

Ethical Dilemmas Presented by Convergent Volunteers During Emergency Response

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Abstract

This article addresses the phenomenon of convergence as it applies to disaster management and helps to explain why nonaffiliated volunteers respond to disasters. The article will illustrate how "convergent" volunteers can present ethical conflicts and management concerns to emergency managers during a critical incident and how convergent volunteers can be managed by the development of a comprehensive Volunteer Management Plan.

Keywords: convergence, unaffiliated, volunteer, ethical dilemma, management plan,

INTRODUCTION

Effective disaster response requires the coordination and collaboration of many different resources and entities. During the planning stage of disaster response consideration is given to the roles that volunteers and volunteer agencies will play and how their efforts will be integrated into the overall disaster plan. Convergent volunteers are those people who want to help during an emergency but have no training or prior affiliation with a disaster response agency and may also include organizations that form instantaneously in response to a disaster.¹

Because convergent volunteers are not associated with any part of the existing emergency management response system, their offers of help are often underutilized and even problematic to professional responders. Well-intentioned, but untrained volunteers may injure or kill victims when performing search and rescue operations and spontaneous organizations often outstrip the capacity of emergency managers to effectively utilize them.²

This article will explore the paradox of people's willingness to volunteer versus the emergency response system's capacity to utilize them effectively and examine the ethical dilemma presented to emergency managers by convergent volunteers. This article will also examine the relationship between convergence theory and volunteer response to emergency events.

WHY DO CONVERGENT VOLUNTEERS RESPOND?

During disasters, large numbers of people with no pre-planned role arrive at the scene to offer assistance. Logical reasoning would suggest that people would avoid disaster areas due to the inherent dangers that disasters can present. There may be life-safety concerns at the scene of a disaster or even traumatic visuals that convergent volunteers could be exposed to by responding.

Response could also mean a sacrifice of time, work and family obligations. To better understand the ethical issues presented by convergent volunteers, we must first understand the reasons that bring convergent volunteers to disaster sites.

“Convergence,” which is mass movement or attempted movement towards a disaster site, is not a new phenomenon.³ Following the 2001 disaster at the World Trade Center volunteers by the thousands descended on the site. According to one Red Cross professional, “We’ve never had this many volunteers at any disaster . . . This is the most volunteers we’ve ever had in the history of the Red Cross.” By two and one-half weeks after the disaster, the Red Cross had received approximately 22,000 offers of assistance and had processed 15,570 volunteers.⁴

This same phenomenon was recently observed after the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, Hurricane Katrina in the United States, and the Kashmir Earthquake of 2005 where convergent volunteers responded to aid disaster victims. Other recent disasters also document substantial volunteer response.

After the 1985 Mexico City earthquake, ten percent of the population (over two million people) assisted others. In 1989, sixty percent of the population of San Francisco and seventy percent of the population in Santa Cruz, California responded to the Loma Prieta Earthquake.⁵ These responses indicate that convergence is an international phenomenon and not limited to any one country or region.

In his book, *Disasters by Design*, Dennis Mileti argues that although the culture in the United States is based on individualism, the country also has an “altruistic orientation” that encourages volunteerism and involvement in community activities.⁶ This orientation is amplified in disasters and research has shown that individuals put their self-interest aside to volunteer to help others in times of need.⁷

Additional research conducted by Seana Lowe and Alice Fothergill, found the primary motivation for volunteering was a compelling need to help in some way, particularly a need to assist victims, and a desire – even obsession – to ‘do something’ in order to contribute something positive and find something meaningful in the midst of disaster characterized by cruelty and terror.⁴

CONVERGENCE THEORY

Convergence Theory was first documented in the 1957 report, *Convergence Behavior in Disaster: A Problem in Social Control*, by Charles E. Fritz and J.H. Mathewson.³ Convergence Theory builds on social integration which occurs when ordinary people informally converge on a disaster site. Convergence Theory states that individuals, upon seeing a disaster, desire to act in a specific way and therefore form a loose organization of people which, in disaster situations, is there to help.⁸ Unfortunately, convergent volunteers are not always helpful and may present significant issues to the management of an emergency.

ISSUES PRESENTED BY CONVERGENT VOLUNTEERS

Convergent volunteers are a valuable resource in times of emergency but if not managed properly they can create a number of issues for emergency management. The fact is that thousands of willing and well meaning, albeit untrained and inexperienced volunteers can do more harm than good in a disaster.

Unskilled and untrained volunteers - A convergent volunteer who shows up on the disaster scene may not have the necessary equipment and may also easily become a distraction to those leading the response effort. While well-intentioned, convergent volunteers may not have been

vetted through a system with regard to licensing and certification; and they may not have the proper education and training needed to provide appropriate victim care and to keep victims and/or themselves safe. Because of this, convergent volunteers are often not able to be used during a disaster. If they are used, their skills, knowledge, and ability are underutilized by the disaster leadership team because they cannot be easily slotted into the existing response network.⁹ This experience often leaves the individual who spontaneously deploys with a feeling of dissatisfaction, disappointment, and maybe even anger at those who are managing the response. **Safety and security concerns** - Besides the problem of convergent volunteers not having the necessary training or skills to be effectively utilized, their presence can also raise safety and security concerns. Following a disaster in Haiti, a volunteer from Idaho was accused of trying to take Haitian children to the Dominican Republic to “protect” them.¹⁰ Other convergent volunteers include criminals and people who arrive to take advantage of the victims or situation.

Safety is another serious concern for convergent volunteers. After the September 11, 2001 terror attacks, thousands of volunteers labored at the ruins of the World Trade Center in New York, often with little or no protective equipment. Studies showed that a significant number were exposed to toxic dust and had respiratory problems and other illnesses as a result.¹⁰

Accountability and personnel management - Convergent volunteers may create issues of accountability and management at disaster scenes for emergency management. Because of the nature of convergence, convergent volunteers may take individual action without coordination with other responders. This can lead to confusion, redundancy and inefficient use of resources. Incident Command may not be able to account for the number of convergent volunteers on scene or their actions, leading to a loss of control of the scene. Convergent volunteers may also exhaust resources – food, water and shelter – that are meant for affiliated volunteers.

ETHICAL DILEMMAS PRESENTED BY CONVERGENT VOLUNTEERS

Research by Lowe and Fothergil indicates that volunteers who respond to disaster sites are motivated by an obsession to do something positive to help.⁴ Many convergent volunteers are able to provide legitimate services during a disaster and may be recruited by other volunteer organizations to assist in response or recovery efforts. Other volunteers may find that their services are not wanted or that officials are biased against using their services. Unfortunately, many are surprised to learn that there is no plan to utilize them, no disaster response strategy in place or plan to mobilize and integrate them into the disaster response effort. Often this extraordinary resource of time and talent goes untapped just when community need is greatest.

In their research of convergent volunteers who responded to the World Trade Center, James Kendra and Tricia Wachtendorf suggested that convergent volunteers became increasingly unwelcome as response turned to recovery: “Over time, as the response evolved, volunteers were less and less welcome; it may even be possible to mark the shift from response to recovery by noting when non-affiliated volunteers were asked to leave or were evicted from various sites. A week after the event, some officials stated that they didn’t ‘want volunteers in even if they’re already here.’¹¹

Camille Tumolo, Director, Volunteer Services, New York Presbyterian Hospital stated that following the 9/11 disaster the hospital was “overwhelmed” with over four hundred well-meaning volunteers from the community who got in the way of hospital staff until they were asked to leave. According to Tumolo, “I know this sounds harsh, but in a time of crisis and chaos, the last thing we need are masses of people wandering around trying to be helpful.”¹²

The obvious ethical dilemma presented to emergency management officials is whether or not the decision to allow convergent volunteers creates more harm than good in a given emergency situation. According to Kendra and Watchendorf “Convergence, at its heart, presents a conflict of legitimacy: whose motives for converging are most acceptable or laudable, which if any convergers can provide the greatest good, and which convergers don’t belong.”¹¹ During a time of obvious need, how do officials accept one person’s offer to volunteer while denying another and is the decision based upon personal bias, prejudice or agenda?

Another factor that must be considered is the effect that refusing their offer to help will have on the individual volunteer. In their research of convergent volunteers, Lowe and Fothergil noted “volunteering gives ordinary citizens a sense of “interconnection, healing, and empowerment” after a disaster.”⁴ Refusing an offer to help could marginalize the individual and create feelings of hostility and resentment towards emergency management officials.

ADDRESSING THE ETHICAL DILEMMAS

Resolving the ethical dilemmas presented by convergent volunteers begins early in the initial planning stages for an emergency. Emergency managers should recognize and acknowledge that convergent volunteers will come to a disaster and understand the reasons why volunteers respond. Thoughtful planning on how to utilize this resource will reduce the ethical dilemmas caused by this phenomenon by providing a standardized and hopefully tested protocol for convergent volunteer management that considers the ethical issues presented by convergent volunteers.

One tool that can be incorporated into the Emergency Operation Plan to help manage convergent volunteers is the Convergent Volunteer Management Plan. Proper development of this plan will help to address many of the ethical issues including how volunteers are selected, trained, utilized and shown recognition for their efforts.

CONVERGENT VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT PLAN

Convergent volunteers often overwhelm local governments and community agencies following a disaster with offers to help. A Convergent Volunteer Management Plan lays the groundwork for a disaster volunteer program and directs this resource to disaster response and relief efforts. The plan defines what volunteers will do, how many will be needed, and who will supervise them.¹³

Assessment of agency needs - Developing the Convergent Volunteer Management Plan requires an assessment of an agency’s needs during and following a disaster. How can volunteers be utilized and how many would be needed to accomplish each task? Is sufficient staff available to supervise volunteers and the required supplies/equipment available? Answers to these questions will be critical in developing the plan. Answering these questions will also help to avoid confusion and frustration on the part of staff and volunteers reducing anxiety and tensions between the groups.

Procedures and guidelines - A Convergent Volunteer Management Plan must include procedures to guide the implementation of the plan. Procedures should include those required for volunteer selection, orientation, placement, supervision and evaluation. Planning might also include the establishment of Volunteer Mobilization Centers that coordinate volunteer check-in and assist with screening, orientation and placement. A valid screening and placement process will help to determine how volunteer resources can be used most effectively, minimizing the feeling of being underutilized often felt by volunteers.

Procedures for training of convergent volunteers must also be established. Training helps to maintain consistency and quality of service and also protects the interests and assets of the agency. Volunteers must understand the rules and procedures for their assignments, know whom they report to and be trained to operate required equipment safely and efficiently. Training helps to establish confidence and reduce stress related to not knowing what to do.

Supervision, evaluation, and recognition - Supervisors must ensure that convergent volunteers under their guidance understand their responsibilities, are sufficiently trained to accomplish their tasks and are meeting performance standards. Supervisors are also responsible for ensuring the welfare of the people working for them by promoting an atmosphere of teamwork, resourcefulness and cooperation.

Evaluation and recognition of the work performed by volunteers is an important responsibility of supervision. As noted earlier in the discussion, “volunteering gives ordinary citizens a sense of “interconnection, healing, and empowerment” and failing to recognize that contribution promotes resentment and bitterness on the part of the volunteer.

CONCLUSION

According to Fritz and Mathewson (1957) “convergence behavior is a virtually universal phenomenon following disasters. This informal mass movement of people, messages, and volunteered supplies toward the disaster-struck area has been documented and verified in nearly every study of disaster.”³

During a disaster, unaffiliated volunteers will converge on the disaster site often overwhelming local government capability to manage or effectively utilize them. This influx of well-meaning volunteers can create more issues for emergency managers than they resolve, causing managers to be reluctant to accept their offers to help, even in the face of obvious need. The ethical dilemma of whether or not to refuse or accept an offer of help during a time of crisis not only impacts rescue and recovery efforts but also has a significant effect on the individual volunteer and their ability to reconcile with the crisis.

Managers who recognize the phenomenon of convergence and acknowledge the dynamics involved when convergent volunteers respond to a disaster scene can help to mitigate the negative aspects of convergence by incorporating a Convergent Volunteer Management Plan into their Emergency Operation Plan and disaster planning.

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