

Disaster volunteers, please curb your enthusiasm!

Monday Mar 5, 2012 3:52 PM http://usnews.nbcnews.com/_news/2012/03/05/10585734-disaster-volunteers-please-curb-your-enthusiasm



John Sommers II / Reuters
By Kari Huus, msnbc.com

Volunteers from the Henryville United Methodist Church collect and distribute food and supplies to tornado victims on Monday, days after tornados ripped through the small community of Henryville, Indiana.

In the wake of every U.S. disaster there is an influx of people who want to help, and the situation in the Midwest and Southeast after last week's deadly tornadoes is no exception. But to many of the early arrivals who parachute in to help, disaster relief experts have a message: yes please, but not so fast.

For the first few days after Friday's twisters devastated large swathes of the Midwest and southeastern U.S., the Indiana Department of Homeland Security was strongly discouraging ad hoc volunteers as well as gawkers who flocked to the scene.

"We had people driving through looking... immediately after it happened and it was a significant problem," said Denise Derrer, public information officer for the Indiana Department of Homeland Security. The dangers of downed power lines, debris and gas leaks meant that they needed to rely on trained emergency workers, and not worry about other people dropping in to help.

"If you have never run a chainsaw before, maybe now is not the time to learn," she said. "We are trying to get the word out."

"What people tend to do is they will go to where the actual tornado touchdown has been," said Joe Tolan, president of the United Way in Louisville, Kentucky which also covers the southern part of Indiana. "That is rarely the best thing to do in the first few days. It adds to the confusion and clutter."

That's where the volunteer receiving centers like one that opened Monday morning in Jeffersonville, Indiana come in. The center, set up by the United Way and its partners is located in a vacant car dealership, hastily cleaned and adapted into a makeshift workspace over the weekend as a place to organize, train and deploy volunteer teams to do jobs after the disaster command center has determined what's needed.

Jeffersonville is about 15 miles down the freeway from devastated towns of Henryville and New Liberty, far enough to be out of the way of emergency teams still trying to restore services.

When the center's doors opened on Monday morning, more than 100 people were there, waiting to roll up their sleeves.

"We figured there was going to be a little organized bedlam this morning and we were right," said Tolan.

Survivors try to reclaim a sense of normalcy after the severe weather that killed more than a dozen people in Indiana alone. NBC's Lester Holt reports.

Eager as they are, volunteers have to jump through some hoops. Each volunteer needs to register and list their skills, sign a waiver, get basic safety training, and possibly a tetanus shot. For those entering the worst hit residential areas, there are typically checkpoints, where volunteers are required to show wristbands identifying them as registered. Tolan said that several hundred volunteers were registered by the end of the day.

In part, the protocol helps safeguard against looting in damaged areas. DHS spokeswoman Derrer said they did not have any reports of looting so far.

"Odds are that the overwhelming majority of people are totally positively motivated," said Tolan of volunteers. "There are certain protocols you simply have to follow to protect people's property and ensure safety of the volunteers."

Teams of volunteers are deployed to sites and tasks at the command center's request.

It's clear that not all volunteers follow this route.

In the tiny town of Moscow, Ohio where dozens of homes were destroyed by twisters, a nearby pastor deployed his 100-strong congregation to clean up storm debris, and deliver supplies instead of holding its regular Sunday service, according to a report by Newsnet5, an ABC affiliate in Cleveland.

"A lot of hurting people out here... Instead of having service today, we decided to bring chainsaws, shovels, rakes, whatever it took, to help our brothers and sisters that are hurting," said Pastor Ralph Ollendick.

Tolan notes that some religious groups have developed sophisticated national disaster response systems, and tend to coordinate with government disaster relief.

In addition, there are always people offering help that may be off target.

"There are always multiple things going on," said Tolan. "There are churches that are doing things, like clothing drives, whether or not there will be a need for the clothing, to be candid."

One of the immediate needs from last week's tornadoes, aside from clearing debris, will be to remove dead animals — including wildlife, livestock and pets killed in the storms.

But Tolan said that the biggest challenge is maintaining the initial enthusiasm and meeting long term rebuilding and emotional needs in communities that have lost people and property and suffered trauma.

"It's really important to get out the need for volunteers over time," said Tolan. "The news coverage ebbs long before the need for volunteers goes away."