

Types of Volunteers

Fact Sheet

Overview

Emergency volunteers are unpaid, uncompensated workers who willingly give their time and effort to emergency preparedness and response activities. Below we categorize the different types of emergency volunteers and describe some of the major volunteer organizations and programs.

Volunteer Categories

Government-Based Emergency Volunteers

Governmental emergency response systems use organized and trained groups of volunteers to supplement professional, paid emergency responders. Emergency volunteers who are registered, organized, and trained through government-sponsored emergency volunteer systems are often protected by law from civil liability and given injury benefits. Some states have specific laws for volunteer health professionals (VHPs) (e.g., physicians, nurses, etc.) while other states set out protections for emergency volunteers in general.

Nongovernment-Based Emergency Volunteers

Nongovernmental organizations (e.g., businesses and nonprofits) also recruit, organize, and train volunteers for emergency response activities. For example, hospitals may allow VHPs to provide medical assistance during emergencies at their facilities. Businesses may donate supplies, equipment, and physical space. Liability protections during emergency preparedness and response activities for these organizations and volunteers vary from state to state. Most states do not provide liability protection for these organizations and volunteers.

Good Samaritans

A Good Samaritan voluntarily provides medical assistance or treatment to a victim at the injury scene or during a sudden emergency. Good Samaritans may or may not be affiliated with an official organization and often act independently. Good Samaritan laws often provide the Good Samaritan with immunity from liability for ordinary negligence. See the ASHTO fact sheet on Volunteer Protection Acts and Good Samaritan Laws for more information.

Civic Volunteers

Civic volunteers perform unpaid work for government or nonprofit organizations (e.g., schools, faith-based institutions, social service agencies, humanitarian organizations, artistic organizations, or emergency services). State and federal volunteer protection statutes protect them from liability for ordinary negligence. Volunteer protection statutes usually limit protection to volunteers who are affiliated with government or nonprofit organizations. Also, the protections typically apply to the volunteer and not the organization. Unlike other liability protection statutes, an emergency declaration does not need to be in place for volunteer protection laws to apply. See the ASHTO fact sheet on Volunteer Protection Acts and Good Samaritan Laws for more information.

Practice Notes

- Identify state law(s) that establishes a government-based emergency volunteer program.
- Identify state law(s) that provides liability protections or injury benefits to emergency volunteers.
- Identify state law(s) that apply to business and nonprofit volunteers.
- Identify state Good Samaritan law.
- Identify state Volunteer Protection Law and review Federal Volunteer Protection Act.
- Identify the liability potential of self-deployed volunteers.

Self-Deployed or Spontaneous Volunteers

Unregistered, untrained, and unscreened individuals may come to the scene of a disaster to offer help. The liability protections for emergency volunteers often only apply to registered volunteers. Also, workers' compensation laws and disability benefits may only apply to volunteers who are registered with an emergency response program or who are deemed to be employees of the state. Some courts have recognized implied employees and found that an employer-employee relationship exists in emergency situations when events occurred too quickly to establish the relationship through normal channels. Because this recognition has not been granted by all state courts, potential emergency volunteers are strongly encouraged to register with and join response organizations before a disaster or emergency.

Volunteer Organizations and Registrations Systems

Emergency System for Advance Registration of Volunteer Health Professionals (ESAR-VHP)

Each state has established an [Emergency System for Advance Registration of Volunteer Health Professionals \(ESAR-VHP\)](#)¹ program to register VHPs, verify VHP credentials and privileges, and coordinate emergency response agencies. The state ESAR-VHP systems have different names (e.g., Washington State Emergency Registry of Volunteers and Kentucky Health Emergency Listing of Professionals for Surge). There may also be other state by state ESAR-VHP variations (e.g., registration process, integration with Medical Reserve Corps).

Citizen Corps

[Citizen Corps](#)² is a Department of Homeland Security project that helps coordinate emergency volunteer activities. It is comprised of a national network of state, local, and tribal [Citizen Corps Councils](#)³ that implement the emergency preparedness and response programs. The [Citizen Corps Partner Programs](#)⁴ include the Medical Reserve Corps (MRC), the Community Emergency Response Team (CERT), the Fire Corps, USAonWatch, and Volunteers in Police Service.

Medical Reserve Corps

[MRC](#)⁵ is a community-based program that organizes and utilizes local volunteers for emergency preparedness and response. MRC is administered by HHS and is a partner organization of the Citizens Corps. MRC volunteers include medical and public health professionals such as physicians, nurses, pharmacists, dentists, veterinarians, and epidemiologists. Non-health professional volunteers include interpreters, chaplains, office workers, legal advisors, and others. In some states, the role of MRC units during a declared emergency and liability protections for MRC volunteers are explicitly addressed in the state's emergency authority statutes.

Practice Questions

- Who is the volunteer?
- What organization is the volunteer affiliated with?
- What is the volunteer's role and responsibility?
- How is the volunteer protected from liability?
- How is the volunteer compensated for injury or disability?

Community Emergency Response Team

The [CERT](#)⁶ program educates and trains professional and lay volunteers on disaster preparedness. Liability protections for CERT volunteers may be found in state and federal volunteer protection acts. Like MRC volunteers, some states have explicitly extended liability protection to CERT volunteers.

American Red Cross

The [American Red Cross](#)⁷ is one of several non-governmental community organizations that prepares and responds to disasters and emergencies. Red Cross volunteers provide relief to victims and help people prevent, prepare for, and respond to emergencies. The Red Cross's main role is to provide shelter and refuge during disasters, not deploy medical and other health-related professionals. Liability protections for Red Cross volunteers will generally be found in state and federal volunteer protection acts.

¹ ESAR-VHP. Available at <http://www.phe.gov/esarvhp/Pages/default.aspx>. Accessed on 8-21-2012.

² Citizens Corps. Available at www.citizencorps.gov. Accessed on 8-21-2012.

³ List of Citizen Corps Councils. Available at <https://www.citizencorps.gov/cc/listCouncil.do?submitByState&stateOnly>. Accessed on 8-21-2012.

⁴ Citizen Corps Partner Programs. Available at <http://www.citizencorps.gov/citizencorps/partners/paindex.shtm>. Accessed on August 21, 2012.

⁵ MRC. Available at www.medicalreservecorps.gov. Accessed on 8-21-2012.

⁶ CERT. Available at <http://www.citizencorps.gov/cert/index.shtm>. Accessed on 8-21-2012.

⁷ American Red Cross. Available at <http://www.redcross.org/>. Accessed on 8-21-2012.