



Spontaneous Volunteers in Disaster Response Operations

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Learning Objective: The student will learn how to organize spontaneous volunteers during disasters.

During disasters, there are many community volunteers who emerge with a lot of enthusiasm, some expertise, and some tools appropriate to the tasks at hand but no connection to any organized planned response group. Unified Command's challenge is to marshal these spontaneous volunteers effectively.

Many fire departments use the American Red Cross for feeding response personnel and disaster survivors; the Salvation Army for temporary housing for displaced survivors; and other religious, fraternal and civic nongovernmental organizations for various disaster-related support. Community Emergency Response Team members can assist others in their neighborhood or workplace when trained responders are not immediately available to help. The challenge emerges from spontaneous volunteers who may not be affiliated with any organization.

As one Georgia fire chief said during a 2011 post-tornado debriefing, "Everybody had a chain saw and cut their way out of their driveway and opened up many of the side streets we wouldn't have gotten to in several days. While many folks had saws, almost nobody had any formal training, and nobody had the basic safety equipment! And some were not attentive to downed power lines. We couldn't have recovered without them, but I constantly worried about their safety."

These are the volunteers for whom you need to plan. The Federal Emergency Management Agency and several partners have written "Managing Spontaneous Volunteers in Times of Disaster." You can download a copy at <http://www.fema.gov/pdf/donations/ManagingSpontaneousVolunteers.pdf>. This short pamphlet contains the condensed, experience-based lessons of dozens of people and organizations over hundreds of responses. It can be a starting point for the Volunteer Annex in your Emergency Operations Plan (EOP). (See Coffee Break Training CC-2013-4 for an EOP discussion.)

Next week's Coffee Break Training will discuss the creation of Volunteer Reception Centers to coordinate these additional assets.

For more information on fire service operations during the April 2011 Southeastern tornados, visit <http://1.usa.gov/13FjOOg>.



Volunteers clear debris from roads in El Reno, Oklahoma. The El Reno area was struck by an EF5 tornado on May 31, 2013. Photo courtesy of Andrea Booher, Federal Emergency Management Agency