How People -- and Others -- Help in Time of Disaster
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By Nan Hawthorne

Listening to streaming video from WWL Channel 4 in New Orleans on the station web site presented me personally with a sense of the overwhelming catastrophe Hurricane Katrina has visited on that city and throughout Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida. In a time when "homeland security" is the watchword, the vulnerability of cities seems as great or greater. The rescue and relief efforts simply cannot meet the desperate need.

Knowing that volunteers, informal and formal, can be the difference between utter hopelessness and survival, I thought about writing a piece on disaster relief volunteers and set out on a quest for information via the web. What I found and was impressed by was the breadth of approaches to disaster relief and the diversity of skills and tools that are routinely leant to resolve critical needs. I decided to share with you some of what I found, perhaps to celebrate the very treasure that is the only thing that can match the immense need of disasters.

We are all familiar with the organizations that get the press coverage. It is only proper that organizations like the Red Cross, the United Nations and other massive groups get that recognition. Response to a disaster requires huge
organizations that can mobilize the numbers of people and supplies.

Recent natural disasters as well as terrorist attacks like 9-11 have brought awareness of rescue organizations and their highly skilled volunteers. I live near Seattle, and dozens of this city's law enforcement and emergency personnel were quick to respond to many of these calamities. The fact is that these professionals responded from everywhere. Experts in search and rescue wasted no time in heading for affected areas. One group stumbled across in my web search was the National Search and Rescue Dog Association with animals that are specially trained to sniff out trapped people, a group that pairs volunteers who train and deploy them with that willing creature, the dogs to save lives and also to recover bodies.

The favor is returned by those animal welfare volunteers who do their best to help out the most helpless victims of disaster, pets and livestock. My husband and I sent money to relief efforts in New York City after 9-11 -- one of those groups was a Manhattan group that rescued pets after peoples homes had to be evacuated near the World Trade Center.

The poignancy of one story I heard just today on WWL brought to mind how much need there is for dedicated medical volunteers. A nursing home with 300 residents found itself with no nurses. All had left before or after the hurricane, leaving only two aides to care for the residents. As a result, four of them had died and the WWL reporter was passing on a plea for medical personnel to head to that facility. What this story said to me is that sometimes volunteers are the only hope, since professionals may not always have the commitment to stay when their own lives, families and homes are threatened. Any faithful ER fan knows something about volunteer doctors and nurses. My own nephew, Dr. Shannon Hamersley, volunteers for more than one medical volunteer organization. Every aspect of a disaster has a threat to human health. In Katrina's case there is trauma from collapsing buildings, exposure, and the ongoing threat from toxic pollution. The volunteers in organizations for medical volunteers may have the broadest responsibility of all.

Watching video on WWL's web site also illustrates the importance of those who can respond to the emotional impact of a disaster. One video showed a young girl with her family, all of whom had left the Superdome as it became overwhelming to them. The child simply could not stop crying. People who can address the emotional trauma of people, those from all walks of life, as well as those grieving the immense loss, will be vital to the
future mental health of those people. This is another area where we are joined as a species by those creatures that have adopted us. One group dedicated to this is described in an article called Volunteers, the Spirit of America about Therapy Dogs who help people in all sorts of trauma and need.

The area of greatest long-term impact is probably economic. Not only are people's homes gone now so are their jobs. Immediate needs cost money, but have you thought about the fact that jobless people in the area of Katrina's devastation still have loan payments? They still have health insurance premiums? As these payments simply cannot be made the impact on the economy in general will be felt. As much help with applying for government assistance as the affected people can receive for the next many months may help not only them, but the entire country -- and perhaps the world -- stave off as much impact as possible.

Perhaps the last insight into disaster relief volunteerism I gained was ultimately the most important. Since the United States can arguably be said to hog the news it may seem, at least to Americans, that we are the ones who run to save the world. We do -- that is part of who we are. But a simple glance across a few pages of search results will quickly make the searcher realize that volunteers are everywhere. The first item I found when searching the terms impact volunteers disaster relief was a corps of U.N. volunteers from India.

This article was not directly on the topic of volunteer resources management. It was however on the innovation and creativity volunteer organizations must and do have when facing and attempting to deal with disasters, small and large.

I personally want to recognize those volunteer efforts that are outside the formal realm of our profession, those who simply do good without a structure to support them. From today I can share one story like this, one family's story about a neighbor going up and down streets in their flooded neighborhood in a row boat bringing gallons of water to people stranded on roofs. People can be terrible, as the stories of looters stealing evacuees' cars at knifepoint illustrate. But they can also be oh so amazingly wonderful.
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Hawthorne is a professional journalist and content developer living in the Seattle area and has been a practitioner, trainer, consultant, and writer in the profession of volunteer resource management for many years. She came to international attention as founder and coordinator of the CyberVPM online forum, a pioneering effort in using the Internet for professional networking in the field of volunteer resource management. She is the founder of International Volunteer Manager Appreciation Day, held every November 1.

Hawthorne is the author of three training kits, "Recognizing Volunteers Right from the Start," "Building Better Relationships with Volunteers," and "Managing Volunteers in Record Time." She has written over 150 articles on volunteer management. In addition, she has written articles for
eSight Careers Network, specifically regarding competitive careers for those who are, like herself, blind or partially sighted.

Hawthorne has received recognition for her work through a Dufort Award for Excellence in Volunteer Management, as Nonprofit Nuts and Bolts "Favorite Internet Resource [provider] on Volunteer Management," the Victim-Assistance Online Award for Excellence, LA Times Pick of the Day, as well as having a biography included in "Who's Who in America."

Hawthorne is best known for her "what works?" approach to developing and managing volunteer programs.

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Related CharityChannel Articles (all contributors)

- **Spontaneous Volunteer Management in a Disaster** (Wednesday, February 01, 2006)
  During a crisis situation, individuals naturally want to help each other by volunteering to
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- **Demystifying Relationships with Government** (Wednesday, April 12, 2006)
  Recently, the following question was posed on CyberVPM, "How do you interface with government officials responsible for disaster response if you are volunteer professional?" The following answer is deceptively simple: "How do you interface with other nonprofit or business professionals?"

- **Are You Ready to Go?** (Wednesday, June 28, 2006)
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