

Office of Inspector General
DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY

**Federal Emergency Management
Agency's Volunteer Service Program
Following Hurricane Katrina**



OIG-07-51

June 2007



**Homeland
Security**

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MEMORANDUM FOR: R. David Paulison
Administrator
Federal Emergency Management Agency

FROM: *Richard L. Skinner*
Richard L. Skinner
Inspector General

SUBJECT: *FEMA's Volunteer Service Program Following Hurricane Katrina*
Report Number OIG -07-51

The purpose of this memorandum is to report the results of our review regarding FEMA's mission assignments to federal departments and agencies to provide volunteers in response to the 2005 Gulf Coast hurricanes. Our objective was to determine whether the volunteer service program was managed efficiently and effectively. We and other Inspectors General from the participating agencies conducted interviews of agency points of contact (POCs) and volunteers.

FEMA issued mission assignments to more than 20 federal agencies that called for the assistance of federal employees who were able to serve a minimum two-week field assignment in a variety of disaster relief positions. FEMA's mission assignment obligations per agency ranged from \$2,000 to over \$2 million for overtime, travel, and per diem for employees who volunteered. Participating agencies retained responsibility for their employees' regular salaries. These services supplemented the large numbers of employees assigned to hurricane relief efforts in line with their regular positions. A FEMA report identified a total of 1,038 volunteers deployed, including 321 from 14 agencies external to DHS. FEMA and DHS officials, however, believe many more were actually deployed than reported, and we identified volunteers from a number of agencies unaccounted for in FEMA's records.

RESULTS OF REVIEW

The volunteer service program was initiated in a short time frame and with limited prior experience or planning, but was generally implemented efficiently and effectively, and provided needed resources to assist with relief efforts. Volunteers overwhelmingly cited their service as particularly rewarding. However, POCs and volunteers identified several areas that need to be addressed prior to the next hurricane season to improve the efficacy of the volunteer service program.

Planning, Organization, and Communication

Limited guidance for participating agencies and prospective volunteers was available prior to Hurricane Katrina. FEMA subsequently prepared brief instructions that provided agencies with general information about the program, including the coordination of volunteers between FEMA and agencies, anticipated services and volunteer needs, and answers to frequently asked questions, such as employee duty status, agency responsibility for travel orders, personal supplies to travel with, and general deployment information. However, review and feedback from POCs and volunteers identified a number of issues that caused misunderstandings, confusion, or concerns, such as:

- What expenses are eligible for reimbursement?
- Can notifications to volunteers to depart for training locations be made in more time than 24 hours?
- What are the expected assignments or types of work available?
- Do employees make their own travel and lodging arrangements, and who provides the details?
- How will overtime pay be reported and paid?

Additionally, FEMA contacted agency volunteers directly, without notifying or involving agency POCs. Bypassing agency POCs, who were specifically designated by the agency at FEMA's request to coordinate the volunteer service program with FEMA, limited the agency's knowledge and record-keeping of the volunteers' acceptances, departure or return dates, service locations, and accounting for services performed. In some cases, supervisors were not even aware of their employee's deployment.

Field Utilization

The volunteers we spoke with generally told us that their services were rewarding and productive; and that they would volunteer for future assignments. A number of issues were mentioned in our interviews that, although they did not change volunteers' feelings about their service, added complications and should be addressed for future deployments:

- Delays between the completion of training provided to volunteers in Florida and deployment for the actual field assignments were awkward and unproductive.
- Disaster recovery centers to which they were assigned were often not ready, nor notified in advance to be prepared, to accept and use volunteers productively.
- Due to the large number of displaced individuals and response personnel in the area, volunteers had significant difficulties in obtaining lodging in proximity to their assigned locations.

Matching Skills with Needs and Training

Volunteers cited the need to better match their skills or specialties with future field assignments. In some agencies, the POCs identified the skills of the volunteers prior to their deployment and the volunteers were used in line with these skills. However, generally there was no pre-identification or coordination of skills and abilities with assignments, which resulted in some volunteers not being

employed as productively or effectively as possible. For example, a number of volunteers with computer and language skills were deployed to do manual labor, and some with outdoor or specialized labor skills were used in offices. Similarly, it appeared that standard training was provided to all volunteers, although many of the volunteers had previously received similar training on some of the subjects at their agencies, such as diversity, equal opportunity laws and regulations, and ethics. Conversely, some volunteers noted a need for specialized and improved training in the task area to which they had been assigned, such as case management, Disaster Recovery Center operations, and disaster programs. Though the time constraints and difficulties in identifying specific assignments and locations prior to completion of training can hamper matching skills with needs or identifying necessary training, pre-identification of potential volunteers, including their skills and prior training, would improve program effectiveness. In addition, the additional time and effort required to identify specific assignments and duty locations in advance of sending volunteers for training could benefit relief efforts by ensuring that qualified individuals are providing the most productive and needed services possible.

Post-Deployment

Volunteers were often unprepared for the psychological demands that they encountered working in a disaster environment. Though the instructions FEMA provided to the agencies referred to the availability of pre- and post-deployment psychological support for volunteers, some were not aware of the support offered and said the need for counseling at the end of their service was important, indicating that such support was either not made available or its availability was not well communicated. Because non-disaster workers rarely come into contact with the extent of damage, devastation, and emotional upheaval that disasters involve, they are not cognizant of the impact it has on them personally. Some level of counseling needs to be consistently provided both prior to and upon return from deployment to ensure that volunteers can identify signs and symptoms of psychological distress and know how and where to seek additional help when needed.

DISCUSSION WITH MANAGEMENT AND FOLLOW-UP

We provided a draft of this report to the Directors of the Human Resources and Response Divisions at FEMA. The Director of Human Resources concurred with our findings and recommendations and staff informed us that FEMA is currently working to identify potential volunteers at Federal agencies for use at call centers in the Washington, DC metro area. The intent is to supplement available staff and deploy experienced FEMA staff from these centers to active disaster locations by replacing them with volunteers. We were told that these efforts have had limited success because most prospective volunteers, including those who served in response to the Gulf Coast hurricanes, prefer to serve in the impact area rather than at call centers. The Director of Response did not provide comments to our draft report.

In April 2006, the DHS Chief Human Capital Officer forwarded to FEMA's Human Resources Division a draft summary of lessons learned from the Hurricane Katrina volunteer service program that identified a need for a standard informational package or toolkit for disaster volunteers and the agency POCs. The summary noted that advance preparation, especially in the area of communications, would improve the process of obtaining and deploying a volunteer workforce. It was also suggested that the toolkit include more detailed information for POCs and employees than

was previously provided, and address the issues we noted above. To date, this toolkit has not been compiled.

We recommend that the Administrator, Federal Emergency Management Agency:

1. Ensure that policy and procedural information distributed to other federal agencies regarding the volunteer service program specifically addresses expense eligibility, travel and lodging arrangements, notification and deployment time frames, pre-identification of training and skills, training requirements, and post-deployment support options;
2. Identify a programmatic focal point within FEMA to establish procedures for collecting information, communicating with agency POCs, disseminating instructions, coordinating program activity, matching volunteer skills with needs, and ensuring accurate and complete record-keeping for deployments;
3. Compile a listing of DHS and other federal agency employees willing to provide volunteer services in impact areas and at call centers in advance of each hurricane season, identifying existing skills, knowledge, abilities, and relevant training; and
4. Develop a volunteer survey for use in conjunction with an after-action assessment of the volunteer service program to identify issues, and revise the relevant policies and procedures where appropriate.

The nature and brevity of this assessment precluded the use of our normal audit protocols; therefore, this review was not conducted according to generally accepted government auditing standards. Had we followed such standards, other matters might have come to our attention.

Please advise us within 30 days of the actions taken or planned to implement these recommendations, including target completion dates for any planned actions. Should you have any questions concerning this report, please call me, or your staff may contact Matt Jadacki, Deputy Inspector General for Disaster Assistance Oversight, at (202) 254-4100.

cc: Director, Human Resources Division, FEMA
Director, Response Division, FEMA
Director, National Response Coordination Center, FEMA
Chief Human Capital Officer, DHS
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