

VOLUNTEERS, NONPROFITS, AND COMMUNITY CAPACITY: A CASE STUDY IN PREPARING FOR DISASTER RESPONSE AND RECOVERY

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Although professional emergency managers often regard disaster volunteers as a “crowd control problem,” Florida’s 2004 hurricane season demonstrated that well-trained and pre-affiliated volunteers can offer substantial assistance to professionals and strengthen the community’s preparedness in meaningful ways. Our study shows that the three-year Operation Step Up program helped volunteer centers in Florida enhance their volunteer management capabilities for disaster response and recovery. Initial findings suggested that the involvement of professional volunteer managers could enhance the ability of communities to respond to disasters and provide a better link between government and community organizations. Follow up interviews revealed that, even after the grant funds expired, most programs had succeeded in mainstreaming the disaster volunteer management skills into their organization’s ongoing programs and their interactions with community partners and other Florida volunteer centers.

INTRODUCTION

Disasters occur every day in a myriad of settings and scales across the globe. One of the common traits all disasters share is the need to respond more effectively and to find ways to ease the human suffering associated with these events. Traditional response systems rely primarily upon professional responders from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), state and local governments in the United States, as well as international aid organizations. Large scale disasters, such as Katrina, the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, and the Gulf BP Oil Spill, have tended to overwhelm the ability of traditional organizations to respond. This type of disaster requires the engagement not only of national and international governmental resources but also successful cross-sector collaboration.

Our study examined the role that volunteer managers and nonprofit entities can play in integrating volunteers into disaster and emergency response. In particular, we examined the role of the volunteer manager in training, pre-planning, and relationship building to support the use of volunteer and local resources in emergency response. The dynamic events that take place in a disaster strain and challenge traditional volunteer management practices, but minor modifications and extensions to the role of the traditional volunteer manager can help create positive outcomes for both communities and volunteers. Adaptations to traditional practices can include empowering communities and individuals to respond to disasters, the creation of local communities

of support, and bridging the gap between traditional institutional response and identifying local needs and capabilities.

For the purpose of this research project, a volunteer manager or administrator is defined as an individual who may be a paid or unpaid staff member who is responsible for coordinating the responsibilities of individual volunteers to help achieve an organizational or mission related goal (Connors, 2011). Volunteer managers are employed in a variety of organizations and settings but this project focused predominantly on volunteer managers who worked in volunteer centers engaged in promoting and coordinating volunteerism actively across communities. In particular, many of the volunteer initiatives in this project focused on recruiting senior and youth volunteers and engaging them in response to disasters.

TRADITIONAL DISASTER RESPONSE SYSTEMS

Traditional disaster response systems are managed by large governmental and non-governmental organizations and rely upon the capacity of smaller governmental agencies and community organizations for the coordination of local networks of support. The importance for coordination was demonstrated in the failures of Katrina where cross-sector collaboration and volunteer deployment lagged because of a lack of communication and comprehensive pre-planning (Simo & Bies, 2007).

Under normal circumstances volunteers require a unique type of “psychological contract” in order to fulfill their expectations and retain their services (Farmer & Fedor, 1999); consistent procedures ensure stability

for the volunteer experience. In disasters, participants find themselves in a dynamic process that tests their capacities “to learn, innovate, and adapt to changing conditions, informed by timely, valid data” (Comfort, 2007, p. 189). Preparing volunteers for disaster work, therefore, holds many challenges for volunteer managers and communities.

Thus, despite the ostensive value of volunteer and community organizations in disasters, few programs have been able to maximize the benefits of volunteers while minimizing barriers to their participation. This article examines a unique program, Florida’s Operation Step Up (OSU), which demonstrated significant strides in achieving these goals by employing organizations already embedded in local communities. Operation Step Up was initiated by a three-year grant totaling \$650,600 received by Volunteer Florida from the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS). The program engaged volunteer management and recruitment competencies of existing nonprofit organizations dedicated to supporting and encouraging volunteers. Utilizing this approach to address the challenges of emergency management, OSU was able to harness a network of interested individuals and nonprofit agencies that could contribute local resources and knowledge to emergency response (Lavelly & Legters, 2009; Brennan 2005).

VOLUNTEERS IN DISASTER RESPONSE

The need to employ community resources effectively becomes more urgent in disasters. The participation of volunteers in disasters has a long tradition in the United States (Lohmann, 1992) with many affiliated volunteers involved annually in responding

with the American Red Cross and other disaster relief agencies on a daily basis. Volunteers in disaster situations have the potential to create linkages through involvement between professional response personnel and the impacted community (Borden & Perkins, 2007). This allows professionals from outside the affected area to access information more rapidly which aids in designing an effective response. One critical need following a disaster is effective deployment of community resources to address emerging problems while limiting risks to both professionals and volunteers. Often professionals responding to disasters are brought into communities from other jurisdictions or higher levels of government and have limited local knowledge. Volunteers and volunteer managers have the potential to bridge the gap between response professionals and the community.

Disaster volunteers can be classified in two general categories: affiliated volunteers, and unaffiliated or spontaneous volunteers (FEMA, 2003). Affiliated volunteers are those with recognized agencies that have “trained them for disaster response and have mechanisms in place to address their use in an emergency” (FEMA, 2003, p.17). Unaffiliated or spontaneous volunteers are those who show up in the immediate aftermath of a disaster or emergency. The ability of communities to employ both types of volunteers requires preplanning by emergency and community officials (NVOAD, 2006; Volunteer Florida, 2005).

The FEMA guide on the use of volunteers (2003, p. 114) explains that volunteers enhance response capabilities in emergencies because they supply extra or immediate assistance as needed. Moreover, volunteers represent a willing workforce that is either

already trained or skilled, or can be trained and used in future disasters. However, using affiliated volunteers effectively requires emergency managers and volunteer managers to establish a relationship before disasters and make agencies aware of their roles in emergencies. The establishment of relationships between traditional emergency management professionals and volunteer managers allows for more effective communication and trust when faced with critical decisions and rapidly changing response needs that are common in emergencies.

In contrast, self-deployed, spontaneous volunteers often create barriers that interfere with response and create additional work for emergency personnel who have to direct and oversee their involvement. At worst, spontaneous volunteers have the potential to create danger and casualties if poorly managed (FEMA, 2003). Additional complications arise from the involvement of spontaneous volunteers because they lack screening and training, require close supervision, and often hamper access to an area. Most emergency response personnel are not formally trained to work with spontaneous volunteers, however, volunteer managers employ a skill set to work with these types of volunteers on a daily basis.

Finally, the involvement of volunteers in disasters poses unique challenges due to exposure to physical and emotional stress (FEMA, 2003). Disasters have potential to produce extreme stress reactions in situations such as coming in contact with death and injury, property devastation, and extreme emotional reactions from victims.

METHODS AND DATA

Initial data collection for this study was based on program documents and records, surveys and interviews with stakeholder groups, and site visits between December 2005 and April 2006. The researchers distributed survey instruments to numerous stakeholder groups and conducted interviews with program directors, staff members, partner organizations, emergency managers, volunteers, and state program staff. Site visits were conducted with four of the volunteer centers across the state. Each of the sites had various levels of involvement in providing both program development and actual hurricane response. Each program contained unique program elements or experiences that were intended to create a deeper understanding of the program's elements.

Since the work of volunteers in emergency management hinges on the role accorded to them by local government emergency managers, we also examined transcripts from interviews conducted with 15 county emergency managers in July and August 2011.¹ Data from these interviews permitted us to construct a more coherent picture of the overall role of volunteers and nonprofit organizations in emergency management.

Finally, we were concerned, with whether volunteer management organizations were able to sustain their enhanced emergency response capabilities over time. One possible outcome was that volunteer capabilities and the enhanced relationships with professional emergency managers would retract once the federal funding had expired. To examine the sustained capability and explore "lessons learned," the researchers conducted additional interviews in January and February 2012 with program directors and staff in Volunteer

Florida,² the organization that conceived and implemented the statewide program. Nine individuals, all of whom had been involved in the Operation Step Up activities, participated in this final phase of data collection.³

ROLES AND COLLABORATION IN EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

The Florida Division of Emergency Management (FDEM) is the primary government entity in Florida in charge of emergency management. FDEM is responsible for coordination with other departments and agencies in state government, FEMA, county and municipal governments, school boards, and private and nonprofit organizations that have roles in emergency management. Volunteer management for emergencies is a component in this system of vertical and horizontal collaboration. Throughout most of the U.S., county governments typically take the lead in first-level emergency response (Waugh, 1994; Choi & Brower, 2006).

The model deployed by FDEM follows primarily a bottom-up process in which the local emergency manager requests services, extra support, and resources from regional or state coordinators when the situation demands a response that exceeds the local government's capabilities. One county emergency manager explained vertical coordination with state and federal governments this way:

Generally based on the local priority, the federal government and state government is not going to come in, take over an incident, or manage the disaster for a county daily-base[work], falling in more of a supporting role providing resources and expertise, or personnel or whatever you need based on the

request from that local jurisdiction.

At the local level, emergency managers depend on horizontal collaboration -- among local government units, between local governments, and with nonprofit organizations. Emergency managers described collaboration in various ways in their interviews:

Collaboration is about building the relationship with people, especially in the pre-disaster environment.

It [collaboration] is the development of interrelationships with critical partners to accomplish the mission of emergency management.

Collaboration does not happen spontaneously when emergencies arise. It requires a lot of planning and careful preparation, relationship building, and forging of formal agreements that lay out who provides each critical service component. Typically, local emergency managers need to educate their own government leaders and others in the community about the practical realities of emergency response and recovery. As one emergency management director explained:

I think it is our job to educate and inform the administration with the local government on what could happen, what needs to be done, should that occur, and who needs to help to do that. Because, honestly, the community cannot do this and government cannot do this on their own. It has to be a community-wide effort. . . One of our tasks is trying to bring different entities within the community together by using collaboration and coordination to address whatever did happen.

Other emergency management directors described how relationship-building is a center-piece in setting up collaborative partnerships:

Collaboration is about building the relationship, especially in the pre-disaster environment. Nobody wants to meet somebody for the first time when the worst disaster came in, especially in this small rural community such as we are.

The relationship, you're going stay in touch with them and become friends with them. I would say we are good friends with most communities, people from organizations we deal with. So you have friendship more than just a business association. . . . So it is about going from business partnership to actual relationship. And staying in touch in the off time even when we are not meeting.

Many emergency managers emphasize their role in providing advice to local businesses and nonprofits for improving their capabilities and preparedness for emergencies. Several emergency managers explained why nonprofit organizations are a critical collaborative resource:

I will ask help from non-profit [organizations] if I don't have enough manpower. Like if I had the family that lost their home...we don't even have a clothing store here, so we may have to have the United Way four miles away and send them [the family] the clothes or whatever to help the families or send furniture to help the family, not relying on the staff from other [public] agencies. The non-profits...we have the network and they all work together and try to get the supplies you need to victims. There are lots of churches

within our communities. They have large followings...that is a huge resource there in the way of manpower and facilities.

(These organizations) know the neighborhood. They know the people. They get out there more than we do. And then we can't do it all, so we need them to be able to help to respond [to the disaster] with us....

One county emergency manager observed that agencies do compete with each other for limited federal funding and other support. Sometimes this competition weakens collaborative relationships. Sometimes agencies compete similarly for media attention, because media attention helps agencies maximize their budgets and stimulate charitable donations.

Several emergency managers observed that each agency has its own unique characteristics, and this compounds the difficulties that emergency managers face when dealing with these networks of participants, especially when the agencies themselves are competing with each other. In these situations interpersonal skills – among emergency managers and their corresponding nonprofit partners -- and interagency relationships are vital for collaboration to succeed. One emergency manager asked:

Are they [non-governmental organizations] easy to work with? No. They probably say that 'We are easy to work with.' No, because they have different institutional structures than government's way to do business. That's one of the reasons why we have to collaborate, and have good relationships with players who oversee these things.

Thus collaborations among professional emergency managers, professional volunteer managers, nonprofit organizations, private businesses, and other community groups are vital to emergency management -- but enacted on contested terrain. It was against this context that Volunteer Florida undertook its Operation Step Up initiative.

BUILDING A NETWORK OF VOLUNTEER AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT

As part of a grant program designed to increase preparedness and response capabilities of volunteers and volunteer centers statewide, Operation Step Up provided training to volunteer centers on a variety of emergency management related topics, including continuity of operations, disaster mitigation, long-term recovery, and management of spontaneous volunteers. The grant program joined local volunteer centers and emergency response agencies to: (1) develop the roles of volunteer centers in local emergency management plans; (2) mentor emergency response agencies to develop volunteer programs; (3) unite volunteer centers and emergency response agencies to use volunteers in disaster response; (4) engage and enable volunteers in urban areas to lead in preparation and response to disasters; and, (5) utilize volunteers to mitigate disasters locally.

Most of the volunteer centers at the outset of the program were locally based nonprofit agencies with missions that focused on promoting volunteerism in their communities through recruitment and referral of volunteers to other nonprofit agencies. A small handful of volunteer centers were offices in local government. Volunteer centers in general were formed to promote civic engagement and volunteer participation in their local communities, especially targeting youth and

seniors. All the volunteer centers were relatively small agencies or were programs nested within larger organizations in the community.

In designing Operation Step Up, Volunteer Florida specified what they expected to accomplish from the program. These outcomes measured how well programs complied with accepted best practices in volunteer management and levels of involvement between volunteer center managers and emergency management officials. In general, our surveys showed that volunteers believed the volunteer organizations implemented sound volunteer management practices, with the exception of recognition or thanks that volunteers received. The interview and survey results highlighted how the program was also successful in other ways, including increasing coordination and cooperation among nonprofits and governmental agencies in response and preparation for a disaster.

RESULTS FROM VOLUNTEER SURVEYS

Research related to volunteer retention and satisfaction suggests that nine components are key to volunteer management: supervision and communication with volunteers, liability coverage, screening and matching volunteers to jobs, documentation of volunteer involvement, written policies and job descriptions, recognition, measurement of volunteer impact, training and professional development of volunteers, and training paid staff to work with volunteers (Hager & Brudney, 2004; Lammers 1991).

A total of 67 volunteers from nine volunteer centers responded to our survey.⁴ The volunteers interviewed generally expressed that “the work we are doing here is

important.” The survey results further illustrated that nearly 90% of volunteers intended to continue volunteering for at least another year (see Table 1), which is slightly better than the national average of 80% volunteer retention (Hager & Brudney, 2004).

Responses	Frequency	Percent
No Answer	1	1.5
Highly Unlikely	6	9.0
Unlikely	1	1.5
Undecided	1	1.5
Likely	19	28.4
Very Likely	39	58.2

Table 1 Likelihood of Continuing to Volunteer

Hager and Brudney (2004) found activities most closely tied to retention were regular recognition of volunteers, volunteer training and professional development, and screening volunteers to match them to appropriate tasks. Unlike many other sporadic volunteering opportunities, Operation Step Up included these as key program elements. The grant set forth a requirement that grantees provide volunteer recognition events for participants. Another key requirement was that volunteers receive training ahead of disasters to prepare for activation for direct response or registering and screening other volunteers.

Previous studies have identified the quality of volunteer opportunities as an important component of creating satisfying experiences for volunteers (Jamison, 2003). In our sample, nearly 80% felt either “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the amount and quality of service opportunities

(see Table 2). Our interviews with volunteers suggested that one reason volunteers saw their experience as worthwhile was that they viewed disaster relief work as particularly important to their communities and families.

Responses	Frequency	Percent
No Opinion	12	17.9
Very Satisfied	26	38.8
Satisfied	26	38.8
Unsatisfied	3	4.5

Table 2 Satisfaction with the Amount and Quality of Service Opportunity

More than half of our respondents reported that they either “often” or “very often” felt their assigned tasks permitted them to develop new skills; another 37% reported that such tasks offered “average” opportunities to develop new skills (see Table 3). Previous research also suggests that volunteers are more satisfied (Jamison, 2003) and more likely to continue volunteering (Hager & Brudney, 2004) if their tasks are challenging and provide opportunity for growth. This suggests that assigned tasks play a significant role in increasing volunteer satisfaction. Our interview data supported the idea that the nature of emergency preparedness and response reinforced satisfaction for these volunteers. Many volunteers had first-hand experiences and leadership roles alongside first responders. Often these new tasks required significant training and required volunteers to perform duties with which they had no prior experience, such as registering volunteers and/or performing support functions for emergency workers.

Responses	Frequency	Percent
No Answer	3	4.5
Not At All	1	1.5
Rarely	3	4.5
About Average	25	37.3
Often	16	23.9
Very Often	19	28.4

Table 3 How Often Tasks Provide Opportunity to Develop New Skills

The commitment of volunteers to their host organizations’ missions is also revealed in survey results. Nearly 93% responded that they were either “somewhat likely”, “likely”, or “very likely” to seek advanced training offered by host organizations (see Table 4).

Responses	Frequency	Percent
No Answer	3	4.5
Very Likely	29	43.3
Likely	28	41.8
Somewhat Likely	5	7.5
Unlikely	1	1.5
Very Unlikely	1	1.5

Table 4 Likelihood of Taking Additional or Advanced Training

Nearly 70% of volunteers indicated that they would be willing to accept greater responsibility with their host agency (see Table 5).

Responses	Frequency	Percent
NA	8	11.9
No	13	19.4
Yes	46	68.7

Table 5 Willingness to Accept a Position of Greater Responsibility

Another important program outcome was to understand how volunteers viewed their participation. Thus volunteers were asked to report on several aspects which spoke to their feelings of efficacy in volunteer situations and adequacy of training for these situations. Volunteers were asked to report on their sense of growth in ability to perform disaster-related volunteer tasks. Their responses confirm their confidence in being able to perform well; as 92.5% responded that they had been either “adequately” or “very adequately” trained for their volunteer roles (see Table 6).

Responses	Frequency	Percent
No Answer	1	1.5
Very Adequately	20	29.9
Adequately	42	62.7
Inadequately	3	4.5
Very Inadequately	1	1.5

Table 6 Adequacy of Training to Prepare for Volunteer Functions

Finally, volunteers were asked to report on how Operation Step Up training affected their personal competence in emergency preparation and response (see Table 7). Nearly 80% reported that their skills and knowledge “increased” or “increased greatly.” Clearly

these volunteers felt confident to deal with emergency situations with new skills they received through the program. Interviews also suggested individuals acquired new skills as volunteers but had taken proactive steps to become more prepared at home as well.

Responses	Frequency	Percent
No Answer	2	3.0
Increased	25	37.3
Increased Greatly	28	41.8
Stayed about the Same	12	17.9

Table 7 Acquisition of New Skills/Knowledge for Emergency Situations

SIX YEARS LATER: SUSTAINED CAPABILITIES AND SYSTEM CHANGES

In early 2012, our interviews with volunteer managers sought to acquire hindsight perspectives from their participation in Operation Step Up and to learn about their organizations’ ongoing capabilities in emergency management. We asked them to tell us about what they perceived to have been their agencies’ successes and challenges from the program, what roles their agencies had retained in local ESF15⁵ activities, and changes they observed in their organizations and in their roles in state or national level systems.

Successes and Challenges

All of the volunteer managers reported that their agencies had either initiated Volunteer Reception Center (VRC) activities or had enhanced what they were already doing. One manager reported that “we have a tighter

process in that we have a full-scale intake procedure, we have done exercises with phone lines and everything, and we have continued to test it by having volunteers come in and do mock interviews with us.” All of the managers reported that they had trained staff within the agency to run the VRC processes.

Several managers reported that as they created and experimented with their VRC capabilities, they became sensitized to the potential contributions of other nonprofits and community groups and to the needs that these groups would have during disasters. Several reported these activities led them to form a Community Organizations Active in Disaster association, or COAD. As one explained:

I think the greatest area of success was learning about the capabilities of other agencies in the community. We learned a lot more about the impact that non-response organizations can have. So we created COAD. They already had VOAD [Volunteer Organizations Active in Disasters] at the state level, but there was a huge gap locally. Churches complained. If we needed a licensed daycare to step up to the plate, we needed first responder kits, so that they can be comfortable doing their job knowing that their families are taken care of. Space? Where can we put a VRC if the library’s roof is blown away? So those connections, we made and created the COAD because there were so many of them. For example, the Florida Baptists had a disaster relief team. And we were able during (Tropical Storm) Fay when trees were falling on people’s houses. We’d pass it along to them, they’d go take a look, get the tree off the roof, and tarp the roof. . . . A little bit of tarp goes a long way, and if you’re in your 80s

and you don’t have any relatives, you need that help.

Our interviewees reported that approximately two-thirds of Florida’s volunteer centers now have active COADs or Volunteer Organizations Active in Disasters (VOAD) associations, many of which are multi-county structures. Several volunteer center directors cited their successes in reaching out to individual households in their communities, especially in getting families prepared for disasters. One observed that initially, as they began meeting with families in neighborhood groups, they were amazed at the numbers of households that were totally unprepared with plans or “go-kits” if they were called on to have to evacuate. Toward the end of the three-year program those meetings hosted much larger numbers of families that were fully prepared and knowledgeable about evacuation.

Two of the volunteer managers described their efforts to get special populations prepared for disasters; such as, the elderly, disabled, poor, and Spanish-speaking households. One, noting that her volunteer center has continued to make community presentations on household preparedness even after Operation Step Up money expired, described recent projects directed toward special populations:

One of the big problems in our county is that not everybody has the resources to put a kit together, so we worked with a community group to put together 75 to 100 emergency kits to be delivered to seniors or folks who had limited resources. We also put together a list for a disaster preparedness kit for people who are sight and hearing impaired, and we did that in English and Spanish. We did large print and also worked with our community college to get it

translated into Spanish on a CD and a cassette that, with all the preparedness information, how to register for a special needs shelter, what sorts of things you'd need to gather. We did it for three counties because we were also working with one of the sight impaired organizations and we would go in and teach their clients. So that was very rewarding, that collaboration with the college and the other organization as well.

Some volunteer center directors also noted the response and recovery activities that their agencies had been able to provide to individual households under actual disaster conditions. One, describing a situation in another county, observed that "during Hurricane Charlie, down in Sarasota, they had people going house to house because the police couldn't get to everybody. There were people who couldn't get medication." This experience was well known within the statewide network, but it was clearly an account that bolstered volunteer centers' self-esteem. "They saved lives," she continued, "just walking the doors as trained volunteers. So when they saw this, old emergency management people started to get it that volunteers could really be an asset."

Most of the volunteer center directors reported successes in promoting business continuity planning, but not without some difficulties. One manager described how their business continuity initiative had fallen short of expectations. She reported that her agency had planned "to get community volunteers to take the training and to become facilitators in the community. . . but the volunteers did not want to put the time in that we thought was necessary." Apparently, the vision that most volunteers had was to "go in and give businesses a little overview." Then they'd

come back a couple of weeks later to see how much progress the business had made. "But most businesses were so busy just trying to keep their businesses afloat, that to have the volunteer come and say, 'give me half an hour, and let me go over that with you together for next time,' just totally missed what the businesses could do on their own.

Several interviewees identified a challenging mismatch between the goals that volunteer centers want to achieve in emergency management and requirements that the funding source had attached to the funding. One described it this way:

The National Corporation, who provided the funding, required the recruitment and training of a certain percentage of seniors. . . . So you train, and recruit, and orient, and the storm may or may not come. But that was the struggle, to demonstrate the value of the program through volunteers with boots on the ground, and that was a function of where the funding came from. If it had been from another source, that didn't have that piece as such a priority, then I think we in the volunteer centers could have focused more on the relationship building and building programs that met local needs better.

Several volunteer managers also found the paperwork requirements to be a significant challenge. One of them captured a sentiment of her counterparts with this observation:

There was a lot of paperwork, especially related to recording how many new volunteers we recruited, how many hours they put in, and so on. We met the hour requirements with the VRC exercises, but that felt a little disingenuous. In an actual disaster, we would have been running a volunteer reception center anyway,

but the paperwork really didn't make us any more efficient and accountable at it. At times, we questioned why we were jumping through those hoops for such a small chunk of money.

Two of the volunteer center directors described significant challenges in getting their county emergency management directors to take them seriously as participants in ESF15 activities. One described her frustrations in interactions with the county emergency management officials. "I know every county is different, but for me, I didn't have a good experience with the county." She described how basic communications often broke down. "I'd send volunteers, for example, to where they'd say the truck is coming with ice, and we sent volunteers fifteen miles, only to find out they'd called county employees and they were doing it." She concluded that she wasn't the only one experiencing these difficulties:

We had multiple meetings with the United Way, my executive director and the committee chairs, and everybody felt the same way. They felt it was lack of complete cooperation. It was just difficult to get answers or cooperation. And I think it was the county didn't want to deal with unaffiliated volunteers, they thought it should be strictly our problem.

These managers were quick to acknowledge the efforts of Volunteer Florida to advocate for them. One observed, "they tried to step in and help, but I was hemmed in by the county." Their experience reminds us that not all professional emergency managers routinely acknowledge the value of volunteers in emergency management, and that professional volunteer managers must continue to educate government leaders and others in the

community about their potential contributions to emergency management.

Formal and Informal Roles in ESF15

All the volunteer center directors we interviewed acknowledged that their agencies had either formal or informal responsibilities within their counties' ESF15 activities, although those roles varied considerably. Several acknowledged that their agencies had had formal responsibilities to lead ESF15 even before Operation Step Up, but that participating in the program had enhanced their capabilities and reputations for performing the role. Another described having her agency undertake the role as a result of their enhanced capabilities from Operation Step Up. One manager observed:

When we originally were identified, because we were not part of government per se, there was a skepticism that we would be able to do what needed to be done. And we would go to briefings and we would do things, and we'd say, "when we're here, we're like employees, we're here to do a mission," and that gradually grew. And I think Operation Step Up helped us even more firmly become entrenched in the emergency preparedness and response in our community.

Two agency managers observed that their organizations at one time had ESF15 lead responsibility but had recently given it up due to insufficient resources. Another described having had ESF15 lead responsibility, but transferred most of the responsibilities to the Red Cross, and then re-established responsibility when the Red Cross underwent a significant leadership change. Those that retained ESF15 leadership all described how Operation Step Up gave them the resources,

time and focus to learn about their potential community partners. Having gained this awareness, several of them recounted their efforts to form COAD or VOAD structures, as we described above.

All the volunteer managers acknowledged that their organizations retained the capability to offer a Volunteer Reception Center and that they and their community partners fully expected them to do so. Many described having Memoranda of Understanding that formally cemented this expectation. Finally, several described other official duties related to disaster recovery. One observed that her agency was part of:

the long term recovery committee for our county, and so we had tropical storm Fay four years ago, and there are still families the county is working with from that flooding, with money from community development block grants. And with that, we make sure the volunteers have adequate instructions about what they should be doing, what they shouldn't be doing, and they trust us to do that.

Organizational and System Change

Our interviewees identified an array of organizational and system changes that occurred at various levels. We have organized the changes into three levels or categories: organizational/operational changes; changes in emergency systems in counties and communities; and changes within federal level systems.

1. Organizational/Operational Changes

As many of our interviewees emphasized, Operation Step Up caused their volunteer agencies to focus energies on emergency management, an emphasis that many had

always acknowledged but not adequately addressed. At a basic level, some organizations were motivated to write their own internal emergency plans and plans for collaboration with external partners. One manager described how her agency wrote a plan jointly with an adjacent county that permitted it, “if our buildings were impacted, and theirs wasn’t, we could go and operate out of their facility”. Another manager reported on how her agency was compelled to cut back its activities after the Operation Step Up funding had expired, but they retained “five ‘go bags’ ready to go for our two counties, and we have paid staff who are trained and can run volunteer reception centers if they’re needed.” All of the managers described the organizational learning that their volunteer centers’ experienced, an idea aptly expressed in the words of one interviewee:

Going though the exercises showed people, including us and the emergency management professionals, the potential for chaos when nobody is prepared to manage unaffiliated volunteers. I and the others in the organization are better prepared personally and professionally to do what’s needed. It also caused us to think about and plan for the practical realities.

Another volunteer manager noted how the attention her agency directed toward emergency management from Operation Step Up caused them to “weave our preparedness into our program of work, so that when the money went away the program didn’t go away, because it was mainstreamed into the projects.”

2. Community and County Systems

One of the conspicuous system changes in many counties was the creation of COAD and

VOAD structures as single- and multiple-county structures. In addition, some counties' volunteer centers instituted noteworthy system changes by creating services focused on special populations such as the elderly, poor, disabled and Spanish-speaking families. In a few instances, as volunteer centers established their reputations through solid performance in simulations and actual disasters, emergency managers were impressed enough to help support the ongoing volunteer missions with emergency management funds after Operation Step Up money expired.

In numerous counties, emergency managers displayed their newfound confidence in the volunteer centers in other ways. In several counties, for example, the volunteer centers have regularly been invited to participate in annual or bi-annual disaster simulations. One volunteer manager explained that:

Emergency managers still contact us, even in peace time. We were just involved in an airport exercise last month. It's a triennial exercise and they engaged us to help with recruiting volunteers. They wanted to have 50 or 100 volunteers to have sufficient volunteers on hand to simulate the exercise they wanted to do, which was an active shooter situation at the airport. So we recruited volunteers and signed in all the volunteers that day. And they know that we will give adequate orientations to the volunteers when they have an event that comes up, and be sure that we're not going to put volunteers in harm's way.

In another county, the emergency plans were modified so that county employees are potentially on call to help fulfill duties within ESF15. The volunteer manager described how "we put their information in the system by

department or division. We send the director the information, they tell us who's available that shift, whose on vacation, and so on." This policy demonstrates a whole new level of internal support from county government for the volunteer system. Having established that level of confidence in her agency's performance, she found it increasingly less difficult to find alternative funding after the Operation Step Up funds expired. "I just applied for more grants," she explained. "If you have experience and you've done a good job with it, people are more willing to give you dollars to support your efforts," she continued.

In another county, the reputation and expertise built up by the volunteer center over the period following Operation Step Up encouraged officials at the local Coast Guard Station to seek them out for guidance in supervising volunteers involved in cleanup activities following the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. Central to all of these collaborative activities is the reservoir of reputation, and goodwill created by the volunteer centers from their Operation Step Up activities.

At least three types of Operation Step Up projects appear to have died out after the initial funds expired. A few volunteer centers had undertaken projects for the Front Porch initiative⁶, a pet project of then Governor Jeb Bush. Little, if anything, remains of the Front Porch initiative, which Bush had promoted in political speeches and appearances. Likewise, the Event Watch initiative, in which volunteers were trained to help police and security at special events, appears to have evaporated, perhaps largely from concerns about legal liability. Finally, an initiative to train ham radio operators and prepare them to assist with disaster communications, has apparently also gone moribund. A few

interviewees suggested that new communication modalities, especially cell phones assisted by portable generators, have diminished dependence on the ham radio operators.

3. State and Federal Systems

Every interviewee emphasized the enhanced capacity of their statewide association of volunteer centers and their growing respect for Volunteer Florida's emergency management staff. Several managers noted that prior to Operation Step Up relationships between Volunteer Florida and some of the volunteer centers "was not so great." But Operation Step Up "allowed the relationships to develop on both sides." The funding was, among other things, a simple vehicle to build new and better relationships. When the money expired, Volunteer Florida then became more dependent on their partners in the counties. When they recently lost a staff position, they looked to the counties to develop people who could come to Tallahassee to assist in the state Operations Center.

The statewide trainings and meetings also built relationships among individual volunteer center directors, while it also reassured everybody about their common stock of competence. One volunteer center director observed that:

Before Operation Step Up the meetings of the state volunteer center association were a waste of time. It seemed like we did not have a common purpose. We didn't really work together, we just got together. And the couple years of Operation Step Up and intense hurricane activity really brought us together, and bonded us so that we care about each other and help take on each others problems. . . . We had to come

together and we did, and got to know each other a lot better.

This statewide emphasis, carried out with the cooperation of the state association, created confidence, on the one hand, for volunteer managers in counties unaffected by a particular disaster to send personnel to help in other counties, feeling confident that these staff and volunteers were not being placed in harm's way. Thus one volunteer manager acknowledged:

When Hurricane Charlie came in 2004 the folks down in Manatee, and Charlotte, and DeSoto counties there was a lot of stress on our colleagues in those counties, and I sent my person working in disasters down to help for two weeks to Charlotte County. I had full confidence that they would be treated professionally and competently.

Meanwhile counties who received loaned staff in this way could be confident about what and who they were getting. So as one volunteer manager described how, when her county had real needs for outside help, "we ended up calling people from other counties with whom they'd gone through training. Not only could we trust their knowledge, we also had relationships already worked out with them." Importantly, this statewide professional competence has been retained in the years after Operation Step Up. One county volunteer director noted that: "We're still doing those trainings on a statewide basis periodically. And the trainings have been tweaked through use and through exercises, as we continue to develop professionally."

One volunteer center director was convinced that Operation Step Up was the impetus for similar volunteer disaster management activities elsewhere in the United States. As

her organization was a member of the national Hands On Network⁷, she had had occasion to observe development in her network's sister organizations elsewhere in the country. She opined that:

I truly believe the national network was strongly influenced by the work Florida did in 2004 and then 2005 in response to Katrina and to Ivan in 2005 in Florida. Florida was a leader in disaster preparedness and emergency response, and it all goes back to those little initial grants from the Step Up program. It really does go back to that, and to the leadership that Volunteer Florida put around the importance of disaster preparedness and their strong willingness to work with those of us who are boots on the ground.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Our evidence points to several findings that inform volunteer administration for emergency management. In the past, emergency managers often regarded volunteers as "a crowd control problem" rather than an aid to their efforts. The Operation Step Up experience shows that attitudes can be changed through appropriate volunteer management practices and pre-planning for training, using, and screening volunteers. Operation Step Up created an emphasis on volunteering and volunteer management which had previously been absent in disaster situations.

Those volunteer centers across the state of Florida that participated in Operation Step Up established relationships with local emergency management agencies and found ways to gain their trust. Often the greatest barriers were professionals' attitudes toward volunteers, but as volunteer involvement in emergency

preparedness persisted or actual responses to hurricanes occurred, significant relationships began to form. As news of program successes spread, the third year of Operation Step Up saw new centers participating, and barriers to creating relationships decreased.

Operation Step Up also had indirect benefits for emergency management and communities. Programs like Operation Step Up that engage individuals in preparing their communities for disasters offer the substantial byproduct of engaging volunteers in preparing themselves. Despite the study's limited scope, findings suggest that such efforts provide additional community capacity to recover from disaster by simply creating larger numbers of prepared individuals. Volunteers' responses indicated that they felt better prepared to deal with the emergency situations after being involved in Operation Step Up.

The real test of Operation Step Up came in Florida's multi-hurricane experiences in 2004. Volunteer centers that had prepared under Operation Step Up at that point for only a little over a year gained strong praise from their counties' professional emergency managers. Moreover, in 2005, several of Florida's volunteer centers that had prepared through Operation Step Up sent teams to lead the creation of volunteer reception centers in the wake of Katrina. Operation Step Up demonstrated that volunteers have a useful place in emergency preparedness and response, and similar programs could provide necessary structure for positive volunteer experiences in other settings. Emergency volunteers who receive meaningful and challenging tasks find them rewarding. Preplanning for emergency volunteers can free up professionals from tasks that do not require extensive training.

Another positive side effect is that getting citizens involved, especially in less advantaged areas, makes them more aware of the resources available to them after a disaster. An Associated Press study (Bass, 2006) found that although poor and minority neighborhoods suffered the brunt of Hurricane Katrina's damage, residents in wealthy neighborhoods were three times as likely to seek state help in resolving insurance disputes. Taken in conjunction with our findings, this suggests that engaging volunteers from disadvantaged communities may empower them in ways that help level the distribution of post-disaster benefits.

The historical perspective offered by our recent interviews suggests that sometimes planned change can be implemented by a few individuals when the right small systems are opportunely aligned. For, as Margaret Mead famously said, "never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." Those who participated in Operation Step Up might modestly propose that they succeeded in creating a small but important change in the use of volunteers in emergency management.

We suggest that six key elements created the opportunity for Operation Step Up to succeed. First, the state of Florida was already known to be a leader in the field of emergency management. The state had learned the hard way from Hurricane Andrew, several wildfire events, and countless other natural disasters. Second, Volunteer Florida was well positioned to lead such an initiative because of its role as lead agency in the statewide ESF15. Third, the project contained a small but critical mass of knowledgeable and enthusiastic people at Volunteer Florida and several of the county volunteer centers. Fourth, serious

storms in 2004 and 2005 created instant learning reinforcement for the training and systems that Operation Step Up created. Fifth, timing was critical, in that Operation Step Up permitted success to flow to Florida's volunteer participants in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, and to the national Hands On Network. Finally, the initiative had the power of Florida's government leaders behind it. Governor Bush, a strong supporter of volunteerism, endorsed these activities, as did the state's Emergency Management Director, Craig Fugate, who currently serves as FEMA Director.

As we noted in the previous section, three of the Operation Step Up initiatives fell by the wayside after funding expired: the Front Porch project, Event Watch, and the ham radio project. Two of these presumably expired because of technological and legal barriers. We suspect that the third initiative, Front Porch, succeeded temporarily on the basis of symbolic accountability (Brower & Word, 2009) to Governor Bush, but it could not be sustained as an instrumentally effective activity after the Operation Step Up funds expired.

The confidence that emergency managers developed in Operation Step Up volunteer centers demonstrates the importance of funding continuity and stability for such programs. As it becomes apparent at all levels that "government alone cannot deliver all disaster relief," it is reassuring that voluntary activities contribute in ways that are often "more efficient and effective than the Federal government's response" (The White House 2006, p. 63). It also becomes more urgent that we take volunteer management and the role of

nonprofits seriously as an integral part of emergency preparedness and response systems for communities.



NOTES:

¹ We are indebted to Kaiju Chang for access to interview data from her (2012) study of cross-sector collaboration in emergency management.

² Volunteer Florida is officially called The Governor's Commission on Volunteerism and Community Service. It was established in 1994 by the Florida Legislature to administer grants under the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993. Volunteer Florida administers the state's AmeriCorps and National Service programs; encourages volunteerism throughout the state, especially with youth, seniors, and people with disabilities; promotes volunteerism in disaster preparedness and response; and helps strengthen and expand Volunteer Centers in Florida. It is part of the Office of the Governor, and Commissioners are appointed to it by the Governor.

³ Interestingly, all nine volunteer managers were women, whereas 13 of 15 emergency management interviewees were men. Statewide 55 of 67 county emergency managers are men, and all but one or two of the volunteer center directors are women. This gendered distribution invites future exploration, but is not within the scope of our study.

⁴ The volunteer centers were not required to track participation of volunteers from year to year. This made it impossible to estimate how many volunteers had participated in each program over the length of the grant. The survey results for this reason are only used to illustrate general feelings about the program.

⁵ Emergency management in Florida and other states designate 17 distinct Emergency Support Functions (ESF). Emergency management plans for the state and local governments designate specific organizations to take the lead in coordinating the activities of each function. ESF15 coordinates the activities of volunteers and donations.

⁶ The Front Porch Preparedness (FPP) initiative focused on the revitalizing distressed communities by providing educational and technical assistance to help residents plan and implement projects that will make long-term changes (Florida Department of Community Affairs, 2006). The program involved 20 communities across the state. Through Operation Step Up, Volunteer Centers and local emergency management developed partnerships with these Front Porch Communities to "identify and recruit volunteers to become leaders in community disaster preparedness and mitigation (Volunteer Florida 2003, p. 7)."

⁷ The Hands On Network is a network of the 250 volunteer centers that aid individuals in finding and engaging in local volunteer opportunities. It is a Points of Light program.

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