

Concept of Disaster Volunteers Is Evolving (Opinion)

BY: [Eric Holdeman](#) | June 15, 2012

When I started working on the civilian side of emergency management, I had a limited vision of what volunteers could do to support emergency management functions before, during and after a disaster. Now I'm a fervent advocate for volunteers to the point that I'm not sure there's anything they can't do.

I came to this realization during an earthquake [training exercise](#) at the Washington state EOC, which was staffed with amateur radio operators. I don't want to seem discriminatory, but I'm guessing these folks were in their 70s or 80s. Because of the workload during the exercise, I was afraid I'd be responsible for killing one of them. But we survived, and it provoked thoughts of how volunteers would be needed to support a lengthy, 24/7 communications operation when the "Big One" hits.

My concept of disaster volunteers expanded greatly when I arrived at the King County, Wash., Office of Emergency Management, where there already was a nucleus of volunteers called the EOC Support Team. The original crew had about 10 members and that expanded to more than 40 when I left King County 11 years later. The volunteers came with a high degree of experience and technical expertise in radio systems, automation and management. They helped wherever their skill sets matched up, such as answering phones, helping to develop [situational awareness](#) and leading coordination or logistics efforts.

By the time I left King County, EOC Support Team members could lead various sections of the EOC response and fulfilled key roles within the operations center. This was made possible because of an active training calendar and members' availability for EOC activations, which gave them the necessary experience to function well in a technologically sophisticated EOC.

Using virtual volunteers is the next step in the evolution of incorporating [volunteer technical expertise](#) and experience. [CrisisCommons](#) and other such virtual organizations have responded to numerous disasters and contributed vastly to emergency management efforts to develop situational awareness and a common operating picture, proving that physical presence is not necessary.

Then there are the spontaneous volunteers who show up at disaster sites to help, and whose efforts are now being fostered and organized by social media. Rather than a hodgepodge of people and organizations, there now exists the ability to have a coordinated volunteer effort that maximizes the resources of volunteer disaster organizations — like the Red Cross, Salvation Army and Mennonites — and combines them with individuals who are self-connected and loosely affiliated via social media channels.

This ability to mobilize volunteers has placed emergency managers in the key role of orchestrating not only the governmental response, but that of volunteers too. This requires 21st-century emergency managers to consider themselves as those who provide direction, rather than trying to control every aspect of what's going on in a response and recovery effort. The scale of mega-disasters is now too large for a command and control mentality. To achieve the maximum amount of effort, emergency managers must give up control to become more effective.

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