and their habitats who did have a plan and did put volunteers to work.)

- Lots of people offered to help. They were turned down brusquely, largely with the reason: “It takes training to clean up dangerous chemicals and so we can’t let you do it.” More specifically, they were told “you must have *24 hours* of training.”
- There was a form for people to complete that asked only for their name and contact information. The staff admitted they had “whipped this up” that same morning.
- The would-be volunteers (taxpaying citizens) got angry, especially as they watched miles of beaches go unmonitored and uncleaned for days.
- The government spent money to bring in more paid, trained help.

OK. The red herring in this situation is the “it’s dangerous” response. The real issue – and focus of this Hot Topic – is that emergency planning that does not include strategies for dealing with spontaneous volunteers is simply bad planning! The Red Cross and some local response coordinators have actually learned much of this from 9/11, Katrina, and other natural disasters. But, as the oil spill proved, there are still many types of crises in which the volunteer wheel is re-invented, often badly.

Health care has created the concept of emergency *triage*, in which a skilled medical practitioner assesses each patient and determines who needs immediate attention, who can wait, and even who can’t be helped. We simply have to teach civil emergency response organizers the need for “Helper Triage,” too. Turning every potential volunteer away without assessing what s/he is offering to do is a mistake on many levels.

## Danger and Risk: Truth vs. Assumptions

Let me state clearly and strongly that I do NOT want anyone who is unqualified to be put to work at anything that poses any health hazard to him or herself personally or to the community. I’m sure that the majority of the people who offered to help in San Francisco should not have been handed a yellow suit and told, “go for it.”

But here are some things to consider:

- The authorities had no system in place for identifying whether any of the applicants were actually *trained and experienced* in working with toxic substances. The assumption was: if you’re volunteering, you’re an amateur. Given the population of the Bay area, the odds were very much in favor of finding at least some qualified volunteers who would have been immediately capable of doing the risky (and other) stuff.
- Where did the rule of “24 hours of training” come from? Might some of the prospective volunteers be partially qualified (for example, firefighters) and therefore have only needed, say, 10 more hours of training in some of the specialty issues? The oil clean-up was obviously going to take at least several weeks of work. Was there no way to offer a crash training course (again to pre-qualified volunteers)? Was any of the training already on video? Should it be, so that other emergencies have a way to prepare extra workers?

- Does every single task in the clean-up need every single minute of the 24 hours of training? Are there not some activities that could be delegated to slightly-less-trained helpers while the fully-trained workers did the most critical tasks?

## The Volunteer Management Skill of Task Analysis

The last bulleted item is a function of linear thinking. Administrators who always work with full-time employees think of jobs as a cluster of activities all done by people with similar qualifications. We in the volunteer field, on the other hand, are skilled in putting diverse people to work in short bursts of energy, a few hours at a time.

The offers to volunteer may have included a willingness to clean up the oil itself, but that really wasn't what people were saying. They were offering to *help*. There seemed to be no one in charge who could envision what that might mean. Here's a list of just some possibilities that the reporter and I brainstormed together in only a few minutes:

- Help to cordon off affected beach access points and explain to people why they couldn't go to those spots.
- Work in the supply unit handing out protective gear and tools to those who would then touch the oil.
- Provide a respite area with refreshments for the workers.
- Take digital photographs of assigned sections of beach (with instructions to stay at a safe distance from any oil), sending these in electronically to other volunteers cataloguing them for a before/during/after record.
- Complete paperwork as dictated by the frontline workers.
- Call area hotels for vacancies for workers brought in from distant areas.
- Distribute instructions to special populations potentially affected by the spill, such as small boat owners, life guards, etc.
- Staff a hotline for people reporting affected shoreline.
- Compile a list of organizations rescuing wildlife.

I'll bet that someone who actually knows what's needed in this sort of emergency could develop a much longer list!

## The Solution for the Future

It's imperative that citizen volunteers be a subject for consideration in any emergency plan and that at least one authorized person be designated solely to be in charge of volunteer mobilization when a crisis occurs. At a minimum, this person should start with *triage*:

- Expect to hear from people who want to volunteer. Have a phone line, Web area, and/or physical location to deal with these questions. Assign the first volunteers to staffing this center!

- Expect to hear from the media (possibly within minutes of the crisis) and have a prepared statement to address what civilians should do if they want to help. Hurried responses of “stay away” or “we don’t want volunteers right now” – without explanation or alternative actions – damage public image.
- Have an application form that specifically asks whether a prospective volunteer has certain skills, training or experience relevant to the emergency. Anyone who answers affirmatively should be immediately moved to a different spot and interviewed further.
- Have access to those in charge to identify non-skilled or differently-skilled needs (see list of ideas in the previous sections) and find applicants with potential to fill those roles.
- Communicate, communicate, communicate (all with the help of volunteers, of course):
  - Send out clear lists of what specific skills are needed.
  - Explain why not everyone will be seen on the spot, but assure that their names will be kept on file for possible new needs over the next days or weeks.
  - Provide alternative volunteer information for those who want to do anything to help, even somewhere else.
  - Keep all of this current on a Web site (these days there are all sorts of great tools for emergencies – start with VolunteerMatch.org).

No one expects the civil engineers or transportation officials or healthcare authorities to stop their efforts to remedy the crisis in order to deal with citizen offers of help. But it IS legitimate to expect these people to predict the outpouring of volunteers and to care enough to assign someone to manage them properly, with the right preparation, concern, tone, and sincere thanks.

Once the triage pace and volume of the first days of an emergency have subsided, the volunteer manager can then apply all the principles of effective support and recognition to those who gave their time and those who could not be deployed. Not to mention planning ahead for the next emergency, which *will* happen.

*How can our profession advocate to include volunteer management as an emergency need?*

*Are Volunteer Centers and Hands On Network affiliates prepared to step in as natural coordinators in these sorts of situations?*

*Could professional associations of volunteer program managers work with disaster response officials – when there is not a crisis – to help them designate an emergency volunteer coordination plan (possibly with help from the professional VPMs)?*

Related Topics: [Disaster Response](#) | [Preparing for Volunteers](#) | [Volunteer Resources Manager, Role of](#) | [Volunteer Work Design](#) | [Image of Volunteering](#)

***Posted by Susan on 11 June 2010 -- because, unfortunately, the same topic has reared its ugly head again!***

We are in the middle of the horrific gushing oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico crisis. *The Huffington Post* just put up this blog post: Gulf Oil Spill Volunteers: Problems Matching People To Jobs. That pushed me to enter a comment linking their readers back to this 2007 Hot Topic and all of your comments! Will we ever learn?

***Posted on 20 December 2007 by H. Roberts, PLNJ Inc., Pres., Keyport, NJ USA***

What is the protocol for insuring volunteers during disaster relief? Do agencies coordinating relief efforts worry about the cost of liability, do they take out insurance on every volunteer? Does the cost of insurance prohibit recruitment? Do the undefined parameters of unauthorized volunteers play a role in the decision not to recruit? Do potential legal issues cause hesitation? If so, I can understand the challenges from a liability perspective.

***Posted on 4 December 2007 by Merrilee White, Volunteer Florida, the Governor's Commission on Volunteerism & Community Service, Emergency Management Consultant, Tallahassee, FL USA***

I agree that volunteers might have provided many kinds of assistance to the oil cleanup effort. However, I think we should give California credit where it is most definitely due. I'm not familiar with their current activities, but it was Bay Area volunteer centers that helped pioneer the Volunteer Reception Center concept for managing unaffiliated volunteers 10 years ago! Recently, California volunteer centers accepted responsibility for managing the hundreds of spontaneous volunteers who served in fire-scorched counties during the wildfires. Ohio emergency managers and volunteer managers recently utilized thousands of unaffiliated volunteers to protect homes from major flooding. In February, unaffiliated volunteers, triaged by a county-sanctioned Volunteer Reception Center and housed in a FEMA-supported base camp dramatically shortened the cleanup from Florida's Groundhog Day Tornado.

Many emergency managers across the nation recognize the importance of unaffiliated volunteer engagement in disaster response and recovery. We still have a long way to go. Certainly, hazardous material incidents present different risks to professional and volunteer responders than do other kinds of events. There is a mystique to "hazmat" incidents that has allowed this area to remain out of synch with other emergency management disciplines regarding the use of spontaneous volunteers. The good news is that printed materials, training and mentoring are available from many sources on the safe and effective use of unaffiliated volunteers.

Best of all, there are many nationally recognized emergency management professionals who advocate for strong statewide disaster volunteer management programs, and who support or endorse training for Volunteer Centers, Hands On Network affiliates, State Service Commissions, Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT), AmeriCorps programs, and state associations of volunteer managers on the "art and science" of spontaneous volunteer management.

Great things are happening on the national front:

- The National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (NVOAD) Volunteer Management Committee produced a resource called Managing Spontaneous Volunteers in Times of Disaster.
- The National Response Framework provides guidance on the Federal role in supporting State governments in the management of masses of unaffiliated volunteers... (<http://www.fema.gov/pdf/emergency/nrf/nrf-support-vol.pdf>)
- The DHS Target Capabilities List provides measurable objectives for disaster volunteer management planners at all levels. (DHS, September 2007)

Yes, we have a long way to go; but major strides are made as volunteer managers and emergency managers strengthen the ties that bind and experience first-hand the energy and skills that spontaneous, unaffiliated disaster volunteers bring to disaster response and recovery.

***Posted on 3 December 2007 by Judy Chetwin, NPS, Regional Volunteer Manager, Denver Colorado***

As a representative of one of the federal agencies involved (but not located in SF) I hope we will do better in the future and set up emergency planning options for the "next" incident.

For me as a volunteer manager, volunteer safety is absolutely the number one concern. My agency has not always done a good job with this and the result has been volunteer injuries. This is simply not acceptable. So when caustic chemicals were spilled in the Bay, I can understand the very real concern expressed for volunteer and visitor safety in regards to their generous offers to help. We were bound by EPA and other regulation in not allowing access to the beach areas to help with clean up and animal rescue without proper training and personal protective equipment for all involved. Should we have had an emergency plan? Sure. Should we have contacted the media and other support agencies to get the word out on what was needed and provide the options for that training?. Yes again. Many were trained and assisted in clean up and animal rescue.

I certainly agree that it should have been planned for and possibly been marketed better. But please do not get angry over our need and responsibility to protect the American public in this situation.

***Posted on 3 December 2007 by Jackie Norris , Metro Volunteers, Denver, CO USA***

As a former American Red Cross employee who now runs a volunteer center, I absolutely agree with everything in your hot topic this month.

However, you - and others - may want to know that Volunteer Centers and Hands On Affiliates have already made well-organized plans in many locations across the country to be prepared for an outpouring of spontaneous volunteers in the event of many different types of disasters.

Our challenge is often in getting public emergency management offices to acknowledge that we have this expertise and can be very useful to them in times of crisis. The Volunteer Centers of Florida have developed the Volunteer Reception Center model, which is the triage system you describe.

Here in Colorado we're fortunate to be part of our state office of Emergency Management's plan, in writing. Advocating for this official recognition is something every state should consider.

There is also a great new technology tool: [www.HelpinDisaster.org](http://www.HelpinDisaster.org), created as a part of the 1-800-volunteer.org system, which can pre-register volunteers and their skills before a disaster happens, and then be available as a registry of skills and availability in time of disaster.

There is a lot going on in this field - we just need to get the word out!

---

#### PRIVACY STATEMENT

Follow us   

Copyright © 1997-2025