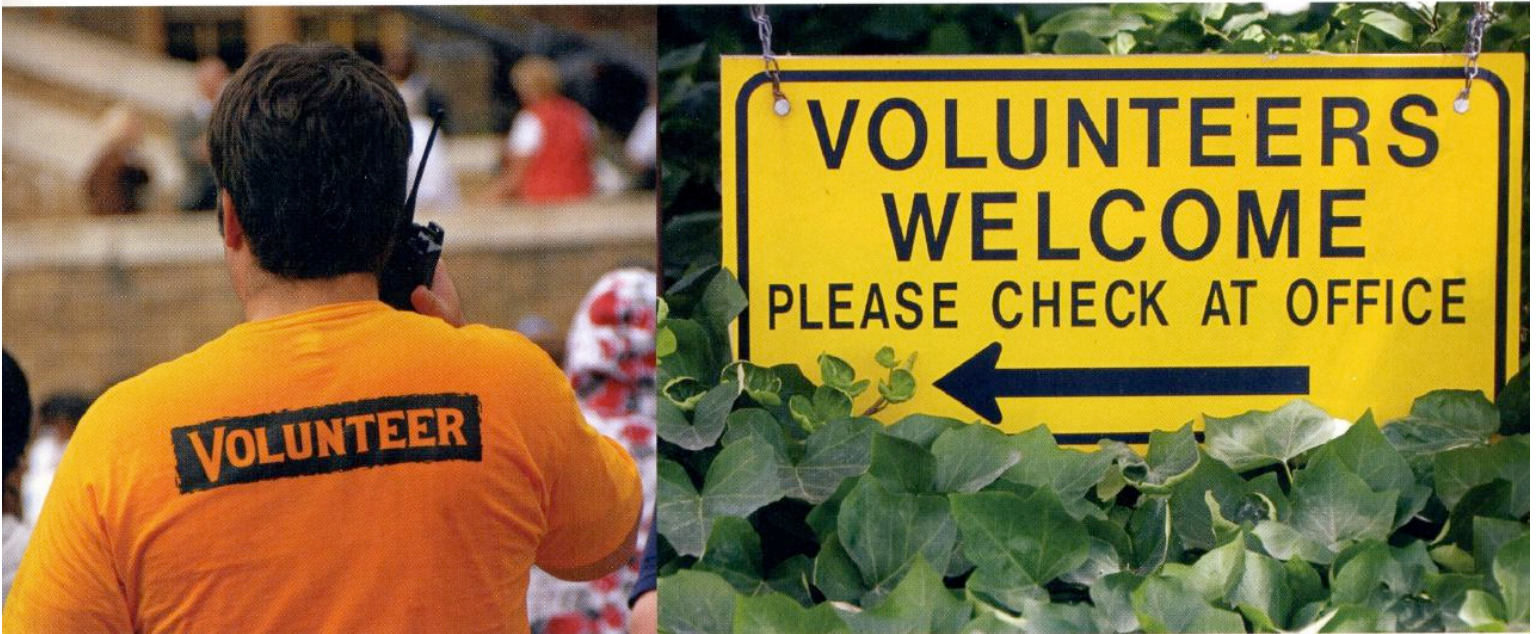


What every venue manager must know about dealing with volunteers.



(By Logan Kugler)

Richard Groscost thought he was prepared for anything. Then in October 2007, wildfires erupted in southern California — and an influx of well-meaning volunteers showed up at his door.

“We got caught flat,” says Groscost, manager of safety and security at the Orange County Fair & Exposition Center in Costa Mesa, Calif. “I never expected to have so many volunteers showing up. We probably had about 30 at one point, and since we’re a small facility — our whole operation is within one acre — we were completely overwhelmed.”

A photograph of two hands reaching towards each other against a blue sky with white clouds. The hands are positioned as if about to grasp each other, symbolizing help or support. The text 'HELPING HANDS' is overlaid in large white letters.

HELPING HANDS



Houston's George R. Brown Convention Center had more than 2,000 volunteers at any given time in the aftermath of Katrina. They handled duties such as crowd control, monitoring sleep areas and consoling people who had lost a family member.

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Like Grosco, many venue managers have found that while volunteers are generally well-meaning people who want to — and can — help, their arrival during an already hectic time can create serious challenges.

“When they just show up and you’re unprepared, it takes a lot of staff to supervise, watch and train them,” Grosco says. “It’s tough because when you’re trying to provide services to people, handling volunteers becomes a drain on you. And when you’ve got someone who’s well-meaning and wants to help, and you say, ‘Go away,’ it’s bad public relations.”

Preparation Is Critical

How many people tend to volunteer in times of crisis, and to what extent are they helpful or simply in the way? It depends on factors

such as the type of emergency, who is affected by it, its magnitude and the amount of media attention it receives. “If several businesses are burning down, the volunteerism won’t be significant,” Grosco says. “But when people’s homes are being destroyed, that reaches people at an emotional level, and they want to reach out and help.”

When more volunteers than you can handle arrive at your door, take down their names and contact information, and ask them to return later. “It’s a good idea to make a list instead of flat-out turning people away,” Grosco says. “We made a list and started calling around day 14, asking for help. Most of the time they would say yes. Sometimes they were back at work and couldn’t volunteer.”

No matter how many volunteers show up, they’re ultimately as

“There are plenty of people willing to volunteer. You just have to give them basic training so that they’re familiar with your facility — before it’s time to call upon them in a crisis.”

helpful — or in the way — as you are prepared. For Greg Davis, director of Cajundome in Lafayette, La., assigning volunteers to specific tasks was a nonissue when Hurricane Katrina struck. That’s because he had a pre-established organizational plan that allowed his team to quickly evaluate where they needed people, and he worked closely with the American Red Cross.

With the help of around 500 volunteers per day, Davis accommodated more than 18,000 hurricane evacuees over 58 days. “We had a very well-organized reception for the volunteers,” Davis says. “We knew as they walked up where we needed to place them, because our department heads were in constant communication with the reception desk, which was staffed by five to 10 people at any one time.”

According to Davis, it’s the first three to four days that make the difference, because those volunteers are communicating with their friends and family and telling them what it’s like. “In our case, they were encouraging their friends and families to come to Cajundome,” he says.

Building Your Team

Having a cadre of volunteers is essential for venues in times of crisis, making it important to develop a pre-established group of people (think Army Reserve) you can call upon when needed. “You’ll never be able to run the shelter with just paid staff,” Davis says.

Adds Groscoast: “There are plenty of people out there that are willing to volunteer. You just have to find them, get them on your pre-established list, and give them basic training so that they’re familiar with your facility and your way of action — before it’s time to call upon them in a crisis. This way, while there might be a small amount of specific training that you’ll

need to give them, you won’t be training them up from scratch while you’ve got a hundred other things to deal with.”

You can build your team of volunteers by:

Asking the community. Send postcards to people in your area mentioning that you’re looking to expand your reserve of volunteers. Ask them to reply with their contact information and skills they could provide to your venue in a crisis situation.

Asking local officials. “You also could coordinate with your local municipality, because they already have a long list of volunteers, whether it be a search team, police explorers, fire explorers or fire volunteers,” Groscoast says.

Asking faith-based organizations. “Get to know the United Way organization in your community or your local Red Cross,” Davis says. “Those are the organizations that are going to provide the bulk of your volunteers.”

Meet with the groups to discuss how they could be of help in your venue, and try to find out how many volunteers they could provide, Davis says. “Be sure to have a good communication plan so that if a major disaster strikes, you can activate those organizations very quickly.”

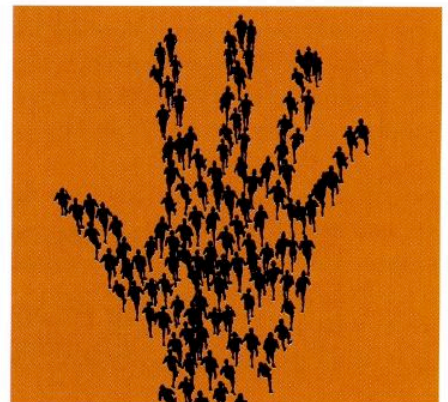
For those volunteers who show up ready to help in the time of a crisis but haven’t had the benefit of advance training, additional supervision and a crash course may be required. “We didn’t have a formal training session because we were in the middle of a major disaster, but we did make sure our volunteers were well-supervised by the head of each department,” Davis says. “They learned as they were instructed on how to do the job.” (For more information about handling volunteers, see the Mega-Shelter Best Practices Guidelines handbook, available at www.iaam.org/products/index.htm.) **VSS**

All Hands on Deck

George R. Brown Convention Center in Houston had more than 2,000 volunteers at any given time when it opened its doors to evacuees in the aftermath of Katrina, says Luther Villagomez, general manager.

The venue assigned volunteers to duties such as monitoring sleep areas for safety and security concerns, consoling and retrieving information from people who had lost a sibling or family member, and helping with crowd control to organize people into lines. “A lot of it is organizing volunteers to give people opportunities to feel at home, and keeping them busy while they wait to be placed in a more permanent location,” Villagomez says.

To make the best use of volunteer help, venues should identify the number they need in the event of a crisis, along with the types of jobs they could fill, Villagomez suggests. “This ensures you get only as many volunteers as you need, and you’ll know the type of skills needed,” he says. “Then create a system to phase in additional volunteers in shifts and schedules so that you don’t mentally or physically tax any of them.”



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