

California Disaster Corps Tightens Integration of Volunteers, First Responders

By Corey McKenna on July 14, 2010

California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger announced in June the formation of Disaster Corps, a group of highly trained and vetted volunteers tied closely to the state's mutual-aid system. The corps provides a network of volunteers ready to respond to emergencies.

The initiative provides \$1.15 million (through U.S. Department of Homeland Security grants) spread over five counties for additional training and FBI/Department of Justice background checks for Disaster Corps applicants, as well as new county staff positions responsible for coordinating volunteers during disasters.



About 1,000 volunteers will be categorized by capabilities, and the corps will initially be fed by programs in San Francisco, Los Angeles, San Bernardino, Riverside and San Diego counties. Background checks will be conducted for each volunteer, and they will be certified in Red Cross CPR and first aid. A new statewide Disaster Volunteer Resource Inventory (DVRI) will house the volunteers' contact information, affiliations and training information to facilitate their utilization during disasters.

Photo: California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger toured volunteer field demonstrations at the launch of the Disaster Corps program. Courtesy of Peter Grigsby—Office of the Governor

Volunteers aren't always included in emergency managers' responses to disasters and a mutual-aid mechanism for the use of volunteers outside their sponsoring jurisdiction didn't exist in California before the establishment of Disaster Corps, according to the state's Cabinet Secretary for Service and Volunteering Karen Baker.

Nor do volunteers undergo background checks in all cities and counties. "In Los Angeles that was never even something that was thought of when it first started with the CERT [Community Emergency Response Team] program," said Stacy Gerlich, commander of the Los Angeles Fire Department's CERT program. "But for us with 4,500 [CERT trainees] a year, there's no way, even if you just look at the cost involved."

The Disaster Corps creates a set of standards that participating volunteers are expected to meet, so emergency managers who use them know what to expect.

“This enhances [our corps of volunteers] and gives us the ability to have a tighter network, so to speak, of ready-to-go volunteers on short notice that we can reach out to, communicate with on an ongoing basis, train with on an ongoing basis, and also provide assistance for outlying counties,” said Wilson Lee, CERT coordinator for the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department. “What this gives us is sort of the elite volunteers, the ones that understand the Incident Command System, that have some basic knowledge of communications, know the chain of command and know that they might just be doing tasks they’ve never been trained to do.”

It may also make emergency managers more comfortable using volunteers because they will have a clearer idea of who’s expected to pay for housing and feeding the volunteers, and who will manage and account for them. “So you as a city administrator, a chief or a county office emergency manager could say, ‘Well, at least I know when I request them they’re going to come as a package. They’re going to come with a management piece. They’re going to come with paperwork, and we’re going to know how to integrate them.’ I think that’s what’s important,” Lee said.

This new initiative will also help channel the efforts of spontaneous volunteers who may have a professional skill they wish to lend to response efforts. These volunteers might be professionals who can lend their services, and the initiative will provide a structure to do that in way that’s in line with federal accountability, liability and reimbursement rules relative to disasters.

Elevating Volunteers’ Visibility

In a disaster, local emergency managers could be focused on the immediate response and may overlook the assistance they could receive from properly trained and vetted volunteers, Baker said. “In this case, they would be able to push the DVRI button, immediately see who in their local jurisdiction does debris removal [and] utilize those resources,” she said.

Additionally if the local emergency managers had trouble tapping those resources, they could reach out through the Standardized Emergency Management System (SEMS) to request Disaster Corps assistance. In addition to integrating Disaster Corps into SEMS, the next version of the state’s emergency plan, which is in the process of being finalized, will define an additional emergency services function for volunteers.

The Disaster Corps is planned for volunteers with experience in mass care feeding and sheltering, law enforcement and radio operations. Other volunteer specialties are planned to be added as the program matures.

Disaster Corps members will have their names, contact information, training and capabilities entered into a Web-based database, the DVRI, available to all emergency managers, volunteer coordinators, nonprofits and faith-based organizations that want to provide disaster assistance in the state.

The DVRI will include information on each volunteer organization, the service it provides, its capacity and location, how many personnel are sworn disaster service workers and how many volunteers are deployed. Officials in the five counties participating in the program's roll out see the corps as increasing training and coordination between volunteers and first responders.

The Los Angeles Disaster Corps has started selecting approximately 200 volunteers, out of the county's 5,000 CERT members, to be a part of the statewide program. "In the middle of July we're going to have a process that we, internally in our department, will create that will allow our volunteer coordinators the ability to preselect through an application process or through some kind of check-off sheet on whether the volunteer wants to be in it, what skill sets they have [and] when they're available," Lee said.

San Francisco is planning to set up a center to place spontaneous volunteers in positions with the city as well as nonprofits assisting in the response. Amy Ramirez, an emergency planner and Disaster Corps program lead with the San Francisco Department of Emergency Management, said the new volunteer coordinator will have a bird's-eye view of volunteer programs in the city and could identify opportunities, including tapping the many Recreation and Parks Department volunteers for disaster response. "One of the things we're going to do here in San Francisco is to have that person start looking at city departments that use volunteers on a day-to-day basis and figure out if it makes sense to affiliate those volunteers so we can use them in a disaster."