

Informational Report on Point Of Distribution (POD) at Lahaina, Hawaii after August, 2023 fire

By: Mark Meininger, Portland NET, September 6, 2023

This is an informational report on the operation and organization of a Point Of Distribution (POD) operating in Lahaina, on the island of Maui, in Hawaii, in response to the catastrophic fire there in August, 2023. I volunteered there August 26 and 28. Marked and unmarked versions of a satellite view of the POD are on the following page. This report is based on my observations and discussions with CERT and lay volunteers working at the POD.

Overview

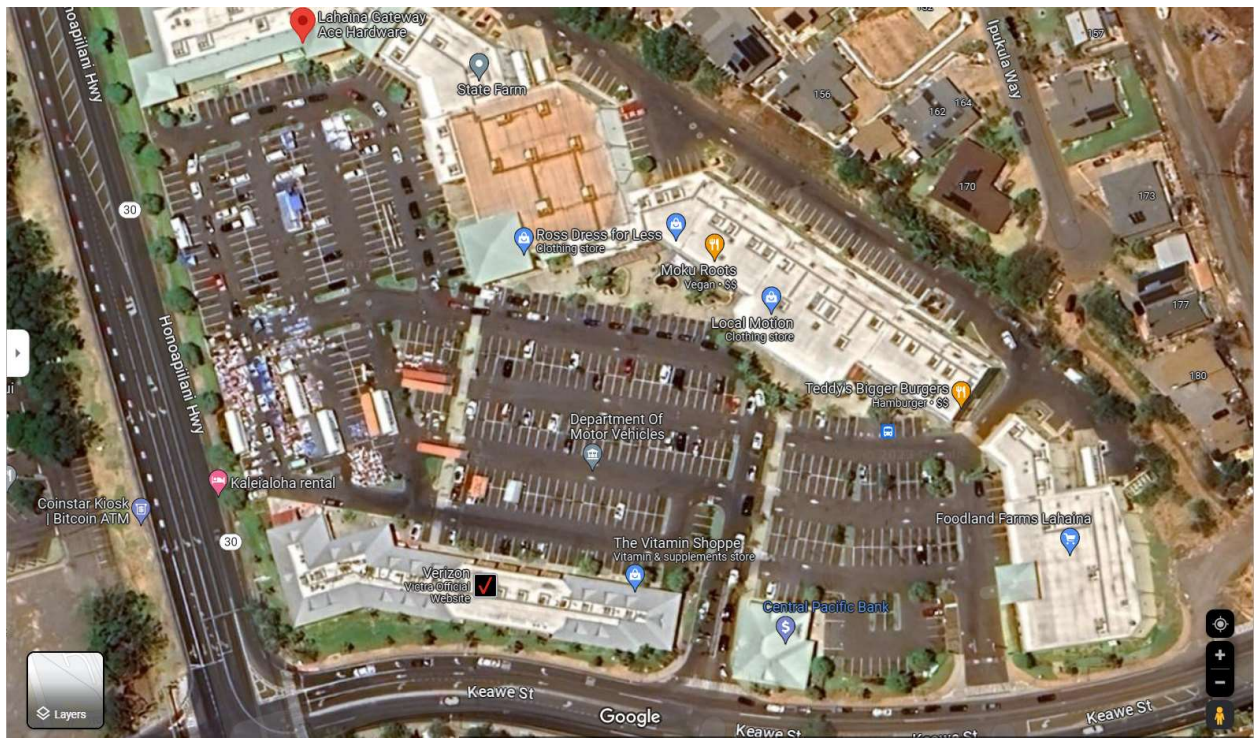
The POD was deployed by Maui County.

<https://www.mauicounty.gov/CivicAlerts.aspx?AID=12748> The site lead appeared to be a CERT volunteer. I could not find any County staff on the site in a leadership or any other role.

This POD was located at Lahaina Gateway shopping center, which is where the bypass highway that curves around Lahaina town center reconnects with the north side of Lahaina town. The shopping center appeared not to have been damaged by the fire. I was told that the POD was located there because power had not yet been restored to the area, so the stores of the shopping center could not open.

The POD was operated extremely well and appeared to be staffed and led almost entirely by volunteers. The site set-up and organization were superb. On the days I worked, the site set-up differed from what is shown on the attached satellite view in only minor regards. The automobile route (marked in red) and locations of distribution facilities (marked in yellow) and goods storage containers (marked in green) were largely the same. The differences are that the satellite view was likely an earlier version of the POD in which the distribution facilities appeared to be covered by 8'x8' pop-up tents and the automobile route was not as clearly marked. When I worked professional frame tents 30' long and perhaps 20' wide had replaced the pop-ups, and the auto route was clearly marked by cones and yellow tape and attended by volunteers guiding traffic along the way.

My observations below will note some differences between the Lahaina POD and POD operations proposed in FEMA course IS-0026 Guide to Points of Distribution.



Staffing

The staffing appeared to be entirely volunteers, except possibly some logistics staff who handled accessing of palletized goods from Conex containers and forklift movement of materials around the site, including replenishment of palletized goods at the distribution tents and movement and stacking of empty pallets at an on-site storage area.

The site was open to the public 10AM to 4PM on alternate days. The other days were used to restock the site. Set-up hours for open days were 7AM-10AM. Site set-up included removing and storing tarps covering palletized goods that had been staged at the distribution areas the day before and setting up and staging multiple product lines. A few volunteers showed up for site set-up, but most volunteers were lay volunteers who arrived 15-20 minutes before 10AM by charter bus from 1 or 2 of the other main towns on the island. CERT volunteers began arriving 8-9 to begin setting up and preparing to lead the product lines.

As a visitor to the island there was virtually no accessibility to spontaneous disaster volunteer opportunities. A County volunteer gateway site <https://www.mauinuistrong.info/> did not work to connect me as a prospective volunteer with any disaster volunteer opportunities. Staffing of the website might have been overwhelmed, or lay volunteer staffing might have been adequate, but I doubt it was the latter as explained below. It was only through a happenstance chain of telephone calls that I was able to find a volunteer opportunity at the POD, and there was no check of me or my abilities on my arrival. It was all comers welcome.

Volunteer staffing during the POD operation hours I saw seemed adequate. I worked 7AM-11AM or 12PM on my two days, so I only saw early operational times. CERT volunteers led several of the product lines. I didn't see if there was a staffing change during operations, but I suspect there was not. It would be a full day to work the 10-4 operational day. Just before opening of the POD, the CERT site leader gave the distribution volunteers an excellent briefing that in about 1 minute covered trauma-informed care, personal safety with regard to moving vehicles and dehydration, and the need to keep cars moving.

Volunteer staffing for the morning site set-up was more problematic. On my first day there was an experienced group of volunteers who led the site set-up. That worked well. On my second day that experienced group was not there when we arrived at 7AM. On this day I happened to bring four other family members with me, and we became the main site set-up workers. We kept busy the whole time.

The Maui County volunteer group Maui Nui Strong might already have recruited all the local volunteers they needed or could handle, but the lack of structure in the morning set-up staffing makes me doubtful. My lesson from this is that reliance on spontaneous volunteers for any part of a scheduled disaster relief operation is precarious.

Distribution

The Lahaina POD operated differently from how the PODs described in FEMA course IS-0026 appear to be described. The FEMA IS-0026 PODs seemed to be predicated on each product line distributing the same goods, with very controlled traffic control. In a FEMA IS-0026 POD a traffic controller would direct a number of cars into the distribution area corresponding to the number of product lines. Each car would receive the same batch of goods from its corresponding

product line, and the traffic controller would then direct that group of cars out and the next group of cars in.

In contrast, the Lahaina POD had multiple different product lines for each of multiple different product categories (e.g., pet food, pasta grain bread, canned food, snacks, toiletries, baby supplies, paper goods). Below are photos of the canned foods product line as an example. There was a leader for each product line.



Set-up of the product line included setting two 6' tables end-to-end to form a 12' product bagging work surface. Different products within the category were staged on the table in cartons or boxes leaving a clear edge in front for volunteers to slide a bag along and fill with each type of product. Extra cases of each product were staged under the table from the palletized supplies to resupply the cartons/boxes on the tables. Filled bags were set in a pallet-sized Gaylord box for distribution to people in cars.

The FEMA IS-0026 POD are described as presuming that each car is collecting supplies for 3 people. In contrast, the Lahaina POD accommodated however many people the car was collecting supplies for. At the entrance to the POD, an intake volunteer would ask the driver the number of adults, children, babies, and pets they were getting supplies for. A card was marked accordingly and placed at the lower left corner of the windshield. As cars moved through the distribution area the drivers would indicate the product lines from which they wanted goods. I didn't see how this happened. A volunteer runner would place into each car a number of bags corresponding to the number of people marked on the intake card, as determined by the product line leader. I didn't learn how this determination was made or communicated to the runners.

I was told that the POD served people in about 1,000 or more cars each day. In a six hour day that leaves about 21 seconds for each car to be in the distribution area. Cars were constantly moving through at about a walking pace. Safety of runners was the primary concern, but cars were also urged to keep moving. It worked well.

Conclusion

The Lahaina POD was impressive. I learned a lot and was impressed and proud of the CERT volunteers who ran the site. I was uneasy about the reliance on seemingly spontaneous volunteers, but it appeared to work. The need for professional logistics workers was critical to operation of the POD.