COVID-19 Best Practice Information: Managing and Deploying Volunteers in a Pandemic Environment

Background

- Volunteers play a critical role in disaster response and recovery. Throughout the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) public health emergency, volunteers have risen to the challenge by helping those in need.

- The following is a list of key considerations and lessons learned from ongoing COVID-19 response operations across the country. These are best practices for consideration and do not constitute nor should they be considered as guidance in any way. This document supplements FEMA's previous publications on engaging spontaneous volunteers and donations management.

- The following is a list of key findings and considerations for jurisdictions and communities regarding ongoing COVID-19 operations across the country. These are best practices for consideration and do not constitute or should be considered as guidance in any way.

Key Considerations

- Proper organization and management of volunteers is key to ensure their safety, promote productivity, and maximize efforts.

- Volunteer assignments should be given to volunteers with the appropriate backgrounds. Individuals with the right experience that have already been subjected to background screenings (e.g., teachers, certain non-profit organization staff) may be trusted with more sensitive assignments including working with people with disabilities, children, people experiencing homelessness, people with acute medical needs, and others with access and functional needs.

- Non-affiliated volunteers with limited experience can be assigned non-sensitive tasks, alleviating demands on emergency managers.

Lessons Learned Related to COVID-19 Operations Volunteer Management

Managing Volunteers

- **Potential Best Practice:** The International City/County Managers Association (ICMA) provides practical recommendations for local governments to prepare for a surge of community interest in volunteering.[1] Volunteers may directly support COVID-19 response, other disaster needs, or help the government increase capacity for responding to future emergencies. Other examples of volunteer management including the following:

  - The Montgomery County, Maryland Volunteer Center[2] provides a comprehensive list of opportunities for affiliated and unaffiliated volunteers to support COVID-19 response.

  - A Louisville, Kentucky volunteer created an online program to match volunteers with city's at-risk residents.[3]

- **Potential Best Practice:** *Galaxy Digital* recommends organizations conduct an assessment to determine whether they are equipped to respond to the pandemic and whether it fits within their organization's mission and capabilities prior to engaging their volunteer base.[4]

- **Potential Best Practice:** *Energize,* an international training, consulting, and publishing firm, developed a training directory that includes live events and free classes for volunteer administrators and managers. They also created an international forum to share information that helps leaders manage volunteers during this crisis.[5]

- **Potential Best Practice:** Keeping volunteers safe while responding during the COVID-19 outbreak is a pressing concern for volunteer managers and important to preserve a workforce that provides community services. Organizations should follow the latest CDC guidance to include providing facemasks, hand sanitizer/hand washing stations, and gloves for volunteers, as well as following local social distancing guidance. Organizations should also consider whether their own volunteers are part of high-risk population before committing to support the response.[6]

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[1] 2020 ICMA, Planning for COVID-19 Community Volunteers, https://icma.org/blog-posts/planning-covid-19-community-volunteers

[2] This document contains references and links to non-federal resources and organizations. This information is meant solely for informational purposes and is not intended to be an endorsement of any non-federal entity by FEMA, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, or the U.S. government.

[3] 2020 WDRB, Louisville woman creates to match volunteers with city's at-risk residents, https://www.wdrb.com/news/louisville-woman-creates-online-program-to-match-volunteers-with-citys-at-risk-residents-during-covid/article_6655e8c2-6655-11ea-a8df-2b74986320d5.html

[4] n.d. Galaxy Digital, Responding to COVID-19: Actionable Steps for Volunteer Managers, https://www.galaxydigital.com/blog/volunteer-management-response-covid19/

[5] 2020 Energize, Supporting Volunteer Efforts During Coronavirus, https://www.energizeinc.com/hot-topics/2020/march_0

[6] n.d. Galaxy Digital, Responding to COVID-19: Actionable Steps for Volunteer Managers, https://www.galaxydigital.com/blog/volunteer-management-response-covid19/

Identifying Community Needs

- **Potential Best Practice:** The city of Vacaville, California set up a hotline to allow those in need to be directly connected with a volunteer who is able to provide a specific service (grocery delivery, therapy, pharmacy assistance, etc.).[7]

- **Potential Best Practice:** VolunteerMatch hosts an online database, searchable by location, of over 67,000 volunteer opportunities across the country. Opportunities include virtual and onsite activities to aid communities impacted by COVID-19.[8]

- **Potential Best Practice:** Targeted toward residents who are at heightened risk of complications from COVID-19, Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) volunteers in Delmar, CA are going door-to-door asking vulnerable neighbors stuck at home during COVID-19 if they were feeling well or needed anything.[9] Volunteers also provided printed materials summarizing the assistance that is available to the public.

  - It is essential that these volunteers maintain proper social distancing and are protected using the appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE).

  - Independent registries of people with disabilities, older adults, and others with access and functional needs are often incomplete. These lists should never substitute for the development and integration of accessibility into all programs and services that volunteers and emergency managers provide.

- **Potential Best Practice:** The British government's call for help led 750,000 people to volunteer to assist the country's National Health Service in supporting 1.5 million people with pre-existing health conditions who are vulnerable to complications from the virus. Tasks include delivering medicine, transporting patients to medical appointments, taking people home from the hospital, and calling isolated patients to help prevent loneliness.[10] In New York, 82,000 people have volunteered for the state's medical workers reserve force. Similar recruiting efforts are underway in several other states.[11]

- **Potential Best Practice:** Virginia is recruiting 30,000 volunteers for the Virginia Department of Health's Medical Reserve Corps. Volunteers include those with medical or public health experience, as well as those who can assist with logistics, communication, coordination, and technological support. The Corps is being used to work in alternate care facilities, support call centers, conduct contact tracing, and to reorganize storage rooms for protective medical equipment.[12]

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[7] 2020 The Reporter, Coronavirus: City launches hotline to assist seniors during coronavirus outbreak, https://www.thereporter.com/2020/03/23/city-launches-hotline-to-assist-seniors-during-coronavirus-outbreak/

[8] n.d. VolunteerMatch, Help with COVID-19 by Volunteering Remotely or On-Site, https://www.volunteermatch.org/covid19

[9] 2020 CERT volunteers are neighbors helping neighbors, http://www.delmar.ca.us/CivicAlerts.aspx?AID=652

[10] 2020 CBS News, 750,000 volunteers answer call to help U.K. health service manage coronavirus crisis, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/750000-volunteers-answer-call-to-help-u-k-health-service-manage-coronavirus-crisis/

[11] 2020 ABC News, Call for virus volunteers yields army of health care workers, https://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/call-virus-volunteers-yields-army-health-care-workers-69920370

[12] 2020 Emergency Management, Virginia wants 30,000 volunteers for the Coronavirus Fight, https://www.govtech.com/em/safety/Virginia-Wants-30000-Volunteers-for-the-Coronavirus-Fight.html

Creative Ways Volunteers Are Serving the Community

- **Potential Best Practice:** Information technology (IT) volunteers in New York State are being recruited for 90-day virtual deployments to develop creative technology-based solutions for managing operations, analytics, and communications during COVID-19 response.[13] NY recommends recruiting teams or cohorts of individuals from a single institution to lead specific projects.

- **Potential Best Practice:** The University of Washington recruited laboratory technicians, graduate students, and postdoctoral students as volunteers to assist in processing COVID-19 tests. Their efforts led to the testing of approximately 2,000 specimens per day.[14]

- **Potential Best Practice:** Veteran organizations such as the Wounded Warrior Project and the American Legion are engaging members and checking on them through virtual games, party-line conference calls for those not comfortable with social media, and virtual fitness lessons to help veterans stay connected and avoid feelings of isolation.[15]

- **Potential Best Practice:** Citizens in possession of three-dimensional printers and specialized sewing machines are producing masks, gowns, and other items to protect healthcare workers. [16]

  - In settings where facemasks are not available, a healthcare provider (HCP) might use homemade masks (e.g., bandana, scarf) for care of patients with COVID-19 as a last resort. However, homemade masks are not considered PPE, since their capability to protect HCPs is unknown. Caution should be exercised when considering this option. Homemade masks should ideally be used in combination with a face shield that covers the entire front (that extends to the chin or below) and sides of the face. [17]

Topics for the "Best Practices" series are generated from crowd sourced suggestions. Have an idea? Let us research it! Organizations and individuals can e-mail best practices or lessons learned to fema-cipsupport@fema.dhs.gov.

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[13] 2020 Healthcare IT News, New York seeks volunteers for COVID-19 tech SWAT team,
https://www.healthcareitnews.com/news/new-york-seeks-volunteers-covid-19-tech-swat-team

[14] 2020 The Chronicle of Higher Education, University Labs Head to the Front Lines of Coronavirus Containment,
https://www.chronicle.com/article/University-Labs-Head-to-the/248263

[15] 2020 The American Legion, Veteran organizations go virtual in response to pandemic,
https://www.legion.org/membership/248680/veteran-organizations-go-virtual-response-pandemic

[16] 2020 Forbes, Calling all people who sew and make: you can help make masks for 2020 healthcare worker PPE shortage,
https://www.forbes.com/sites/tjmccue/2020/03/20/calling-all-people-who-sew-and-make-you-can-help-solve-2020-n95-type-mask-shortage/#4bd63e7e4e41

[17] 2020 CDC, Strategies for optimizing the supply of facemasks,
https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/ppe-strategy/face-masks.html#crisis-capacity