Mark Peterson - Host:

I am Mark Peterson, and this is "Before, During, and After: A Podcast from FEMA."

Mark Peterson - Host:

Voluntary agencies are typically some of the first organizations to respond and are often the last to leave a community, sometimes years after a disaster. The work of federal, state, and local governments is only part of the response and recovery puzzle. In fact, people showing up in times of need as volunteers are a critical piece to serving the needs of disaster survivors. In celebration of April being National Volunteer Month, this episode will focus on the transformative effect volunteers have on disaster response and recovery. The difference that they make in the lives of disaster survivors and the role they play in supporting FEMA's new individual assistance program reforms.

Mark Peterson - Host:

So, April is Volunteer Month, and we're excited to have a great panel here to discuss just the tremendous impacts that volunteers have in the way that we, as a organization and we as a community, respond to and recover from disasters. And so, I wanna welcome a couple of guests here to help kind of, really describe the impact that volunteers have. And, and first and foremost, I wanna start off with April Wood from the National VOAD. April, thanks for joining me. Tell me a little bit about your organization.

April Wood:

Thanks, Mark. I'm with National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster. We are a membership association of about 75 national nonprofits that do disaster relief and recovery work across the U.S. And our 56 state and territory VOADs, including the District of Columbia as well. So our mission is really to work together across our four Cs, to be able to help people in communities affected by disaster and alleviate any suffering working together to reduce any redundancies of efforts and make sure that we're being efficient with services to communities in need.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Wonderful, thank you. And Arif Yusuf from Islamic Relief, USA. Tell me a little bit about your organization. Well,

New Speaker:

Well, thank you, Mark. It's a honor to be here with you on the podcast. And so, as you mentioned, my name is Arif Yusuf. I'm currently the Director of Programs at Islamic Relief USA. I'll oversee both our domestic and international programs. We are a international and domestic humanitarian and advocacy organization in the U.S. And we focus on four program areas. The first being healthcare services, food insecurity. The third being refugee resettlement. Part of that is the United States State Department program on what they call U.S. RAPP, Refugee Admissions and Placement Program, and also disaster response and recovery and preparedness. We are a member of National VOAD and proud member of National VOAD as well as April was mentioning. And so, we have been involved in the disaster space since 2011 and been part of collaborating with other NGOs domestically and internationally responding to some of the most unfortunate crisis we've seen in the recent years.

Mark Peterson - Host:

We are so grateful to have you here. I, I know that you are probably very busy both internationally and domestically so thanks for taking the time. And then also from our Region 4, which is located in Atlanta, Georgia, we have Eric Nankervis. Eric, thanks so much. And tell me about what you do at Region 4.

Eric Nankervis:

So, I am the lead Voluntary Agency Liaison and Mass Care Specialist for FEMA Region 4. In that role, I oversee a team of four other voluntary agency liaisons, or as we call them VALS and mass care specialists, that liaise with the nonprofit sector, with the state, with the different voluntary organizations active in disaster, the VOADs to ensure that we are preparing ourselves before, during, and after a disaster to be able to support those that may be impacted should something happen. So it is, I think, in FEMA, one of the best jobs because I get to work with the organizations that are doing the work that we FEMA cannot do, but the organizations that, that like, Islamic Relief and the other national VOAD partners that actually are walking side by side with those disaster survivors to be able to help them through the response and recovery as they try to find their new normal after a disaster.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Absolutely. And then finally, Colt Hagmaier, who's the Assistant Administrator for Recovery at FEMA headquarters. Colt, thanks for being here. How does FEMA's recovery programs work with volunteers both in the field and in our regions and headquarters?

Colt Hagmaier:

Recovery's part of FEMA, obviously, and as FEMA, we help people before, during, and after disasters. And as of today's recording, we've been doing it for 45 years. It's our 45th birthday of FEMA. And so, in the Recovery Director, obviously we have programs that are focused on that after disasters part. After something has come through, we join the community with our, with our partners, whether they be other federal agencies, nonprofits, philanthropic, private sector organizations, we, we help bring them all together along with our programs to provide comprehensive recovery solutions for those communities. So, we're there helping to identify what their needs are, what outcomes they would like to see at that, at that community level, and then bringing together lots of different organizations and lots of different programs to support them.

Mark Peterson - Host:

So, Colt, from a FEMA perspective, as we work in the field to bring together organizations that can support the recovery of the, the, the various communities that have been affected by disasters, what do you see as the true impact for, of volunteers on the communities and in the way that we work together to support those communities in disasters?

Colt Hagmaier:

So, volunteerism in America, I think is critical to emergency response and recovery. It's, it's how I got involved in emergency management. I started as a volunteer when I was 15 on my local rescue squad. And, and had just had a tremendous experience over the, over the following 20 years that really shaped, not only the career I wanted to have, but who I am as a person. And so I think the world of our volunteers, and that's why it's such a privilege to serve on the administrator's behalf, on the National VOAD Board with April and with Arif, because I get the privilege of seeing firsthand all of the different voluntary organizations, each with their own niche and their own resources and their own perspective on how they are going to help that community come together in a way that not only helps at the very microscopic local level, whether it's only a few families impacted or at entire state levels. I mean, we have VOADs that are bringing together organizations from across the state and from outside of states in a coordinated way to support those communities, individuals, and families. And so, I get to travel with the administrator on occasion, and often when I get to a disaster, which is not long after the disaster, there's already volunteers from within that community and from the surrounding jurisdictions that on their own or through mutual aid agreements or through coordinated VOAD agreements are already there providing assistance and helping that community jumpstart its recovery.

Mark Peterson - Host:

April, likewise, to Colt's experience, I mean, I can't tell you how many times that I've been out at a, a disaster event shortly after the maybe hurricane has made landfall and there's already volunteers on the ground. How do organizations, and maybe that you work with closely, how do you see them mobilizing so quickly into that community response apparatus?

April Wood:

Yeah, so volunteering in America is kind of the core of how we help one another, how we help in our communities every day, whether you're volunteering through a faith-based organization or an advocacy organization or community-based organization, it's how we serve others and make a difference in our community every day. And our volunteers are always at the ready. They're trained. They bring a friend with them, sometimes that's not trained, that's a spontaneous volunteer, and we're able to quickly integrate them into established systems and structures like our volunteer organizations active in disaster structure at the state and territory level, where we're able to effectively partner with our emergency management partners at a state, local level, as well as our partnerships at a federal level.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Eric, Colt kind of mentioned that we, we're really, we are bringing together so many organizations that maybe have their own, maybe take on volunteerism. They're coming from a different perspective. And, and you're certainly coming from an, an, an Islamic perspective and, and that organization with Islamic Relief. What do you look for for volunteers? How do you mobilize individuals who wanna serve their communities and bring them together?

New Speaker:

You know, as April mentioned, I think volunteers are core of our operations, especially when it comes to disasters, because they help amplify our work, whether that's coming in and building capacity to the work that we do, or help bringing in resources to do the work that we do. And so, that's one thing I don't want us to forget. But, as an organization, we, we do not have a shortage of volunteers and there's a lot of excitement around volunteerism, especially when it comes to emergency response. And any faith-based organization will tell you this is, everybody wants to help. And it's a core of who they are. Especially when you're coming from a faith community, you're always taught to help your neighbors. And from a Islamic perspective, you know, we have this tradition where we're told to help 40 neighbors on the right, 40 neighbors on the left, you know, 40 neighbors in front of you, 40 neighbors behind you.

New Speaker:

And so, we have this culture where, you know, where volunteers is part of being a good Muslim. And so, we have a large interest from our community in terms of wanting to volunteers for different things. And the number one thing that we get asked for is, "Hey, how can I help out an emergency?" Rather that's, you know, getting the opportunity to deploy with us to do a, a response, or how do we be around for the long-term, helping out with our long-term operations, a long-term recovery operation that is, where you go and you help rebuild a home with a different partner across the nation. And so, one of the things we would try to do is try to formalize our operations in terms of where we offer training to our volunteers. And so, we, what we do in an organization, in our organization, is that we have volunteers who are specifically ready for disasters and so, they're trained. So, for example, we have a great training platform with the American Red Cross, where they're trained how to operate and manage a shelter, where they're trained how to do damage assessment. We also have training with the United Methodist Church, where our volunteers are trained on how to do basic types of constructions. And so, we keep these volunteers separate from our mainstream volunteers. And so, whenever a call comes out for us to deploy, we're able to access these volunteers that are trained and ready to go. And so, they're able to kind of deploy within a short time notice because all of the preparedness has been done already. And currently, we have in our database about 30,000 volunteers that keeps growing year by year. And, you know, there's always interest for more volunteers to come on. And so that's generally how we do it.

Mark Peterson - Host:

April, with regard to volunteerism for maybe the response to natural disasters specifically, or, or really any kind of disasters, are there specific skills that we look for?

April Wood:

That's the beauty of volunteering, Mark, right. Anybody can volunteer. You can be sitting at home at midnight answering a phone call for someone that needs help, or you can be in the field with a hammer helping to rebuild someone's home after a disaster. It's really about finding the right fit for you and the right interest that you have in giving back to your community. People volunteer for so many different reasons, whether it's a social connection, whether it's because they wanna give back, as Arif mentioned, to their community. And in some cases, like my own first volunteer experience, it came out of a tragedy where I had a high school classmate that was involved in an ATV accident that required dozens of units of blood and we organized a blood drive in our local community. And so, that was kind of my entry into the world of volunteerism. And I just really encourage folks to find something you're passionate about, something you care about. It might be the environment, it might be pets, but find something and go and give back to your community. It's a really rewarding experience.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Eric, you serve in, in FEMA's Region 4, which is a, a very active disaster region and sees threats of hurricanes, tornadoes, severe storms, flooding, I mean, you name it. Do you have any examples, maybe, of where the volunteer community has really stepped up to make a dramatic impact in response and recovery efforts?

Eric Nankervis:

You know, Colt really hit on this, you know, with his remarks a moment ago. Before we get there as FEMA, the volunteers are there. We show up as FEMA trying to coordinate with the local government, with the state government, but by the time we're there, we already see the different organizations collaborating, cooperating, communicating, and coordinating together to be able to help those impacted by that disaster. I'll take an example of the tornado that went through Rolling Fork a year ago in Mississippi. By the time FEMA was boots on the ground and we had a disaster declaration, there were already about 10 different organizations doing feeding, doing sheltering doing chainsaw work, tarping roofs and everything else in between before we were able to set something up for a FEMA response. So, you know, the, the, the power of these VOAD organizations is so important because they're there before we get on the ground as a federal agency, as the, the, all of the federal agencies that come in to support.

Eric Nankervis:

And at the end when we pull out, they're still there ensuring that those unmet needs of those disaster survivors are being met. And I think that's something that's really important about the role of volunteer agencies in disaster is what we FEMA, what we other federal agencies cannot provide, they can. They can find those solutions. We can work with them to help find those solutions but in the end of the day, it starts locally with a disaster, and it ends locally. And it's those voluntary organizations, those volunteers, that are really there to ensure that the community is fully taken care of, and people are being able to be brought back to the new normal of whatever that may be after a disaster. You know, a lot of times we talk about we're trying to rebuild their homes, repair their homes, but a big part of it is not just rebuilding their homes and repairing their homes, it's also helping them as individuals, helping them to navigate what their new normal is gonna look like, and providing that emotional and spiritual care that we, FEMA, may not be able to provide. But those voluntary organizations are able to, to be able to help them rebuild themselves because they have been through the worst day in their life, ever, and they need that help - someone to walk beside them and to be able to walk with them through that recovery process. And that's the power of the voluntary agencies and the faith-based organizations and being able to help in the recovery process. It's not just the hammer nails, it's also the hand in hand walking them through the process and helping them rebuild not just the home, but themselves, how they need to be emotionally and spiritually taken care of.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Colt, when I think about maybe the, the headquarters level and the disasters that are often, maybe cause FEMA headquarters to be activated, I think of very large events, big hurricanes. And, and a lot of those situations, maybe the, the volunteers that are local to a community can be quickly overwhelmed. And so, when you're active in these events, how does this work in terms of mobilizing large amounts of volunteers? And how does FEMA fit in in that? I mean, are you in conversations with April and Arif, you know, regularly?

Colt Hagmaier:

Yeah, so, a lot of that happens sort of at a more local level, to be honest with you. Like every, every disaster starts very locally and expands. And so, as an incident exceeds the capabilities of that locality, assistance comes from other places. And then when it gets really big and it requires a national response, we activate what's called the National Response Coordination Center. That's a physical room in, in FEMA headquarters in DC that's responsible for coordinating and communicating all of the response and recovery activities at the national level. We're not directing, tactically, every specific thing, but we're providing the resources and the coordination across agencies and across organizations. One of the key seats in that, in that NRCC, the National Response Coordination Center, it's actually filled by April and her team, they are such integral partners to us that they are there sitting beside us during those activations, talking about what information's coming in through their channels, what information we have, and how to best share that in a way that coordinates the support to those communities.

Mark Peterson - Host:

So, April, we were talking about how the NRCC mobilizes and then sort of like works with the larger organizations to support, maybe, areas that are overwhelmed from volunteers.

April Wood:

Yeah, to build on what Colt was sharing about the National Response Coordination Center and how we work together at a national level, that is being replicated across the country when disasters are occurring at that local level. As he mentioned, our state and territory wide leadership are right there in those state EOCs, in those county emergency operation centers, working and coordinating alongside their local and state emergency managers. And that's important because it benefits our emergency management communities from the volunteer hours that are donated or maybe it's in kind resources. I had a state VOAD leader share with me a story this morning of a recent disaster that occurred, and they were able to facilitate more than $150,000 worth of water in support of their state emergency management partners. And so, those are the opportunities that we have to work together in coordination between our voluntary agencies and our emergency management sector to really be able to get the right resources to the right people at the right time.

Eric Nankervis:

And if, if I may, you know, FEMA is only here when there is that federally declared disaster in designated counties, we're not able to respond to each and every disaster that is out there. It's only when the state requests it and the president approves it. But it's the volunteers, it's the voluntary organizations that are out there, the faith-based organizations that are out there ensuring that those disaster related unmet needs are taken care of. FEMA is just one piece of that puzzle that may be there. And a lot of times on the smaller disasters, we are not. And it's really important, you know, for those volunteers and those that want to volunteer to remember that we're just one small, as FEMA, part of that puzzle, if we are allowed to go into it. It really is that starts local, ends local, and it is the volunteers that take care of those. They know the people. They are there to support those impacted. And that's the most important thing. I think as we reflect upon volunteer month that we, FEMA, are just a small piece of it. We cannot do it all by ourselves. We do not do it all by ourselves. We rely so heavily upon those volunteers before a disaster is declared, if a disaster is declared and after we, FEMA, leave that disaster, it's still on the volunteers. So, the more that we can marshal that spirit of volunteerism, the better we as a nation will be to be able to get the help that those disaster survivors need.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Arif, I'm interested from your perspective, how do you go about the process of mobilizing all of those volunteers and, and really tapping into the enthusiasm that they have?

New Speaker:

There are different parts to it, right. One of the things, as Cole mentioned, is a lot of this is done at the local level. And so, Islamically for breaking down into regions. And let's say for example, we have coordinators that are based in the regional level. And so their job is twofold. And, and what we call the blue sky times when everything is normal, you don't need to deploy, is when we go out and we meet with our state VOADs. We go and we build a relationship with local level agencies. So, for example, you want to go and, and sit with the, with the VOAD elected board, or maybe there's an executive director - some VOAD does have that, they all have different ways in which they operate. And so, you wanna build those relationship and the organization that stayed at the, that sit at the state level because sometimes not every organization that's national is gonna be in a certain state, or not every organization that sits at a state is gonna be at a national level and so, you want to go and build that relationship out so you have a sense of what you're going to do and what they're going to do and what you're an expert in versus what you can rely from a different organization. And a lot of times that requires conversation, not only at the VOAD, at the state VOAD level, requires conversation with your local, state emergency services or a local county emergency management official, or your local FEMA region, whether that be FEMA Region 2 in New York, or et cetera, et cetera. We make sure you have a good relationship with your FEMA VAL. And that's how we do a lot of the backend coordination. And, and that, that happens at the local level. Sometimes the required national support, like our national headquarters here in Alexandria. But a lot of the work that we do, and when we deploy, as Colt mentioned, it starts at a very local level and then it expands from there.

New Speaker:

And in terms of our volunteer management, we also try to do the same thing. And we're, we're looking at different communities and managing the volunteers from a community perspective. And so, we want our, our, our regional coordinators to have a relationship with the volunteers in their region - to know who they are, to know their skillset. As April mentioned, you don't need to have a skill to volunteer. But they are such a thing as skill-based volunteers. For example, if they're, you know, a chaplain that does emotional spiritual care, there's a different way of how do you interact with them, and then there the different protocols of how you deploy them. But generally, we want to have that relationship ahead of time with the volunteers. You want to be there at the training, you want to go ahead, and you know, understand who they are. And so, when we deploy a team, what we traditionally tend to do is, you know, a lot of times you won't deploy a team, for example, if there's an incident in Houston, it's very hard to get volunteers to come from the city and not where that impact has happened, because for obvious reason, they're, they're busy with other things, you know, they themselves need assistance. And so, you'll deploy a team from a different neighboring state or from somewhere else. And we try to deploy that regional leader with that team that comes from a different region and so, it's very regional based. It's very local based. It's not, you know, the system is centralized, but we tend to to really focus from a local level and then it moves on up.

Mark Peterson - Host:

And maybe this question is for April and Arif, you know, if somebody is considering, you know, finding that area of volunteering and disasters that they might be interested in, it requires a lot of big muscle movements to, to mobilize volunteers, it, especially in these large disaster areas. But I, I think it could also be, it could be overwhelming, and I think it can also feel like, "Wow, those are gonna be some tremendously long days, and those are gonna be difficult days seeing people who have just gone through some of the worst days of their life." How do we support volunteers? How do we care for them in those environments and make sure that they don't suffer from things like burnout or emotional stress. Maybe we'll start with Arif.

New Speaker:

Yeah, and I think that's a great question because when you deploy volunteers, one of the things we try to do is give them a timeframe. So, usually they're committing a week and, and there are certain things that we as an organization are obligated. For example, we're required to find them lodging, required to make sure that they're fed. And so, we have staff that just, their entire job is to really take care of the volunteers that are doing the work from A to Z - from logistics to making sure they have the right information. Because the last thing you wanna do is to have volunteers there, and you don't have the information or what exactly they're gonna do. And so, the prep for before you put somebody on a plane or a train to come to a disaster site, all of that prep work has to be done ahead of time so, that volunteers needs to know what exactly the work entails, for how long, you know, what are the working hours are gonna end, and what is it that the organization is obligation is on the hook for, versus what the person or the volunteer or what their, what their rights are as volunteers. And so, that's how we try to do it to make sure that, you know we keep it consistent. We try not to keep a volunteer on, on a, on a disaster site for more than a week. If we need to be there for more than a week, then we'll rotate volunteers in and out.

April Wood:

Yeah. Thanks. Arif. In National VOAD, our role is really to support our member organizations who are supporting their volunteers in the field across the country. And one of the ways we do that is to make sure that we're providing tools and resources to our member organizations, promoting things like the disaster distress helpline or peer-to-peer support, ensuring that emotional and spiritual care is available to our volunteers and partnering with different organizations with different skill sets and different expertise. So much of this is about trust. It's about trust within a community and trust with one another as organizations that you're responding alongside, working closely with our government partners, our private sector partners, and ensuring that the right resources are available to promote self-care. We can't take care of others unless we take care of ourselves and our families and make sure that everything that's going on with us is going well, and then we're able to serve better and provide that hope and comfort that comes in that role of volunteer.

Mark Peterson - Host:

So, Colt, FEMA has just released some of the largest reforms or most impactful reforms to our individual assistance program that may be in the history of the agency. And so, a number of those reforms will probably impact some of the work that volunteers do out in the field. Maybe walk us through, you know, the overview of the, of the policy changes and then how you see that shaping disaster recovery when it comes to volunteers on the ground.

Colt Hagmaier:

So, I'll start by saying that there's another great podcast out there by a friend of mine, Frank Meranga, who's the Director of the Individual Assistance Program. It goes into far more detail about it, but I'll, I'd love to talk to you a little bit about how it's gonna change the game for how we interact with some of our volunteer partners. So, Individual Assistance is the program that exists within FEMA that helps families and individuals after a disaster. When the president says FEMA's gonna provide assistance, this is the program most likely to interact with someone who's interacting with FEMA. It is part of the safety net that the president unfurls after a disaster declaration, but it's only one part. It's joined together by programs in other federal agencies. It's joined together by things that are offered by volunteers and nonprofits and VOADs and philanthropic organizations in the private sector. And what we found over the last 20 years or so is that we have some holes in our portion of the safety net, and there's some gaps where ours attached to some others. And so, we've done what we can within our existing authorities to try to close those holes and close those gaps. So, for instance, what we found is that where our net touches that of the small business administration and some of their post-disaster loans, there was an opportunity for families to fall through a gap. There was, the two sides were not close enough, and so we were sending people to the Small Business Administration and to get a loan, and they didn't want a loan, or they didn't need a loan, and they were falling out of the process. They weren't coming back and getting the assistance that we could offer them. So now, we're overlapping the nets so that you don't have to bounce from one to the other. There's no more gap. You can go to both at the same time. So that's like one example of what we're trying to do within this new regulatory scheme.

New Speaker:

What's I think really exciting is that we can now provide additional assistance that will help our partners to help provide their assistance to the same people. So often, FEMA will provide assistance to a family - financial assistance, that only goes part of the way to what their actual need is. It will be supplemented by assistance from the state or from a VOAD or from a nonprofit organization. They will now have more accessibility to additional things. So, for instance, we're making changes to what we consider habitability or what makes your home safe to live in. If you have some pre-disaster damage, previously we couldn't do anything about that, but now we can provide additional assistance. That, that funding, you may choose to use with a VOAD partner. They may actually effectuate the repairs on your house. So we're, hopefully, closing some of those gaps so that there's better outcomes for every family. So, now I'd like to turn it over to my friend April, who can, from her perspective, say how this might interact with the VOADS more

April Wood:

Thanks, Colt. And certainly we're grateful for the opportunity to have provided feedback and input into that latest IA reforms that we're seeing roll out. And many of our voluntary organizations are working with disaster survivors every day on their road to recovery. And so, having the opportunity to be able to educate and advocate around the new process and the new reforms is really gonna help that disaster survivor have a better experience on the back end and hopefully a more efficient experience as they move through the pipeline of their recovery after experiencing some of the worst moments of their lives as well. We are right there with them. Volunteer agencies are supporting the disaster case management, the home repairs and rebuilds, and being able to support them through the changes in our partnership with FEMA is critical to the success of that disaster recovery.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Alright, so April is all about volunteers, National Volunteer Month. And really it's about encouraging individuals to support their communities, support their neighbors through volunteerism, whether it be in disasters or out. And so, I'd like to ask each of you, what is the message to somebody who is considering volunteering, either in a big way or a small way, to support their community and their neighbors? Each of you, I'd like to ask you to share your thoughts to that individual. April, we'll start with you.

April Wood:

You know, volunteering can be one of the most life-changing experiences that you can have. It's such a rewarding experience being able to pick a passion, follow your passion, no matter what it is, there are so many different great ways to get involved in your local community or nationally or internationally to support a number of different causes. So, follow your passion and start small. Be flexible. You might not have a great experience your first time. Don't give up. Stick with it. Come back, start small and really connect with an organization that's meaningful for you and what you're looking to achieve. We have a number of organizations on, on our website at NVOAD.org that you can take a look across those 75 nationally vetted disaster relief organizations. If you have interest in disaster relief and recovery work, that's a great way to start looking. If you wanna volunteer in your local community, there's an app called "Just Serve" that is supported by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. And so that's another great way to identify local volunteer opportunities within your community. And just encourage folks to really identify what they wanna do, how they wanna help. And it doesn't matter your background - culturally, politically, religious background, we are all united in service together.

Mark Peterson - Host:

So many opportunities, so many opportunities. Arif.

New Speaker:

You know, that's a, a very important question Mark, and, you know, there's a lot of things each of us could say and why you wanna volunteers, and I think volunteering is perhaps one of the most important thing you could do in your life from a personal perspective. And I'm happy, you know, remembering the first time I volunteered at a disaster site, it's what made me have the career I now have. Because I volunteered after Hurricane Matthew, I think in 2016. And that is like, wow, this is amazing. I have to, this is the line of work I wanna do. And, you know, it made a career out of it. But you know, it just one of my message to, to, to those that are interested, just do it. Because there is no, you know, you can volunteer however you want to.

New Speaker:

There is no big position you have to fill, you know, you do what you can offer, and so just go ahead and do it. And you, one of the things that I have gained from volunteering is a sense of community. When you go on a disaster site, you just go in there as, April mentioned, in, in unity of service to, you know, there is no baggage that comes off of what's happening in current events. You're just there to just help somebody get, in their time of need. And that brings a very powerful message because I've been on disaster sites where you see folks that are coming from overseas to help here, locally in the U.S. There are people from different communities, from all over the United States, coming just to help. And they're all there just for that one mission. And it gives you the sense of great purpose, of great community, that we are all here as in, in the service of humanity.

New Speaker:

And our only goal is to help this individual in their time of need. And that gives you a powerful sense of purpose and it really gives you optimism. It gives you positive energy that it's just so addicting that you want to do it again. And I remember all of the deployments that I've been on, as a staff member and as a volunteer, whenever it ends, it's such a sad moment. It was like, "What? Well, when is the next one? When is the next one?" And I remember when I used to volunteer with, with different agencies, you know, and there opportunity that came up, come up, that I would just go and get my friends to do it and get my family members to do it because you know the experience that you just went through and you just wanna share that. Forget, take, take a week out, take a couple hours out. It gives you a sense of real community and it shows you that there's hope in the world. And that's something very important, especially in this time and age.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Absolutely. Eric.

New Speaker:

Eric Nankervis:

One of the powers of the state and national voluntary organizations active in disaster at the national and state VOADs is how they bring people together - they bring the organizations together and how the organizations work together to support those disaster survivors. It's really important to not go out by yourself to try to help a disaster survivor, you know, self-deploying is what people call it, but find an organization in advance to be able to become a member of or to affiliate with, to, to be able to be a part of that team, that camaraderie that has been mentioned, it's really important not to go out there and just think, "I have a chainsaw. I have a John boat, and I can make a difference." Having a role within the larger voluntary response is really, really important. And identifying with who are those organizations that you might want to be a part of before is really important. There's space for everyone within all of those 75 organizations that April Wood was talking about with National VOAD. And each state has its own voluntary organizations active in disaster that you can take a look at on a more local level. So, you know, my, my message is, don't self-deploy. Don't go out without knowing who you're gonna go out with. It's very important because it's, it's a way to ensure that the work being done is in a coordinated way to be able to best impact those disaster survivors.

New Speaker:

I would also say what April said about you know, not just disaster work. Find that local organization that you wanna volunteer with. It could be a food pantry, you know, within your neighborhood. It could be something, you know, within your city. Find something. Volunteer. It's one of the healthiest things that we can do for our own self-care is to volunteer. And that's an important thing that I think people forget about is when we volunteer to help others, we are increasing our own self-care and really making an impact on ourselves while we are impacting, tenfold, others. So, you know, that is an important part of volunteerism. We're helping ourselves while we're helping others. And in this time and age, I think that's very important to make certain that we're taking care of ourselves through volunteerism while we're helping others.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Sure. Colt, what's your message to somebody who's on the fence about volunteering?

Colt Hagmaier:

I believe we are compassionate people. I believe it's part of who we are, our fabric, to be altruistic. I'll share with you my favorite quote. And bear with me, it's a little, little old. So, it's 210 years old so the language is a little archaic but, "Nature hath implanted in our breasts, a love of others, a sense of duty to them, a moral instinct, in short, which prompts us irresistibly to feel and to secure their distresses." And all of those fancy words just mean that in our being, we need to help those who need help, those who are suffering are forefront, and we do everything we can to help them. And we are in the business of destabilizing incidents. Disasters are destabilizing. They destabilize infrastructure, lifelines, everything that is, you know, our societal norm. It also destabilizes hope. And so, you can get a lot of things from volunteer. You can get experience, you can get social structures, you can get comradery, you can get a sense of self reward, but I don't think there's anything quite like giving someone a bit of hope when they don't have any. And that's really what volunteerism is all about. And what I think makes this country so great in that it is in our nature to want to help those who are suffering.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Colt, as we look at National Volunteer Month, what is your message to all of the millions of volunteers and all of the many organizations that help to bring them together? What is your message to them around the impact that they make to the work that we do at FEMA and also to the survivors that are working through these disasters and their response and recovery?

Colt Hagmaier:

My message is one of "Thank you" and "Give us more." FEMA is one contributor to a very complicated recovery in every situation. When the president directs us to make programs available, we do that as best we can, but they are partial solutions. It takes the work of many partners, many voluntary organizations, many philanthropic organizations, to come together to really weave a tapestry of support so that those communities can recover as best possible. So, thank you, one, for giving of your resources, giving of your time, and making that possible. My message is, once you pat yourself on the back and accept my gratitude, let's get back to work. Because every three days the president is declaring a new disaster. The needs are growing. Our communities need us more than ever. And so we need to get out there and work even harder together to make sure those communities are supported in every circumstance. So, thank you. We appreciate you. Bring your friends along because we got a lot to do.

Mark Peterson - Host:

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