**Transcript: Disaster Partner Spotlight: The NVOAD**

**{Intro Music}**

**[Cassie Ringsdorf]** I'm Cassie Ringsdorf and this is the FEMA Podcast.

When national and local news cover disaster somewhere in the US you may—like me—obsessively follow the coverage, trying to better understand what happened and how extensive the damage was. As the days pass, news coverage wanes, and our lives go on. We slowly forget to check in on the progress but assume things are on their way back to normal for the area's impacted…and they probably are. But what you probably don't see is that the road back is often difficult and can take years to come to what is referred to as a new normal. That road typically involves an entire community of support and resources far beyond what FEMA may provide. 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.

Nearly 50 years ago to coordinate the efforts of these agencies. The National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster or national VOAD was established as a forum to share information and coordinate resources before, during and after disasters. Today, they represent hundreds of national faith-based, community-based and nonprofit organizations as well as state and local groups who support communities in their greatest time of need. On today's episode of the FEMA Podcast, we'll talk to Greg Forrester, president and CEO of the national VOAD and Liz Gibson, FEMA’s voluntary agency coordination branch chief to learn what the national VOAD does, how they do it and why their partnership with FEMA is so important to what we do.

Greg, Liz, thanks for joining me today. I really appreciate it. Greg, I want to start with you. For our listeners who may not be familiar with the National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disasters, could you give me a brief overview of, of what you guys are and what you do and kind of role your organization has after a disaster?

**[Greg Forrester]** Sure. So, we started back way back in 1970, and we’ll be a 50 year old organization here coming into this next year. So it was really about how do we provide services pre and post disaster for survivors without tripping over each other. It was a matter of having, at that point in time, it was seven national member organizations. They had been responding to Hurricane Camille and they found that they were duplicating some of the services within the disaster arena. So what they decided was let's make sure we're having conversations in advance so that we're not doing this again. And over the last couple of decades, they progressed to the point now where we have 72 national member organizations and then we have an organization in every state and territory. And so really driving down to where the community that's affected by the disaster owns the disaster.

And so then how do we work with the nonprofits that are in the affected area? How do they then relate to the state organizations that can bring them some resources? And then how do they connect them up to a national organization that can bring in additional resources when necessary. And then it also became about how do we then integrate with governmental services, whether it's the local county emergency manager or the state emergency manager, and then with FEMA on a national level. And so we have that integration point within our organizations. And then the third piece is private sector. We know that we need funding for this. We know businesses are affected by disasters just like individuals are. So then how do we work with foundations and private sector to make sure that the resources that they're providing work in an effective manner within the area. As a piece of that, we developed what's called the four C's and the four C's stand for cooperation, communication, coordination and collaboration.

**[Cassie Ringsdorf]** Now Liz, how does the National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disasters work with FEMA? How would you describe that engagement?

**[Liz Gibson]** I would say that we are partners. We work very closely with them in a preparedness way. Uh, we have what we call FEMA voluntary agency liaisons in each of our regional offices who work on preparedness things with voluntary sector. The groups that Greg was mentioning, that are state and locally affiliated are regional, VALs work with them in doing again, preparedness kinds of things. Then post disaster helping them be organized, helping them develop long-term recovery groups. The concept being that we gather resources that will be made available to survivors after all the federal assistance that a survivor gets has been maxed out—when they reach a level, when they're no longer eligible for additional help but still have unmet needs, then we work even more closely with the voluntary sector through those committees and groups to help effect additional recovery.

We've been working together with them for not the full 50 years for sure, but probably 40 of the 50. FEMA was implemented in 1979 so this is our 40th year as an as an agency of the federal government. And there’ve been VOADs in existence for probably 38 of those 40 years. So, we've had a long, long history and relationship that goes way back and it's developed as national VOAD has grown. So have the VAL positions within the regional offices grown too. There are more reservists, there are more CORE employees, more permanent, full time employees that all have a VAL title and work in that arena.

**[Cassie Ringsdorf]** So maybe what we want to do now is help people understand what this looks like in a real world scenario. And I think probably the best example of that might be the 2017 disaster season where it was probably all hands on deck for both of you. Could you describe what it looked like from your perspective as well as yours? Uh, when we saw hurricane Harvey coming in to Texas, we knew it was going to be bad and then it just kind of kept getting bad. How would you describe the experience for you?

**[Greg Forrester]** Yeah, so it's very similar to what happens with FEMA where you can now pre-stage materials, supplies and resources and such. We do the same. So, we're watching the weather reports and we're talking to our member agencies that are in what's going to be the affected area, but also the contiguous areas because we want to be able to stage resources, both personnel, but also any of the relief goods and supplies that we're going to need. So, we started with that process and getting updates every day. We're on the phone with each other until there was a landfall and the NRCC was activated in Washington DC. We have a seat in there. And so we responded alongside the FEMA personnel and bringing the resources to the table that we have available in the same fashion in the state level.

So if we, we're talking Harvey, in the state emergency operations center, we also had somebody from one of our state go in the state emergency operations center. So, again, we can go ahead and filter information, provide resources as necessary and requested or just say we don't have that capacity because sometimes it goes both ways for that. The other interesting part I think that I want to mention is we also respond not just in declared disasters. So we're staging this all the time for non-declared, small disasters that may occur within a state that's not going to reach that federal level. But 2017 and 2018 really stretched capacity I think for all of our agencies, whether it's governmental or voluntary, to the point where we saw where the breaking points were and realizing that we need additional resources and additional members in order to go ahead and further the expanse of what we're able to deliver.

**[Cassie Ringsdorf]** So at this point, are you guys looking to expand your membership? Is that kind of a focus area that you've learned since the 17 and 18 seasons?

**[Greg Forrester]** It had always been a piece of who we are. We're always looking to grow because there's more and more agencies coming on board. Our history has been about 75% of our membership is faith-based. And what we're finding now is there's more secular organizations that have a stronger footprint on a national arena for response. And we wanted to make sure that we could go ahead and fit them in to what it is that we're doing with our existing organizations. So, we've grown in a couple of categories, but in the past year we've grown by an additional 10%. A year ago we grew by 20%. So, we're continuing to evaluate and vet all of the organizations. We just, we just don't let anybody join. They have to have certain capacity and capabilities. They also have to agree to behave appropriately in a disaster. And so, we have something called points of consensus, and those points of consensus talk about how we work with survivors and emotional, spiritual care, how we do that, do donations in a responsible manner. And so, whenever we're bringing on a new organization, they have to agree to those.

**[Cassie Ringsdorf]** Now Liz, what is your answer to that? How would you describe the experience from the 17 and 18 disaster seasons from a FEMA perspective working with the national VOAD?

**[Liz Gibson]** It was indeed all hands on deck. We were stretched to our capacity. Um, Harvey was just the beginning of basically a shortage of voluntary agency liaisons. We ended up in a situation where we did a lot of local hiring. We didn't have enough training or time to train, so we were really scrambling. We managed to make it happen. We worked very closely, again, depending on our voluntary agency partners to help us—sometimes through manning a warehouse where donations were coming in, or sometimes helping us through assessment information and feeding it back to us in places where we weren't able to physically there. So, it’s really great to have that partnership because we just couldn't do it all.

So, we're a little better prepared now I think as we've hired a lot of folks because of the 17 and 18 hurricane seasons, we had a lot of local hires. We're putting them through some training. We'll have a big training in August where we're putting about 50 new folks through some intensive training and so we will be better prepared for this year's onslaught if it comes. But we have to train our folks to work with the voluntary sector too. That's not just a given their relationships to be built here and we need to keep working on that.

**[Greg Forrester]** The one other point that Harvey created, was that the joint field office got set up by FEMA for the first time that I can recall in our history where we had additional people from national VOAD organizations deployed into the JFO. And so we worked alongside of the FEMA team that was there as they brought in a cadre to meet the needs for the different categories. We did the same with our voluntary sector, with people with subject matter expertise in those areas. And so it was really a team approach and a real true partnership as we were moving that forward.

**[Cassie Ringsdorf]** So it sounds like there have been some best practices that have come out of the 17 and 18 seasons, increasing membership, staffing, maybe rethinking where your staff is situated in certain disasters. Is there any other successes you'd like to point out, kind of best practices that you can see carrying you through future disaster seasons?

**[Greg Forrester]** For us it became a matter of making sure that the conversation continues. So that’s a best practice. It’s great to have FEMA, they're guiding process with the state, but if we don't have also a direct relationship with the state emergency management, there's a gap that happens in that dialogue because the state's looking for certain things. We're looking for certain things as nonprofits and FEMAs taking the larger picture and the umbrella and that's great, but we need to make sure that the nonprofits, the VOADs are engaged with the state level emergency management as well. Because then it affects the rollout of long-term recovery organizations and some other things that come in that recovery format and timeline.

And so, we look at, and now even as FEMA is looking at response timelines, we're on the same page of saying recovery happens at the time of response. And if you're not planning those two things simultaneously, you're going to end up with a gap. We're getting that's a best practice I think we've learned. And it got reiterated in 2017 as well as 2018 when it came to processes.

I think that we also learned islands are different. Yes, territories are different. Also, like with the U.S. Virgin Islands, to presume that each of the three islands have a similar culture and response and structures is a wrong idea even though it says it's US Virgin Islands. And then with Puerto Rico, the difficulty is when all infrastructure is devastated, then which ones do you put in place first? So, we're learning from that, from a voluntary side, from a community-based approach, outward, just like FEMA is learning it from how do you do it from providing the electric and the transportation, et cetera. But how do we again, coordinate that in a better fashion so it meets community needs as well as the long-term recovery.

**[Cassie Ringsdorf]** That makes sense. Now I'd like to shift a little bit. We’ve talked a lot about response and recovery, which is a really key piece of what you guys do. But I'm interested, I know a focus of your organization is disaster preparedness. How does that fit into your overall mission and what you guys do day to day?

**[Greg Forrester]** So again, it goes back to our faith-based. And so our faith-based network is all the major denominations, whether whatever flavor is on the building, so to speak. So we represent that. We have Jewish groups, we have Islamic groups, we have Sikh groups, we have a Buddhist group. We have the Protestants and the Catholics. And what you'll find is, is most of the faith groups have developed a preparedness training that they have within their congregations. Just as a standpoint of let's make sure that our congregations are prepared to react for themselves, but also then within their community where they reside. So, we do a lot of work with that. And we use preexisting materials. American Red Cross is fantastic. They are a member organization of ours. They produced some excellent materials. Save the Children also has excellent materials.

And then FEMA itself, we utilize the materials that are produced there. What we're finding is, when I speak to groups of disaster professionals who do this as a career, and I ask the question, how many of you have a disaster response plan for you and your family that you've looked at within the last six months? I get the same response rate from disaster professionals as I get from the general public. So, it's about 15 to 20%, which means that even how we're doing it right now doesn't work. So how do we get better at that? And we all know that with people with a plan, we'll survive better. So, we've got to invest some more time and thought process about how we do that

**[Cassie Ringsdorf]** From the FEMA perspective, would you agree with that?

[Liz Gibson] Absolutely. And one of the things that is proven over and over and over is people think more about preparedness post-disaster than they do pre disaster. I think our circle of response is a little bit backwards. We put preparedness up at the top when it should be sort of around the other side, because that's when real people really are open to the message and open to the idea. It's unfortunate, but it's the reality of the world is that nobody wants to talk about it, it's not a sexy topic, to talk about, you know, having gallons of water set aside and having food prepared and having a plan for who calls who and what's your meeting point in all of those things that you do in preparedness just on an individual level. Let alone prepare for your community, your state, and federally. So, I think we have to refocus in a different way.

It's certainly a challenge. I know it is. One of the things we did learn as we did an analysis of what segment of the population is the best prepared and its families with children that are in elementary school. And it was because the fire department and police department send somebody to the school every year. They hand out a piece of paper to the children in the school as to how they're going to respond to a fire in the school. But also, then they take the paper home and say, mom, dad, you have to fill this out. And so, what we find is as soon as families don't have children in elementary school, they fall on the unpreparedness scale.

**[Cassie Ringsdorf]** We're wrapping this up. So, let me ask you guys both a final question. FEMA just celebrated its 40th anniversary. How do you view the evolution of the national VOAD and FEMA’s engagement over the next 40 years? What do you envision, what do you hope will happen, and how do you think it will evolve?

**[Liz Gibson]** I think it will continue to evolve as National VOAD evolves. There’s a fine balance that voluntary agency liaisons, especially at the headquarters level, strive to keep the balance at all times. There is a tendency in government to want to, we tend to task not ask. So, for us, it’s defending and being an advocate for our voluntary sector to say, you know, they are independent. They don't work for us. They're our partners, not our employees. And so, I think it's continuing that message and making it stronger, to continue to be partners and to continue to build that awareness of partnership as they continue to build the response and recovery elements that they have through the various agencies and through additional agencies. So, for me, that’s the primary focus—protecting them, if you will, from being over-tasked, or tasked at all. And making an assumption that voluntary agencies are just going to come in and take care of this. So, no, that’s not the way it works.

**[Greg Forrester]** And so, for us as we move forward, that’s been the dialogue and as long as we can keep it going, one of the big challenges we face in a relationship with FEMA is the changing of staff all the time. What we do is all about relationship. Everything that we do in disaster is about relationship. And this conference that we're at today is all about let's get to know each other before something happens so that when we pick up the phone, we know how you're going to deal with it. We know your expertise. We already know each other. So, as long as we continue to do that between FEMA and the National VOAD. We now have the director of IA who sits on our board of directors so that the head of that unit sits there as a piece of reminding us that we do have a connective point and we want to make sure that we're listening.

We also want to know that our government is listening and saying, ask, don't task. No, you don't deploy us. We show up because we want to. And keeping that boundary, but also realizing that the government has resources that we don't have. We have resources that are deployable that the government can have. And we can do things sometimes a lot faster. And sometimes we do it wrong when we do it faster. And I say wrong in terms of our timeline is different than government timelines. As long as we're educating each other and we're consistently in dialogue, I see the future as being fantastic. As long as we don't forget who we are, both government and nonprofit, and we respect the boundaries that are there in those two.

**[Cassie Ringsdorf]** Well, it certainly takes the whole community. Thank you both so much, Greg and Liz, I appreciate you taking the time to chat with me today.

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