

## *Can I help?*

### *A five-step guide to professional volunteerism...*

Hurricane Katrina has touched our hearts and created a groundswell of empathy and volunteerism across the nation and the world. People stand in line for hours to give blood...rescue personnel from around the country and around the world travel to New Orleans to help dig...and counselors from surrounding states volunteer services to the victims, families of victims, and rescue workers involved in the wake and devastation of our country's worst natural disaster.

Disasters, both man-made and natural, bring out a need within us to help, perhaps the only positive side of such tragic events. Despite our good intentions, volunteerism unchecked can create a new challenge for the recipients of our good will, the challenge of mass-convergence.

A review of recent man-made and natural disasters supports the need for a disciplined and layered response to unusual events. Mass-convergence is the problem that occurs when volunteers descend upon a disaster site without first determining the need or desire for additional assistance. Effective disaster management requires that volunteers be uniquely and professionally qualified, accounted for throughout the disaster, housed, fed and debriefed following the event. The logistics of providing such support can be overwhelming, given the already chaotic environment.

The following guidelines can reduce the impact of mass-convergence and enhance the efforts of volunteers:

1. **Question your motivation.** Volunteering in times of disaster is frequently viewed as being altruistic in nature, and often times it is. However, there is a more selfish side to volunteerism.

For the most part, we live in a state of homeostasis, a balanced existence with some predictable control over our environment. Disasters disrupt homeostasis, placing us in an uncomfortable position of internal conflict, caught between feeling in control, and a need to "fix" the portion of our life that feels temporarily out of control. In times of disaster, the portion of our life that feels out of control often relates to the level of grief or discomfort being expressed by those in need. Rather than mastering the ability to offer a silent presence, or supporting victims from a distance, we give in to our personal need for action, the need to resolve the conflict occurring within ourselves.

*"True heroism is remarkably sober, very undramatic.*

*It is not the urge to surpass all others at whatever cost,*

*but the urge to serve others at whatever cost."*

*Arthur Ashe*

Sometimes, but not always, our personal needs coincide with the delivery of effective service; more often than not, they represent an oppositional set of goals. The end result is an over-deliverance of service prior to the time it is actually needed. Stated simply, we make ourselves feel better at a cost to the victim we are attempting to assist. We address our own discomfort, not that of our neighbor. A disciplined response, therefore, is critical to effective disaster management.

The next time you raise your hand to volunteer, take time to look at your motivation and ask yourself, “Why am I doing this?” Your honest answer to that question will help you to deliver a more compassionate response at a more appropriate time.

2. **Take a personal inventory.** Regardless of the uniform one wears, or the title that appears on one’s business card, we are all human first, making us vulnerable to fluctuating levels of strength and weakness. On any given day, our ability to deal with crisis differs, sometimes dramatically. Before volunteering assistance to others, ask yourself the following questions:

- ❖ What is the state of my current physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual health?
- ❖ What other concurrent life-challenges am I dealing with that might impact my ability to give of myself?
- ❖ What is my current and foreseeable work schedule?
- ❖ What impact will my volunteer effort have on my family?
- ❖ How long can I realistically devote to this effort?
- ❖ What do I need to pack and take with me? (Remember regional climates and seasons)
- ❖ What resources are available to me upon my return?

We have to guard against getting caught up in the emotion of the moment and focusing solely on “emergency response.” Answering the questions above honestly, with input from family members, will be useful in designing a volunteer effort aligned with your personal and professional commitments and responsibilities.

3. **Pack your professional portfolio.** Disaster management requires the screening of volunteers to insure their qualifications. You can help the coordinating agency by providing copies of your degrees, certificates, training records, licensure and formal identification documents. Having these materials readily available will save time and confusion when registering at the disaster site. There are three “C’s” in disaster management that tend to fail at major events, command structure, communication, and cooperation. Presenting your credentials upon arrival will greatly reduce the stress and confusion associated with managing traumatic events.

*“Never promise more than you can perform.”*

*Publius Syrus  
1<sup>st</sup> Century B.C.*

4. **Be patient; play by the rules.** All resources at disasters sites, regardless of their expertise, become part of the Integrated Incident Command System. This means that despite your qualifications or normal level of independent functioning in your business, you are now accountable to the Incident Command structure and are therefore bound by its rules of engagement. This is often challenging to those accustomed to controlling their own destiny, but it is essential to a disciplined and coordinated disaster response.

Prior to volunteering at a disaster site, spend time talking to those who have participated in previous rescue and recovery efforts. Make yourself familiar with the basic concepts of Unified Incident Command. Understand that everyone's role is important, but no one role is more important than any other. Keep in mind that psychological services are best offered after the initial stages of an incident, including: evacuation, fire suppression, medical rescue and recovery efforts. Remember that you are providing service at a potential crime scene and investigative rules regarding the protection of evidence apply. In short, understand your environment and respect those in command. Applying these basic guidelines will enhance your volunteer efforts, and assist Incident Commanders in developing a professional and strategic response to the disaster at hand.

*"You must learn to be the change you wish to see in the world."*

*Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi*

5. **Take care of yourself.** As important as it is to serve others, our first responsibility is always to ourselves. Avoid the "Pit Bull" mentality, where once engaged, the volunteer refuses to disengage until the event is over. No one makes good decisions when exhausted, and we are not our own best judge as to when we have reached that point. Learn to work with coworkers and listen to their advice regarding your condition during an emergency. There will always be a need for service. Take frequent, but short breaks, eat well, try to get regular rest, keep in touch with family and loved ones, and take advantage of short-term psychological interventions while on scene.

Caretakers are not accustomed to thinking of themselves, but ironically, it is through ongoing self-care that we provide the best service to others. Get in the habit of checking in with yourself and your coworkers regarding your health and performance, and learn to be "appropriately selfish."

We all hope that we will never again apply the lessons learned over the past eight days, but it would be foolhardy to think that this tragic event is a one-time occurrence. Our country has changed, and with it, our innocence. There is no doubt that we will be called upon again to serve; the questions remains, will we be ready to provide appropriate assistance? Follow the five steps outlined in this article and you can insure that you will!