

Lessons from the Voluntary Organizations' Response to September 11 Attack in the Washington, DC Area



September 2002

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I. Executive Summary

When a mass casualty event like September 11 happens again, what will Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD) members in the Washington, DC area do differently? When interviewed, DC VOAD members reflected on many facets of local response to September 11. Out of their personal reflections emerged several broad visions for future change in DC VOAD response.

VOAD members see a need to:

- Incorporate more spiritual care training before disaster strikes in order to effectively address spiritual care issues that surface after a mass casualty event.
- Adopt a common nomenclature for services provided, particularly for case managers.
- Adopt a common definition of "disaster survivor."
- Hold midstream de-briefings for caregivers.
- Adopt a "business model" approach to disaster response that includes management teams, budgets, weekly meetings, expected client goals, ongoing training for volunteers, and business partnerships with other organizations.



Damage at Pentagon.

For many DC VOAD members the lessons learned in the aftermath of September 11 are becoming crystal clear. For others, though, there are significant remaining questions that will require informed executive-level dialogue and decision. These questions include:

- What if a terrorist attack happened in an area that had no trained volunteer coordinators? How would VOAD members deploy responders?
- How can volunteer training be changed to address future terrorist-related events?
- How is it possible to more effectively separate the job of VOAD members from the job of trained emergency responders?
- How can "turf wars" be avoided in future disasters?

DC VOAD Contributions:

Traditional help for families who lost loved ones and possibly income and housing

II. Introduction

September 11. While the single date identifies the terrorist disasters in New York City, western Pennsylvania, and the Washington metro area, the effects of the disaster continue more than a year later. In the DC metro area, the lengthy closing of Washington's Reagan National Airport and the postal delivery of anthrax letters extended the impact of the terrorist incident beyond the date and trauma of the original attack. While the massive clean up and economic impact in New York continue to get most of the media coverage, and despite the completion of the Pentagon's renovation, the Washington metro area still struggles to recover.

DC VOAD Contributions:

Managed four warehouses, 40-50 employees, 1500+ volunteers

OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this exploratory study was to enable members of the DC Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD) to describe their contributions to the initial relief effort and ongoing recovery and share lessons learned. The study focused on two primary objectives:

- 1) To gather anecdotal histories of individual involvement in the response and identify the services provided
- 2) To record observations and recommendations about what worked and what didn't

Ultimately, the goal was to discover if the lessons learned from September 11 suggest ways to improve standard practices and procedures in disaster response in the Washington, DC region.

METHODS AND SCOPE

The study was conducted by Village Life Company of Jessup, Md. under the direction of John Gavin, acting director of National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (NVOAD). It was conducted using a case study methodology. A list of contact names and organizations was prepared by the VOAD representatives and presented to Village Life. Those interviewed performed at many levels of response from bus drivers and food servers to organizational directors to caseworkers.

Subjects were contacted by telephone and interviewed using a survey Instrument (see p. 15). Most initial interviews took more than an hour to complete. To amplify specific issues identified in the initial interviews, additional data was gathered from follow up telephone conversations, personal meetings, and DC VOAD group meetings and presentations. The literature review included a sampling of local and national news coverage and related Internet resources.

DEFINING THE SITUATION

Before describing the actions and observances of the members of the DC VOAD who responded to the attack on the Pentagon, it is appropriate to review the following list of factors that define the situation as a whole. Notes on these factors were gleaned from various post-event meetings of DC VOAD and NVOAD members, the American Sociological Association and interviews with national directors of various disaster response organizations.

Factors Unique To September 11

- September 11 has challenged the definition of who is the "survivor" of a mass casualty disaster event. Beyond the traditional family members, non-traditional dependents and partners, the economic and social impact reaches deep into the community and families unrelated to the crash victims.
- Unemployment assistance and help for indirect survivors of the terrorist attacks are larger elements of this disaster than ever before and have created ongoing challenges to traditionally focused response services.
- Traditional mental health counseling programs focusing on short-term recovery appear to be particularly ineffective for indirect survivors of terrorist incidents.
- The scale and terrorist specter of these mass casualty events caused a different emotional/mental trauma than natural disasters and exposed an unmet need for a broad spiritual care response.

DC VOAD Contributions:

Collected/managed over 100,000 pounds of dog food

The Local Issues



An ongoing challenge has been unemployment assistance and help for indirect survivors.

➤ As an urban area where major natural disasters occur less frequently, volunteer response to September 11 events in the DC metro area was handicapped by an "experience curve" that made it more difficult to establish cooperation and communication between large and small, national and local organizations.

➤ Service territories were not universally understood and, in the chaos of an event of this magnitude, "turf" battles were almost inevitable.

➤ Competition for higher profile roles and disappointment when the contributions of smaller organizations were not acknowledged by the press or grant makers has prompted post-event grumbling.

➤ Local nonprofit organizations and local churches are expected to "own" a local disaster. When a high-profile disaster like this generates national attention and high dollar

contributions, local responders – who expect to bear the long-term recovery burden – resent competing for dollars and attention.

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- Federal and regional governments provided funds to some groups with ethnic or community-sounding missions without determining whether they were equipped to provide direct services to local residents.
 - In some cases, federal and regional governments attempted to create new mental health trauma programs by hiring staff away from existing nonprofits instead of contracting services from those organizations.
 - The incidents of anthrax exposure added to the environment of emotional trauma in ways generally not understood or addressed by local or national responders.
 - There is an ongoing lack of understanding that in the Washington area (as in New York), September 11 was just the beginning of a widening circle of emotional, spiritual, and economic aftershocks that will affect people for years to come.

DC VOAD Contributions:

Helped people who lost their jobs as a result of the attacks – airport and hotel personnel and others -- with utilities, groceries, employment, psychological counseling

III. The Call to Action

The September 11 terrorist attacks were unavoidably a media event.

The overwhelming majority of our interviewees named the media – radio or television – as their first source, when asked how they heard about the unfolding catastrophe. Even those who reported being alerted by co-workers or phone calls said they were simply told to "turn on the television!" And, because they were already riveted to their speakers and screens by the news of the attacks in New York, the Washington public had the added impact of being "present" at the moment the Pentagon was hit.

Interestingly, “mothers” came in second to the media. Seven persons interviewed did not hear it in the media. Five of those got calls from their mothers. According to the Pew Research Center, 51% of Americans phoned family members on September 11; by Sept. 12, 74% had checked in with family.



For DC VOAD members, the call to action meant they “started assembling teams and putting them on the road.”

Specific calls to action for DC VOAD members came at different times in different ways. Responders reported that they followed organizational protocols and:

- *"called in and left my name"*
- *"started making calls to pull equipment together"*
- *"started calling food procurement organizations"*
- *"made 50 – 60 calls to the Pentagon and FBI to get permission to be on site"*
- *"went to the Boston and Dulles airports...and set up stations" for families*
- *"made calls and worked with local clergy to determine..." what they needed*
- *"quickly, we were in touch with schools...we were handling the ripple effect against foreign boys"*

Some responders were not called into service until later:

- *"I learned that my department would be involved in the secondary victim assistance by the third or last week of September."*
- *"two months after the attacks, I got two days notice that I was going to New York to work in the Family Service Center"*
- *"I didn't know I personally would be involved in the outreach until mid-January"*

One national disaster response director with responsibility for the DC metro area summed up the mobilization process this way:

"Initially it began with a phone call from the state deputy coordinating officer to tell me that they needed our help. In Washington, I made contact with...our local following there, one of who has an ongoing relationship with the chaplain at the Pentagon. We worked out details with them. I give the directions. We always use the incident command system that's widely used by emergency management at all levels. After having being contacted or contacting the appropriate authority in both NY and VA, then I started assembling teams and putting them on the road."



IV. Disaster Response

It can be no surprise that the terrorist attacks challenged the resources and carefully made plans of all responding organizations. All the elements of typical disasters were there – destruction, chaos, miscommunication, unsolicited volunteers, and donations. There was just more of everything. Everything, that is, except direct survivors.

"At this disaster, there was nobody's home to clean up, no trees to take out of houses. It was more of a crime scene and the security was Zip Lock tight. We're not used to guys walking around with machine guns. The people who were affected by it were not there."



At the Pentagon, we were ... "servicing relief workers instead of victims."

At the Pentagon, we were "... servicing relief workers instead of victims."

We did have "some special needs we met for units that couldn't come back to the feeding area because they were in the 'hot spot' doing the body count. Those people had a special menu; we didn't want to give them anything red...with blood and all."

When asked about communications, all who commented said that their telecommunication systems worked as expected with the exception of calls to and from New York in the earliest hours. At least for our responders, the communications problems had nothing to do with phone systems. When it came to communicating, technology was not the issue.

"In general there was great difficulty in that area (communicating with outside agencies) and everyone had to do what they had to do with their job, so taking time to communicate with each other was very difficult. The biggest thing we had going on was a conference call with the VOAD members."

"I think the whole notion about public information did (changed). I'll only say that it should be one voice that speaks and should give the public clear information. The federal government was telling people to do one thing but they didn't tell the district government."

DC VOAD Contributions:

Spent @ \$7.5 million dollars on direct client assistance

"The information overload was burning us out. It was just constant. There was a time about two weeks after the event that a massive Internet outage occurred on the East Coast and I was so happy because we weren't getting barraged with emails."

"Everything changed practically every hour; that was the problem. As soon as you'd learn how to do something one way, it was changed and then we'd have to learn it all over again."

"...everyone followed different rules, they chose how they wanted things to be."

"A lot of time rules were always changing... I could help some client and then the next day a client with the same problem approaches and I am not authorized to help them. I hated saying no to people and it was really frustrating."

"Every day there were new 'methods' of how to do things. Also, things changed at the scene (NY Family Service Center) depending on supervisors and partners...which changed very frequently."

"They changed daily with the way D.O., checks and clients were handled."

Unfortunately, as in every disaster, there was the responders' most common headache -- unwanted donations.

"...there was a huge outpouring of in-kind donations. More than 100,000 pounds of dog food was donated for 300 search dogs that were on a special diet. We started distributing the donations (pet food) that day and it lasted for many, many, months. We distributed the last of the dog food in May of this year."

DC VOAD Contributions:

Prepared materials on how to recognize effects of trauma in children

"I just couldn't convince the nice Italian ladies in New Jersey that they couldn't just run over and take 'those poor boys working at Ground Zero' some nice home-made ziti."

V. Recovery

The VOAD responders told of their triumphs in the midst of chaos. They also shared frustrations and criticisms. The common denominator was very clearly a concern to "get it right the next time." In their own words, here are the lessons learned:

The Best Practices

"Yes, the protocol that we usually use worked well. It...makes certain that only recognized organizations that are responding to that disaster are able to obtain stuff from the warehouse."

"Between us and the other non-profits and companies that showed up, we were pretty well stocked."

"For over 17 days we had over 400 different individuals cooking, cleaning, picking up afterwards, setting up tables and chairs. We had people serving (asking if someone wanted seconds or another drink). We put flowers on the tables and letters to workers from children. We cleaned up the grounds, did trash removal and ran errands for the workers. We spent over \$120,000; we provided water for the whole parking lot, a 53-foot refrigerator trailer, etc. We did not get a dime of government funding."



"We were pretty well stocked."



Though at first difficult, by the end of the effort, responders were working well together.

"My only difficulty was being accepted by the Red Cross. But, by the end, the head of the American Red Cross asked if we could be put on their rapid response list."

The Conflicts

"Gaining access was unbelievable hard. It was such chaos; nobody knew what to do. I finally got through to the Arlington City Disaster Response Headquarters and Arlington City and they actually gave us permission to be there and hosted us to be on the site. "

"We had a hard time beginning there the first couple of days because the Red Cross came over and they were furious. This is something I never knew... there's an incredible turf war between The Salvation Army and the

Red Cross. The Red Cross was acting like God and "you are here only if we say so."

"The brigadier general brought all entities together and we sat down to a meeting. He said, "You are all here on my property. We're gonna work together."

"There was one (practice) that was not as appropriate. We probably stayed there longer than we should have. We were feeding people we shouldn't have. There were war planners, people planning a response to Afghanistan, and we were feeding the military planners. When we do that, we're no longer a relief organization."

"There were some individuals who were in this for the greed. An individual showed up at one of the warehouses and claimed to be delivering things to Ground Zero. What he was picking up in Long Island was not making it to Ground Zero or Staten Island. So we shut him down very quickly only to have him resurface about three days later with the leaders of another organization to pick up things. You know, you have people like that. They figure out how to get themselves into the system and who knows where it goes?"

"We were prepared to help the people that came to us. The situation we're running into is that it's a year later and we have people who are laid off and who have lost their job but we can't exactly prove that to the Funds. We have this money from the attacks that we're supposed to use to go to them but we have all these other people who need it."



Learning to work together in unity was one challenge all responders had to overcome.

DC VOAD Contributions: 60,000 eggs, 12,000 pounds of pancake mix, 200 gallons of syrup at a time

"People were calling in with truly amazing questions. There's somebody out there who was feeling a high level of anxiety trying to figure out what to do if his or her pet was near anthrax. Some of the questions were pretty amazing to have to pull together. We really felt high pressure to give out information."

"Some mental health workers just seemed to want to hear the "stories." That's not why we were there."

"Everyone wants to know what's going on. For those of us who were working on it, it was an issue of basically postponing your emotional reaction until you have time. And then when you do have time, trying to have an emotional reaction is hard. You're too tired to cry. There's just no time."

The Spiritual Care Issues



"I never cry ... but I cry all the time now."

"I don't know quite why but I'm beginning to realize it's having an impact and I don't know quite what it is and how much. We've been running with no time to stop and think about ourselves. I know I'm drained all of the time, even after I have a weekend. I know there's an impact but I can't put a finger on it. I never cry. I've always thought I would be good doing disaster response because I don't cry, but I cry all of the time now."

"Emotional needs you never know. You are able to deal with crisis counseling to get people through the crisis of the moment and help them prepare for handling the future but once they walk out the door you never know what's going to happen with them. They're liable to show up in another care center either later that day, week, or months from now."

"It's been a long, tough year and spiritually I watched so many grow so much in their spiritual life and become closer to God or whatever their faith, and for me spiritually I've done the exact opposite. My faith isn't near where it was before September 11. Spiritually and emotionally I'm a basket case. I haven't had time until recently to recognize that."

VI. Challenges for the Future

Advice from Responders

Those who responded to this study had very specific advice for their own organizations and for other VOAD members:

"We need to have universal coverage to the degree that if a disaster happened in an area without volunteer trained coordinators, then we need to be able to get people there."

"Our training is outdated and we've got to get it up to speed so that it also addresses terrorism. There's a mental and emotional impact on volunteers no matter what the disaster is. We want to make sure the volunteer coordinators are aware of those impacts when there is a terrorist attack."

"I've definitely made the mental health care a high part of what I'm inserting into the trainings now. Not that our volunteer coordinator should be the one doing it, but they need to be seeking the professionals in their community."

"There's people who are trained and on call for this kind of activity and the general appeal goes out for warm bodies. Sometimes that causes more problems than it solves. Leave the relief work to the workers."

"We also need public education campaigns that say this is how to be a volunteer in a disaster so people don't show up on the scene and wait until they call for volunteers. We need you to wait and let us tell you how to best respond. And until you explain why their wonderful intentions could actually hamper a first responder from getting their job done, they don't understand that. We've just got to do a better job educating the general public."

"We have already started a process of getting more of our people through the NOVA crisis counseling training. We continue to do training so we have more and more people available to go in and provide leadership and rotation."

"Talk to other groups; a disaster situation is no time for turf wars."



"We also need public education campaigns that say, 'this is how to be a volunteer in a disaster.'"

In Summary

The eloquent and insightful comments of DC-area responders were, of course, specific and personal to their experiences. There is no doubt that a quantitative study would uncover further insights and even conflicting impressions of the actions of those traumatic days and weeks. However, there is consensus and consistency in the stories found in formal interviews, meeting dialog, and unprompted remembering. And these points are reinforced in the related literature and media coverage of the September 11 disaster.

The message is clear. The five major challenges that the DC VOAD should address in any attempt to improve practices in the future are:

- **A Common Nomenclature**

Case Managers. Case Workers. Family Services Counselors. Every organization has different names for the same job descriptions and services provided. Disasters by definition are intrinsically plagued by confusion and information-sharing problems. The lack of common nomenclature for the tasks and roles in disaster response (especially in case management) impeded the process of accessing resources and long-term support for survivors. It may also have created some of the frustration and burnout of case managers themselves.

- **Standards for Defining Survivors**

Although this event was unique in scope and public reaction, the lesson is there for future recovery efforts. A universally accepted definition of who can be called a survivor and how the impact of a mass casualty event is measured may have eliminated some of the problems hampering those attempting to address the unmet needs of September 11 survivors. Without standards, the public dissatisfaction with the disbursement of funds could undermine fundraising and relief efforts in the future.



A lesson for future recovery efforts is redefining the definition of who is a survivor.

- **Mid Stream De-Briefing**

All those who had positive comments to make about their own contributions to the response efforts mentioned good, on-going information sharing within their own organizations.

Those who were given an opportunity to vent during the long days and months of meeting others needs said they were tired but more positive about their effectiveness.

- **A Business Model**

The best approach for long term response capacity may be a business model with management teams, budgets, weekly meetings, expected client goals, ongoing training for volunteers, and business partnerships with other organizations. The United Services Group in New York

is one example of this model and NVOAD members have said positive things about the effectiveness of this organization.

- **Spiritual Care**

It seems clear that the subjects of this study are particularly qualified to speak to the need for a spiritual care protocol in any disaster response plan. Not only have they witnessed first hand the emotional and spiritual devastation that may be the longest lasting effect of September 11, but also they have paid a heavy price themselves for their front row seat. Although not all responders would discuss the issue or perhaps felt the need, this is an issue that cannot be ignored.



September 11 responders have witnessed first hand the emotional and spiritual devastation that may be the longest lasting effect of September 11.

DC VOAD Contributions:

Helped people who lost their jobs as a result of the attacks – airport and hotel personnel and others -- with utilities, groceries, employment, psychological counseling

More information about emerging spiritual care response can be found in an issue-oriented white paper, "The Crossroads of Spiritual Care: Developing National Standards" published in September 2002 by Village Life Company. It was developed as part of an exploratory study entitled "New Roles for Disaster Response Organizations Following Terrorist Attacks." (See the study's Web site: www.9-11study.org.)

Addendum One

List of Contacted DC Area Organizations

American Red Cross
Americorps – Capitol Region
Burger King Corporation
The Capitol Area Food Bank
Capital Area Crisis Response Team
Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Washington
Center for Multicultural Human Services
Christ in Action (Manassas)
Church World Service/Emergency Response Program
Community Family Life services DC Cares
DC Cares
DC Emergency Management
DC Police Auxiliary/Chaplain
McDonald's Corporation
First Response/ Response and Recovery
Humane Society of the United States
Lutheran Disaster Response
Military – Air force & Army Exchange Service
National Organization for Victim Assistance
Outback Steakhouse
Points of Lights Foundation
Salvation Army
Southern Baptist
Tyson Chicken
The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)
The United Methodist Church: Baltimore-Washington Conference
United Way of the National Capital Area
Volunteer Center Partnerships and Disaster Response
Volunteers of America

Addendum Two

DC-Area QUESTIONNAIRE

Name:
Position:
Organization:
Phone:
Email:

Hello, _____ (interviewee's name).

The folks at DC-area VOADs suggested I call you.

I'm ___(my name)___ and I'm helping to conduct a follow up study of the disaster response to the 9/11 terrorist acts. My job is to gather input from those of you who were part of the organized relief effort. Now that you've had time to pull back a little, we need to hear from you about what worked, what didn't, and what protocols we might recommend for the future. May I take 15 or 20 minutes of your time to ask a few questions?

1. Have you ever been involved in disaster response in the past? Was this with your current organization?
2. If yes...tell me a little about your previous experiences. Have you responded to any disaster since 9/11? What was the most recent disaster you responded to?
3. What, if any, formal training in disaster response have you had? When?

Now about last September...

4. How and when did you learn about the terrorist events in September?
5. How and when did your organization begin its response? When did you learn you would be involved? Tell me about how you were involved... (give time to tell their story).
6. Did you know precise protocols or receive clear directions from your organization about where to go, whom to coordinate with, and what tasks to perform?
7. How did those protocols change "at the scene"?
8. Were you on site at the Pentagon in the days that followed the disaster? Did you report anywhere else in the DC metro area?
9. If you reported at the scene or to an off-site center, what if any difficulty did you have gaining access? How was this resolved?

10. What specific tasks did you perform? Was your role different than in other disasters? How? Were you directed to change your role or did you respond to need?
11. Do others report to you? How many? What did they do? Did their roles change?
12. How effectively were you able to communicate with your team? With other organizations?
13. Was any other group unhelpful or were their efforts counterproductive?
14. Which of your organization's response practices were notably successful?
15. Which were not helpful?
16. What results can you list to date?
17. In addition to your efforts to provide physical aid and comfort, what other help were you able to provide?
18. What physical or emotional needs did you perceive that you were unable to meet? Are you involved in any on-going recovery activities? Have you worked directly with 9/11 survivors since the initial response stage? (if yes, probe for as much info as possible)
19. How might your organization be better prepared to meet the needs of survivors in future terrorist incidents? How might you be better prepared to respond to an act of public violence?
20. What effect has this disaster had on you emotionally? Spiritually? Financially?
21. What, if any, further insight would you like to offer? What would you most like to say to those who organize response activities?

Finally, do you have any photos of you/ your group at work? Could we get copies?

Thank you for your time and insight!