Assisting After Disaster: A Volunteer Management and Donations Management Training

Laura H. Downey
Mississippi State University

David Buys
Mississippi State University

Brent Fountain
Mississippi State University

Tom Ball
Mississippi State University

Anne Howard Hilbun
Mississippi State University

See next page for additional authors

Recommended Citation

Assisting After Disaster: A Volunteer Management and Donations Management Training

Authors

Laura H. Downey, David Buys, Brent Fountain, Tom Ball, Anne Howard Hilbun, and Paula Threadgill

Assisting After Disaster: A Volunteer Management and Donations Management Training

Abstract

Stakeholders in Mississippi perceived that Extension could lead volunteer management and donations management after a natural disaster. In response, Mississippi State University Extension professionals developed a training on volunteer management and donations management to supplement the existing Incident Management System/Incident Command System (ICS) curriculum. The training includes education on connecting volunteer management and donations management to local emergency planning, managing volunteers, managing goods and monetary donations, operating within ICS, and developing relationships between volunteer organizations and partners. The training has been pilot tested in Mississippi with promising preliminary results. Extension professionals elsewhere may benefit from similar trainings.

Keywords: disaster training, donations management, volunteer management

Laura H. Downey
Associate Extension Professor
laura.downey@msstate.edu

David Buys
Assistant Extension/Research Professor
david.buys@msstate.edu
@drbuys

Brent Fountain
Associate Extension Professor
brent.j.fountain@msstate.edu
@MSUExtRD

Tom Ball
Extension Associate III
t.ball@msstate.edu
@RTomBall

Anne Howard Hilbun
Extension Instructor
anne.hilbun@msstate.edu
@ahhilbun

Paula Threadgill
Associate Director, Family and Consumer Sciences and 4-H, and Extension Professor
paula.threadgill@msstate.edu
@DrPIT

Mississippi State University
Mississippi State, Mississippi

Introduction

Mississippi State University (MSU) Extension Service professionals have been assisting communities after disasters since the Great Flood of the Mississippi River in 1927. For over 15 years, MSU Extension Service professionals in the Center for Government and Community Development have provided training on the Incident Management System/Incident Command System (ICS) to other Extension professionals; municipal, county, and state personnel; and volunteers. After a series of storms affected communities across Mississippi in 2014, a group of us considered how we might expand our assistance related to disasters. Our author team sought and received funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture National Institute of Food and Agriculture to explore stakeholder perceptions of Extension's role in natural disaster preparedness, response, and recovery.

Discovering the Need

From March to September 2015, nine focus group sessions were held in eight counties. Participants were 113 stakeholders involved with natural disaster preparedness, response, and recovery. The selected counties were chosen because they represented different regions of the state and had experienced a range of natural disaster types. Extension agents in the selected counties identified 15 to 20 relevant stakeholders in each county and invited them to participate in focus groups at Extension offices or neutral locations. Stakeholders included county and regional civic, business, faith-based, and governmental leaders and lay citizens. Use of focus group sessions conducted after the storms of the previous year allowed us to document stakeholders' associated perceived needs in their own words.

We developed a focus group question route to guide the conversations and ensure that the most important questions would be asked of each group. The guide included 12 questions focused on identifying postdisaster needs that could be addressed by Extension. Each focus group session lasted approximated 2 hr, and a team member designated as scribe took detailed notes during each session.

We analyzed the notes to identify perceived needs that were articulated by multiple participants at multiple focus group sessions and feasibly could be met through Extension programming. Perceived needs that were identified by only one or two participants or at only three or fewer focus group sessions were not considered to be statewide needs. Similarly, perceived needs that could not be met through Extension education were not considered to be relevant for informing program development. After analysis, we met to discuss key findings and determine how best to integrate findings into training development efforts.

Defining the Problem

Participants at each site identified volunteer management and donations management as emergent areas of need that could be met through the work of Extension professionals. Community-wide or large-scale volunteer management and donations management are not directly or typically met by any one community-based agency or organization. Focus group participants expressed that Extension agents are in a unique position to meet these needs because many agents are already trained in ICS, agents have strong connections with other community-based agencies and organizations, and agents are skilled in working with volunteers.

Designing a Solution

In response, Extension educators from the Center for Government and Community Development led the effort to develop training materials and a 1-day training on volunteer management and donations management as an addition to the ICS curriculum. Pilot testing of the materials and training took place between December 2016 and July 2017. County and area agents, administrators, and specialists ($N = 142$) with primary responsibility in agriculture and natural resources, family and consumer sciences, community and resource development, and 4-H youth development were trained.

Training learning objectives focused on

- connecting volunteer management and donations management to the local Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan (CEMP),

- managing affiliated and spontaneous volunteers,

- managing donated goods and monetary donations,

- operating within ICS as a volunteer manager or donations manager,

- developing relationships between volunteer organizations and partners that could be included in the CEMP, and

- coordinating and collaborating with nonprofit government volunteer organizations to develop a working relationship with new and existing volunteer organizations both before and after a disaster.

Multiple educational methods, such as lecture, demonstrations, and group exercises, were used to deliver training content. Stories and experiences, table-top exercises, and interactive activities were included as a way to keep learners engaged.

An informal open-ended paper-pencil evaluation was conducted at the end of each training to assess participants' perceptions of the training and to identify areas of the training that worked or did not work as intended. Analysis of the completed evaluations revealed the following points:

- Participants perceived that volunteer management and donations management are within Extension's roles and responsibilities after a natural disaster.

- Participants were willing to serve as volunteer managers and donations managers.

- The training increased participants' confidence to serve in volunteer manager and donations manager roles.

- Trainers had a wealth of experience related to disaster management, and this experience was essential to their effectively and efficiently conveying training content.

- Hands-on activities and engaging methods helped participants draw connections between training content, prior experiences after a natural disaster, and expectations for what could happen after a natural disaster in the future.

- Additional training would be needed to reinforce material covered.

Disseminating the Training

Volunteers are "the lifeblood of Extension" and have played a historical role in traditional Extension educational efforts (Seevers, Graham, Gamon, & Conklin, 1997, p. 188). Extension professionals from all programmatic areas are in a natural position to help community leaders and other community-based agencies and organizations manage volunteers. Although Extension has not typically led community-based donations management, Extension professionals have assisted with organization of donations after a natural disaster and periodically receive donations to support traditional Extension programs (Cathey, Coreil, Schexnayder, White, 2007; Gregory, 2016, 2017). Extension professionals, however, usually manage volunteers under nonchaotic conditions, and items donated to Extension are generally not on the scale of donations received after a natural disaster. For these reasons, widely implemented specialized training could prepare Extension professionals to assist after disasters. Considering the positive initial feedback gained through our pilot test, Extension professionals in other states

could benefit from receiving similar training. As a first step in dissemination, one of our team members provided information about the training at the annual Extension Disaster Education Network conference in 2017. Information about the training, including instructions on how to obtain the training materials for use in other states, is available at https://gcd.msucares.com/emergency-managementhomeland-security-ics-training.

Acknowledgments

References

Cathey, L., Coreil, P., Schexnayder, M., & White, R. (2007). True colors shining through: Cooperative Extension strengths in time of disaster. *Journal of Extension*, *45*(6), Article 6COM1. Available at: https://www.joe.org/joe/2007december/comm1.php

Gregory, R. N. (2016, March 4). Donation helps 4-H'ers learn STEM concepts. Retrieved from http://extension.msstate.edu/news/feature-story/2016/donation-helps-4-h%E2%80%99ers-learn-stem-concepts

Gregory, R. N. (2017, March 28). Manufacturer donates fabric to MHV clubs. Retrieved from http://extension.msstate.edu/news/feature-story/2017/manufacturer-donates-fabric-mhv-clubs

Seevers, B., Graham, D., Gamon, J., & Conklin, N. (1997*). Education through Cooperative Extension*. Albany, NY: Delmar Publishers.