

Addressing Liability Issues with Disaster Volunteers

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It is prudent for any agency that involves volunteers to identify, assess, and mitigate the associated risks. Agencies engaged in disaster response and relief activities must pay particular attention to any added risks that arise from the emergency situation. Following are some areas of risk and suggested actions:

- Agencies can prevent many potential problems by developing a clear-cut set of policies and procedures. Screening, orientation, training, supervision, and evaluation of the volunteer need particular attention.
- The pressures of a disaster may make it harder to conduct in-depth interviews, to verify credentials, or to train volunteers fully, thus adding to the risk factor. Therefore, it makes sense to place new volunteers in the least sensitive positions and also to create volunteer jobs that don't require extensive training.
- Pay attention to safety issues. Adopt and follow safety procedures. Train new volunteers in the use of equipment, and document the training.
- What access do new volunteers have to your agency's clients and to information about them? Supervise new volunteers closely and make sure they understand and follow agency policies regarding client confidentiality.
- What about insurance? Claims against volunteers may be covered by your organization's general liability policy or by a separate volunteer liability policy. Coverage for accidents and injuries to volunteers may also be available in a general liability policy or a separate policy. Specialized coverage may be needed, such as malpractice for volunteers working in a professional capacity and automobile liability insurance for those who drive as part of their volunteer assignment.

While the points here are offered for your consideration as you plan for disaster volunteers, they are not meant to be a comprehensive guide to risk management. For more information, contact the [Nonprofit Risk Management Center](#) and seek the advice of experts.

What Can Volunteers Do In A Disaster?

There will be many essential tasks that volunteers can do in a disaster. Here are some volunteer opportunities that are likely to emerge:

- Caring for the elderly
- Caring for people with disabilities
- Cleanup/debris removal
- Clerical assistance
- Community outreach
- Courier service
- Damage assessment
- Data entry
- Driving
- Food preparation/service
- Information and referral
- Interpretation/translation
- Interviewing
- Pet care
- Repair of facilities
- Warehousing food and supplies
- Security support
- Shelter services
- Sorting clothing, food, supplies
- Telephone calling/answering