

Aid groups, some of which helped after Hurricane Helene, are preparing to take on more responsibility when storms, floods and wildfires strike.



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Photographs by Allison Joyce

Reporting from Tennessee Ridge, Tenn., and Mount Victory, Ky.

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They were just drills, but each felt urgent and real. A group of volunteers searched a wooded area for someone who had been injured and stranded, ready to provide aid. Then they practiced a river rescue, attaching a rope near the bank to help pull the victim to shore.

This was Rescue HQ, a gathering in rural Tennessee last month where the founding members of several newly formed disaster response groups ran through emergency scenarios and discussed how to better coordinate in the chaotic aftermath of a storm or a flood.

Groups like this are growing in number — a new model of disaster response taking shape outside of government channels. Many volunteers are deeply religious and have military backgrounds.

They're an unequal match for what the government can do, especially when it comes to long-term rebuilding efforts after natural disasters. But with the Trump administration pulling back staffing and funding for the Federal Emergency Management Agency — and even pledging to eliminate it — communities may soon rely far more on volunteer help.

“The bigger the gap is in terms of what the government isn't doing, the more we're going to expect from nonprofits and the larger their role is going to be,” said Daniel Sledge, a professor at the University of Oklahoma who has studied disaster relief.

“Whether nonprofits actually have the capacity or the ability to step in and fill in the gaps that, in all likelihood, we’re going to be creating is a completely different question.”



Nicholas Priego and Jake Floyd, lying down, with the relief group Black Flag Response, teaching a medical course during a disaster training in Tennessee Ridge, Tenn., in May.



Sky Barkley of the Free Burma Rangers played an injured person during a rescue exercise in Tennessee Ridge.



Mr. Barkley of the Free Burma Rangers helped Micah Dunford of the Christian Rangers during a mock rope rescue exercise.

Mr. Trump said this month that he wanted to phase out FEMA after this year's hurricane season, which ends on Nov. 30, and shift much of its responsibilities to the states. Kristi Noem, who oversees FEMA as the homeland security secretary, and Pete Hegseth, the defense secretary, are overseeing a group that will submit recommendations in the coming months about how to reshape or sharply scale back the agency.

Ms. Noem argued recently that the changes would “empower governors to go out and respond” to emergencies. FEMA, she said, “has failed thousands, if not millions, of people, and President Trump does not want to see that continue into the future.”

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Asked what role outside groups should play in disaster relief moving forward, a spokesperson for FEMA said in an email, “Together with federal, state, tribal, local and territorial agencies, we’re strengthening and enhancing partnerships.”

Already, FEMA has lost at least a quarter of its full-time staff since Mr. Trump took office in January, according to a former senior official who spoke on the condition of anonymity to not jeopardize a new job. That number includes career officials who helped coordinate immediate disaster response and leaders who oversaw the most hurricane-prone regions in the country.

And after a series of experienced emergency managers led the agency in recent years, an acting administrator with no comparable experience is now in charge.

A flurry of new disaster response groups sprang up last fall, as residents of western North Carolina expressed deep frustrations with the government’s response to Hurricane Helene’s catastrophic flooding. These groups were sometimes the first to reach people in isolated parts of the region.

“Us private citizens, we can get in there — if we’re one state over, we could hook up our trailers and get in there,” said Austin Fryer, 23, a member of one such group, the Christian Rangers. “FEMA — they have all this large amount of stuff that has to be organized, it has to accounted for. It can’t just be handed out willy-nilly.”



Christian Rangers meeting with the sheriff and other officials at the Mount Victory volunteer fire department to see which areas need help in the aftermath of tornadoes in Mount Victory last month.



Austin Fryer, a member of the Christian Rangers, helps with supplies in Kentucky after tornadoes.



Christian Rangers helped set up a Red Cross relief site in London, Ky.



Mike Toberer of the Mountain Mule Packers, delivering food in Mount Victory.

While nonprofit volunteer groups have far less red tape to navigate than government agencies do, they face other challenges, including coordinating with local officials and not duplicating other relief efforts. There can be personality and ego clashes or competition among groups with differing priorities.

There can also be other motives. Some extremist groups saw an opportunity to embed in communities and spread conspiracy theories after Hurricane Helene. Some organizations have learned to carefully vet potential volunteers, which can be difficult in the first chaotic days of a catastrophe.

“To really try to identify what gaps might be there in the absence of FEMA — that’s the million-dollar question,” said Jeff Byard, a former federal and state emergency official who is now a senior vice president with Team Rubicon, a

disaster aid group that formed after the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. Its teams just finished annual hurricane training in Texas.

In those first days of response, he added, “You don’t want to create a disaster on top of a disaster and you don’t want to impede good will.”

The scale of devastation from Helene, and the difficulty navigating flooded, mountainous terrain in its aftermath, kept government aid from reaching some remote communities right away; in its absence, misinformation ran rampant. Mr. Trump, then a presidential candidate in the final weeks of his campaign against Vice President Kamala Harris, fanned the flames with some false or misleading claims about the federal response.

The experience further weakened trust in FEMA, whose reputation took perhaps its worst hit after its botched response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

“The people we took care of didn’t really care if they existed or not,” said Mike Toberer, the owner of Mountain Mule Packer Ranch in Mount Ulla, N.C., referring to FEMA. “But I would say they do have a role if it’s done correctly.”

Mr. Toberer did not participate in the training in Tennessee, but he loaded supplies on the backs of his mules to help residents and aid groups navigate flooded-out roads during Helene. He also helped deliver supplies last month in eastern Kentucky, after deadly tornadoes.

“We just want to get help to the people and that’s it,” he said.



The path of a tornado that tore through London last month.



Senona Krieser of the Christian Rangers in an airplane belonging to the United Cajun Navy during a scouting trip over London.



Holly Guida, right, of the United Cajun Navy, helped Vicky Hinkle search debris for valuables in London.

Newer groups need to develop detailed protocols and reliable funding streams to make sure that their work is sustainable and reputable, and that it doesn't hinder the work of local officials, said Brian Trascher, the vice president of the United Cajun Navy, which formed in Louisiana after Hurricane Katrina. Members of his group worked with some of the groups in Kentucky after the tornadoes.

"We've turned into a full-fledged logistical disaster response group," he said, adding that the organization's practices had been shaped over the years by lessons learned in each successive disaster. Regardless of what happens to FEMA, he said, nonprofit groups like his are better positioned to assist with on-the-ground relief because they can be more nimble.

“I’m trying to do my best to advise and help other groups that are trying to get out there and help folks,” he said. “The more boots you can summon in a hurry, the better.”



Regena Moultrie of Operation Outreach America helped a path for cows at a home in Mount Victory.



Prayer before an exercise during disaster training in Tennessee Ridge.



Notes during a training in Tennessee Ridge.



Matt Baer of Silent Guardian and Dale Hulseley of Operation Outreach America, carried Mr. Barkley of the Free Burma Rangers during an exercise.

The training in Tennessee allowed those who took part to share experiences and build trust should they need to coordinate at a disaster site. Some had worked on disaster response in only the United States, while at least one man, Sky Barkley, works with the Free Burma Rangers, an aid organization that does work in Myanmar and other countries.

“Don’t ever make promises you can’t fulfill,” Mr. Barkley told the circle of volunteers, as he recounted ways he worked with communities in unfamiliar regions. “You make a promise you can’t fulfill — ‘Hey, yeah, I’ll take care of it’ — and you don’t do it? They will not trust you again.”

They practiced navigating unfamiliar terrain with a compass and providing basic medical care. In a circle, they spoke about how to approach people in need of help without intimidating them. They also prayed; as people were arriving on the first

day, one participant prayed for everyone to be able to set their egos aside and learn from one another.

The gathering was a chance “to get more experience and a refresher,” said Regena Moultrie, a resident of northeastern Georgia and a member of Operation Outreach America, a new organization that responded to Helene in North Carolina.

Some of what they learned at the training came in handy weeks later, when a few members headed to Kentucky after tornadoes barreled through. They coordinated in a group chat, and then introduced themselves to a local church and local officials before driving around the most devastated neighborhoods, looking for people in need of help.

“It gives you a little boost as far as that there’s still good people that are willing to help out — it just, it really lifts you up in ways people could never imagine,” said Tressa Calhoun, who choked back tears as three volunteers with the Christian Rangers got to work securing the tarp on her roof that had already begun to leak. “It’s like a renewal of faith.”

Lisa Friedman contributed reporting from Washington. Kitty Bennett contributed research.

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