

BY THE HELP OF THE PUBLIC  
ENTITY RISK INSTITUTE AND  
THE FLORIDA ASSOCIATION OF  
VOLUNTEER CENTERS

PREPARED BY VOLUNTEER  
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MANAGEMENT



# A CASE STUDY IN UNAFFILIATED VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT

FLORIDA'S RECORD-BREAKING 2004  
HURRICANE SEASON

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VOLUNTEER FLORIDA  
THE GOVERNOR'S COMMISSION ON  
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### **Public Entity Risk Institute**

Volunteer Florida and the Florida Association of Volunteer Centers wish to thank the Public Entity Risk Institute (PERI) for its support of this project. PERI's financial assistance validated our collective efforts to assess the volunteer management response to Hurricanes Charley, Frances, Ivan and Jeanne.

PERI's interest in this work has made a strong statement that experiences gained during 2004 Hurricane Season offer an unusual opportunity and obligation to document, evaluate and improve upon Florida's utilization of unaffiliated volunteers in disaster relief.

Volunteer Florida and the Florida Association of Volunteer Centers see this report as the first step in a strategic planning process that will result in a stronger, statewide network of capacity to manage this powerful resource. We hope that this information is of benefit to others, as well, as they continue their disaster volunteer management planning.

Covery satellite imagery owned by NASA. Imagery found at Visible Earth, [www.visibleearth.nasa.gov](http://www.visibleearth.nasa.gov)

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## Unaffiliated Volunteer Management

### Florida's Record-breaking 2004 Hurricane Season

#### Introduction

Hurricanes Charley, Frances, Ivan and Jeanne demanded Florida's undivided attention, and that of the world, for more than two months of 2004. Even as Florida's emergency management community checked communication and pre-positioned resources in anticipation of Hurricane Charley, Volunteer Florida, the Governor's Commission on Volunteerism and Community Service, and the Florida Association of Volunteer Centers recognized the imminent need to manage the voluntary resources that would emerge in response to the storm. The strong relationship between the two organizations, spanning 10 years of mutual support, training and strategic planning, served Florida well throughout the next few months as one storm was quickly followed by three others.

Volunteer Centers, United Way offices, and county governments totaling fourteen organizations put their disaster volunteer management training to the test, as one county after another was impacted by the hurricanes. It was impossible to foresee that every Florida county would ultimately receive a federal disaster declaration. This report documents the agencies' management of unaffiliated volunteers, those who spontaneously – often with no disaster training – offered their assistance to the relief effort.

Through a survey administered by Volunteer Florida, participating organizations identified the strengths, challenges and impacts of:

- Their pre-disaster relationships with local emergency management and other community organizations
- The procedures they used in operating Volunteer Reception Centers
- Their pre- and post-disaster communication with external stakeholders
- Current policies for risk management
- The software used to register, refer and document the activities of unaffiliated volunteers
- The rapid succession of the storms and the associated fatigue and stress

Recommendations made throughout the report to address the challenges and improve Florida's capacity to manage unaffiliated volunteers collectively suggested the strategic planning process presented at the conclusion of the report.

The value of this evaluation and the resulting report will be increasingly evident as Florida's emergency and volunteer managers embark on the strategic planning process. The goals and objectives likely to be identified in a strategic plan for the management of unaffiliated volunteer are ambitious. As Florida counties continue to recover from the impacts of Hurricanes Charley, Frances, Ivan and Jeanne, stakeholders realize that these goals and objectives must be achieved to effectively utilize this resource in future disasters.

## **Volunteer Florida, the Governor's Commission on Volunteerism and Community Service**

Volunteer Florida was established in 1993 and enacted into Florida law in 1994 as the Florida Commission on Community Service. Volunteer Florida collaborates with a variety of organizations to strengthen Florida communities through volunteerism and service and actively promotes the participation of persons with disabilities in service. The Commission receives federal funding from the Corporation for National and Community Service for an array of national service programs funded through AmeriCorps, AmeriCorps Promise Fellows and Senior Service Corps programs.

The Commission entered into agreement in 1997 with the Florida Department of Community Affairs, Division of Emergency Management to accept responsibility for Emergency Support Function 15 – Volunteers and Donations (ESF 15), the coordination and maximization of voluntary resources in response to disasters. The Commission has played a key role in expanding the participation of voluntary agencies – including faith and community-based, civic and educational organizations– beyond the response phase to the preparedness, mitigation and recovery phases of emergency management, as well. Volunteer Florida conducts training on a variety of emergency management related topics, including continuity of operations, disaster mitigation, long-term recovery and the management of spontaneous, unaffiliated volunteers.

## **Florida Association of Volunteer Centers**

Many of Florida's Volunteer Centers have been serving their communities for over 30 years and are institutions without which community nonprofits, schools and medical facilities would not be able to deliver the level of services that they do. Since 12 Volunteer Centers formed the Florida Association of Volunteer Centers (FAVC) in 1983, FAVC has grown to a thriving network of 21 member Volunteer Centers and several affiliate organizations.

FAVC's mission is to strengthen and promote Volunteer Centers by providing a network of support and professional development. FAVC's strategic goals include providing value to members through networking, professional development and support, and increasing the association's capacity to provide financial support to membership.

## **Relationship between Volunteer Florida and FAVC**

The strong, mutually supportive relationship that Volunteer Florida and FAVC share today is a product of:

- Our collaborative work over a period of 2 years on a strategic plan for the advancement of the work of Volunteer Centers in concert with Volunteer Florida;
- A two-year collaborative project to develop the Florida Volunteer Administration Certification program;
- A cooperative effort to facilitate the development of new Volunteer Centers in areas not served by existing Centers; and
- Funding received by Volunteer Florida and sub-granted to Volunteer Centers to develop their roles in emergency management.

In 2002, Volunteer Florida applied to the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) for a Special Volunteer Program grant made available through the Corporation's Senior Service Corps. CNCS awarded the grant, which funded the development of the Commission's Operation Step Up program and sub-grants totaling \$650,600 for 72 Operation Step Up initiatives to 15 Volunteer Centers over the three- year grant period.

While a few of the Volunteer Centers had managed volunteers in the wake of local disasters, including tornadoes and wildfires, most had little disaster experience and only a few had any meaningful relationship with their county emergency managers. For those reasons, Volunteer Florida's approach to implementing the Operation Step Up program was to:

- Ensure that participating Volunteer Centers first developed relationships with their local emergency management agencies, and
- Provide program direction by prescribing specific goals and quarterly objectives.

As part of the application process for Operation Step Up (OSU) funding, the Volunteer Centers met with their county emergency management directors to select one to three of the eight OSU program options that would most effectively meet locally identified community needs. The Volunteer Centers' next step was to engage local agencies as partners in their selected OSU initiatives. One of the initiatives, Disaster Volunteer Management, was designed to prepare Volunteer Centers and their communities to effectively utilize spontaneous, unaffiliated volunteers desiring to participate in disaster relief efforts.

The first two years of Operation Step Up were considered to be highly successful in terms of enhanced relationships and organizational knowledge, as well as the acquisition of the skills needed to manage this resource. This new capacity remained untested until the 2004 hurricane season.

### **Validity of the Evaluation**

Volunteer Florida, FAVC and the individual participants in this evaluation recognize that

Volunteer Florida's financial support of the individual Volunteer Centers and FAVC held the potential to stifle open, honest responses to some of the survey items. In addition to Operation Step Up and Volunteer Center Development grants, Volunteer Florida is in the process of reviewing proposals for additional homeland security funding for which several Volunteer Centers have applied. The Commission also helped to develop and currently hosts FAVC's website.

Another factor with the potential to influence survey responses is that Volunteer Florida staff developed the model for unaffiliated volunteer management that has been taught in Florida for the past seven years. The Volunteer Centers participating in Operation Step Up were required to train a team of local staff and volunteers to operate a Volunteer Reception Center (referred to throughout this report as a VRC) guided by this model. Ten of the survey respondents are Volunteer Centers that have participated in the Operation Step Up Disaster Volunteer Management initiative for at least one year.

The eleven respondents included:

- 7 Independent or United Way Volunteer Centers
- 2 County-operated Volunteer Centers
- 1 United Way (non-volunteer center)
- 1 County Government

(Although some of these organizations are not technically volunteer centers, by virtue of their volunteer management roles and for ease of reference, they will collectively be referred to as Volunteer Centers, Centers or VRCs throughout this report.)

All respondents are highly trained administrators, most with many years of experience. All are articulate and highly committed to their work and to the ideals of volunteerism. While it is highly unlikely that any participant would have been less than candid in their survey responses, this project does not purport to be a scientific study, free of bias. It is a subjective evaluation of first-hand experience and an honest effort on the part of Volunteer Florida, FAVC and each individual Volunteer Center to:

- Recognize the many successes,
- Identify the challenges encountered,
- Assess planning and training shortfalls, and
- Make recommendations for improved future response.

Because the storms occurred in such rapid succession, no effort is made here to differentiate the Volunteer Centers' activities from one storm to the next. In all cases, the response and short-term recovery from one event were still ongoing when the next event occurred. It should be understood that many of the suggestions made throughout this report were, in fact, already incorporated into some of the Volunteer Centers' emergency or continuity of operations plans. However, since not every item appears in every plan, it was important to reiterate even those points that seem to be obvious.



## **Pre-disaster Relationships between Volunteer Centers and Emergency Managers**

Volunteer Florida and FAVC have always recognized that there would be great value in Volunteer Centers establishing strong ties to their local emergency management agencies. Familiarity and understanding breed trust and confidence. In response to the survey, five Volunteer Centers reported having “working relationships” with their local emergency management agencies. Four others reported having developed “strong partnerships” with their emergency managers. The Volunteer Centers met their Operation Step Up objective to develop the required local relationships. With few exceptions, however, they were unable to invest additional time to establish those relationships *outside* their own counties.

Two Centers found themselves managing unaffiliated volunteers in neighboring counties in which there were no Volunteer Centers and in which they had no relationship with local emergency managers. One of those, whose staff had participated in several VRC exercises over a period of seven years, found that, while planning and training were important, pre-existing relationships with county government and nonprofit agencies would also have been extremely valuable.

With sixty-seven counties in Florida and 21 Volunteer Centers, a major disaster in a county not served by a Volunteer Center was a likely occurrence. While FAVC members would like to see all counties served effectively by a Volunteer Center, they are constrained to utilize staff time on programs for which they are funded. To expand their relationships and commitments to meet disaster needs in contiguous counties or other regions of the State will require additional financial support.

During the 10 years between Hurricane Andrew and the inception of Operation Step Up, several Volunteer Centers had responded to disasters in their own or nearby counties. Some had provided assistance when their counties were designated as “host” counties, to which evacuees were directed. However, without formal roles or assigned responsibilities, the Volunteer Centers’ association with emergency management often dissolved along with the urgency of the moment.

The genesis of most of the relationships that exist today between Volunteer Centers and county emergency management was Operation Step Up. Other relationships began through Volunteer Center participation in homeland security initiatives funded by the CNCS Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) and AmeriCorps VISTA. Another contributor to building relationships was the Citizen Corps Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) program.

Most emergency managers have welcomed Volunteer Centers as partners in disaster volunteer management. While one OSU Volunteer Center did request and receive additional funding from local government to pay for a full-time employee, the support provided by the OSU grants for Volunteer Centers’ disaster work contributed greatly to the relationship-

building process. The strongest relationships appear to exist in the few areas where Volunteer Centers have been involved for a number of years with county emergency management, Emergency Operations Centers and other response organizations. These Volunteer Centers are a known commodity with a proven track record.

**Recommendation:** Relationships between Volunteer Centers and local officials, if not already in place, should be forged as early as possible. Funding should be sought to support Volunteer Centers in establishing relationships and developing protocols for the activation of VRCs in adjacent counties where no Volunteer Centers exist.

### **With Successive Storms, Relationships Evolved**

Prior to the 2004 hurricane season, some emergency managers seemed to value their local Volunteer Centers only as their first line of defense against a dreaded influx of unaffiliated volunteers. Said one Volunteer Center director, "After working through four activations, our EOC Director and other community leaders have a better understanding of and respect for volunteers and the capacity of our Center to manage them."

Another reported, "Emergency management now views us as a strong partner whom they know that they can count on to get things done and make things happen. A greater level of trust and support was developed as we worked at the EOC through three hurricanes and they saw us in action, working with and for them for the good of the citizens."

Most survey responses indicated that this new respect did not happen immediately. In fact, many described a continuing need for improved communication and clarification of the roles of the Volunteer Center and the Center's director or designee. Where the Volunteer Center had been designated the county's lead agency for ESF 15, there seems to have been some pre-disaster, unspoken expectations that the Center director would work in the County Emergency Operations Center (EOC), serving as a liaison between the EOC and the VRC. As one after another of Florida's county EOCs activated, most without sufficient personnel to adequately staff the ESF 15 desk and answer the local public hotline, two Volunteer Center directors felt *required* to remain in the EOCs. They were needed in the operation of their own agencies, but to leave their EOCs would have jeopardized the progress made in their relationships with emergency managers and their roles in disaster relief.

As would be expected, conflicting expectations and lack of communication were less prevalent in the counties where county employees handled ESF 15 functions and benefited from pre-existing relationships with other county departments. Of the three county employees responding to the survey, two operate full service Volunteer Centers as functions of county government. All reported that their organizations manage year-round ongoing and episodic volunteer programs with fifty to several thousand volunteers.

**Recommendation:** Roles, responsibilities and expectations of Volunteer Reception Center directors should be clearly delineated, particularly as they relate to local EOC organizational structure.

### **Reimbursement of Expenses Incurred in Managing Unaffiliated Volunteers**

All respondents found their commitment to this process to be expensive. The overtime hours alone substantially increased their payroll expense for the duration of their disaster activation. For those VRCs operated by county governments, the problem existed but did not fall on the shoulders of those actually managing the volunteers. For the seven respondents not internal to county governments, the issue weighed heavily on those responsible to their boards and funders for both living within their agencies' means and for fund raising of organizational revenue.

Only one non-governmental Volunteer Center had in place a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the county that addressed reimbursement of expenses incurred in the operation of a VRC. One Center has signed an MOU since their activation, after the expenses were incurred. After Hurricane Charley, Volunteer Florida, through a grant from the Florida Department of Elder Affairs, was able to make limited funding available to the VRCs that provided documentation of services provided to seniors.

**Recommendation:** Volunteer Centers should pursue the establishment of MOUs that clearly define procedures by which they will be reimbursed for their disaster-related expenses.

**Recommendation:** County budget departments should provide forms and training on reimbursement procedures for Volunteer Centers. As Centers develop mutual support agreements with other Centers and counties where no Volunteer Center exists, those counties should provide training on reimbursement procedures for Volunteer Centers making commitments to support them.

**Recommendation:** Volunteer Florida should provide an MOU template for use by Volunteer Centers and emergency managers who have not yet created their own MOUs.

### **Need for Integration of State and Local Hotlines with VRCs**

The eleven survey respondents reported a total of 14 different hotlines, including the State Volunteers and Donations Hotline operated by Volunteer Florida in Tallahassee. The hotline call centers were operated by a variety of organizations, including 2-1-1, United Way, Volunteer Centers, and EOCs. It is neither possible nor advisable to attempt to standardize hotline call center operations throughout the State, as local capacity varies widely. Some respondents, however, felt that their operations could have been more efficient had they defined in advance the relationship between the hotline call center and the VRC.

The need for establishing the specific relationship in advance was true of the State Hotline call center, operated in Tallahassee, as well. The Florida Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan (CEMP) has always included plans for a Statewide Volunteer and Donations Hotline, and for the duration of the operation, both the hotline staff and procedures remained very flexible to adapt to the State's changing needs. Additional clarification is needed prior to the 2005 hurricane season on how people who registered with the State Hotline to volunteer will be referred to local VRCs or hotline call centers.

The Public Information Officers for Volunteer Florida, the Florida Division of Emergency Management (FDEM) and the State Hotline call center effectively met the most urgent need at the time, which was to prevent an influx of unaffiliated volunteers, for whom counties had no means of providing basic support. From the day the hotline opened until it closed more than two months later, volunteers who registered from other states were instructed not to come to Florida immediately, that there would be many opportunities and needs for volunteers later, throughout the long period of recovery. This strategy effectively prevented the influx that would have exacerbated the crisis in most areas. While disappointed at not receiving a job assignment, most callers were understanding and hopeful that they would eventually be called to help.

Through the web-based database system, eCoordinator, being used in conjunction with the State Hotline call center, email messages were sent to registrants thanking them for offering their help, and again encouraging them not to travel to Florida without a specific mission and agency to which to report.

**Recommendation:** Coordination is needed to ensure that a consistent, unified message is being disseminated by *all* hotline call centers. The message should include sufficient detail about local conditions to ensure that volunteers understand why they are being asked not to enter the impacted area.

**Recommendation:** Software applications to manage spontaneous, unaffiliated volunteers should be evaluated and a suitable system adopted by Volunteer Florida and the Volunteer Centers to activate in the event of a major disaster.

**Recommendation:** Volunteer Centers should establish in advance protocols for the interface between the local hotline call center and their VRCs.

### **VRCs: No Two Looked Alike and None Was What It Expected To Be**

It quickly became apparent during the response to Hurricane Charley that a VRC is an operation – not a location. Six respondents reported having operated a VRC in their regular offices. Four operated in off-site locations. Several did both and several moved their VRCs multiple times for multiple reasons, making it difficult to keep the public apprised of their location. Five sent staff to support VRCs operated by other Centers. Two set up and operated VRCs in counties

where no Volunteer Center existed. Due to difficulties with the transport of gasoline, one found they were able to facilitate greater volunteer participation by also running mini-VRCs at water and ice distribution sites and a special needs shelter where the volunteers would be working.

Most Volunteer Centers or their county governments had in place at least a verbal contingency use agreement for one or more potential VRC sites. While the Centers would all have preferred to operate from a pre-determined, familiar site, all recognized that post-storm circumstances would dictate their locations. Storm damage, last-minute decisions to use the sites for other purposes, the unexpected need to co-locate the VRC with another facility, and even a sewage overflow all influenced the placement of the VRCs. VRC directors and staff were universally flexible, accommodating and committed to helping connect volunteers with opportunities to serve from wherever they were able to operate.

The VRCs were activated in a variety of ways. Some were placed on standby by their county EOCs as a storm approached and then activated when roads were accessible. Some Volunteer Center directors or designees were asked to report to the EOC prior to the storm. Several VRCs were not officially activated by emergency management officials. Those Volunteer Centers conferred with partner agencies and self-activated based on the number of calls they had received from the public.

Participants agreed that each Volunteer Center's disaster plan or MOU with county emergency management should delineate who has the authority to mobilize and demobilize the VRC and clearly state the parameters within which the VRC will operate.

**Recommendation:** Volunteer Centers should modify or augment their disaster plans and/or MOUs with county government to include language that clearly indicates who will determine the location of a VRC and the criteria for mobilizing and demobilizing it.

### **Impacts of the Storms on VRC Operations**

The Volunteer Centers and VRCs operated under very difficult conditions. Many experienced power, water or phone outages. For that reason, some opened VRCs in county buildings where utility reconnection was a priority. Several plan to work with local amateur radio clubs on backup communications for their VRCs.

One Volunteer Center's office was flooded for 10 days, forcing staff to operate out of the director's home. On the other coast, a Center director lived in the agency's office for several days due to damage to her home. Using home computers, paper backup of volunteer opportunities and telephone communication with agencies, opportunities for placement of volunteers began to emerge. Through it all, Volunteer Center personnel were creative, remained positive and did what they had to do to get the job done.



**Recommendation:** Volunteer Centers should discuss with county emergency management the identification of one or more county facilities suitable for a VRC operation, because of the facilities' priority status for utility reconnection.

**Recommendation:** Volunteer Centers should contact local amateur radio clubs to develop a pre-disaster plan for using volunteer radio operators for backup communications at VRCs.

**Recommendation:** If the VRC must operate without utilities and communication, the Volunteer Center should station an employee or volunteer at the County EOC to serve as a VRC liaison and/or runner, facilitating communication. The liaison should be trained to observe and anticipate needs for volunteers, confer with EOC staff and relay the information to the VRC.

### **Pre-disaster Agency Coordination and Post-disaster Communication**

A key objective of the Operation Step Up initiative was the Volunteer Centers' pre-disaster development of relationships with response agencies. There were several purposes for this objective. Many traditional response agencies have utilized volunteers in a few traditional roles for decades. The Volunteer Centers were to help agency staff identify the tasks currently done by employees that could be handled by volunteers. Volunteer Florida had anticipated that in a major disaster many non-traditional relief organizations would emerge, each with new roles for volunteers. Communication in the wake of a disaster is intermittent at best. In the absence of direct communication from agencies about their immediate volunteer needs, the information obtained from agencies prior to the event was expected to speed the process of referring unaffiliated volunteers to where they were needed.

Participating Volunteer Centers had accomplished this objective to varying degrees. One reported having developed relationships with 12 or more response agencies. Three reported 7-11 new agency relationships. Four Volunteer Centers reported 4-6 agency relationships. Two indicated they had developed new relationships with 0-3 local agencies. As a result of these relationships, seven OSU Volunteer Centers and one non-OSU United Way reported having four or more disaster volunteer job descriptions in their files to which they could refer volunteers.

Several Volunteer Centers reported having contacted local agencies as the storms approached to remind them how to request volunteers. At least two faxed or emailed to local agencies the *Request for Volunteers* form provided by Volunteer Florida through OSU.

While having job descriptions on hand for potential volunteer opportunities did give the Volunteer Centers an overall understanding of agencies' needs, it did not necessarily facilitate deploying volunteers to them quickly. First, it was impossible to know, sometimes for several days, which agencies had survived the storm and were operational. With so many structures damaged, many operated out of their homes, in tents, or camped out in the lobbies of other organizations, unable to update the Volunteer Center or VRC as to their locations.

Although the rule of thumb is to make the first wave of volunteers available to agencies that are feeding and sheltering survivors, some form of communication with those organizations was still required prior to sending volunteers to them. Many American Red Cross (ARC) shelters sustained damage and were subsequently closed. Emergency Response Vehicles and canteens operated by ARC and The Salvation Army (TSA) were mobile. Supporting those operations with volunteers required regular communication. In some cases the Volunteer Centers or relief agencies sent runners to relay information.

Requests for volunteers began to come in as power, landlines, cell phones and Internet access slowly became available to agencies. The CEO of a community hospital left his facility and personally visited the VRC to request volunteer assistance. Overall, however, the requests were not what the VRCs expected, based on the job descriptions on file. In some cases survivors' needs were different than agencies had anticipated. Many volunteers still reported directly to ARC and TSA, mitigating the need to refer volunteers to those two responders. Some VRCs reported referring more volunteers to ad hoc distribution sites and clean-up efforts than to recognized relief agencies.

Among the unanticipated needs were daily requests for hundreds of volunteers to canvass neighborhoods to secure the *Right of Entry* forms for the Army Corps of Engineers Blue Roof program. The Corps eventually had to hire canvassers in order to stay ahead of the contractors hired to apply the tarps. One specific challenge was trying to explain to volunteers, some of whom had spent many long days canvassing neighborhoods, why some of their counterparts were being paid for the same work.

As Volunteer Centers looked back on their experiences, they cited the need to continue educating community agencies about utilizing volunteers to provide disaster services. The magnitude of Florida's back-to-back hurricanes caused damage and survivor needs beyond anyone's imagination. All agree that having a system in place with the capacity to provide volunteers for unanticipated needs is ultimately of more value than trying to pre-determine the skills a particular agency will need.

**Recommendation:** Volunteer Florida and FAVC should confer with the Army Corps of Engineers to develop a strategy to address the issue of paid contractors and volunteers overlapping in providing identical services.

## **Methods of Processing Unaffiliated Volunteers**

All participating volunteer managers had been trained or received instructional materials on the same VRC operational model. Fortunately the trainees, those Volunteer Centers, county governments and nonprofits that boldly accepted the challenge of managing this resource, firmly grasped the most important concept presented in the training – flexibility. From the

Volunteer Centers' descriptions of their VRCs, the parts most resembling the training were their *go kits*. Well armed with the rationale for the VRC procedures they were taught, they were free to adapt and streamline their operations to the needs of their communities.

The commonalities included:

- Completion of a registration form for each volunteer (most included a release of liability statement),
- A brief interview to determine the volunteer's skills and abilities,
- Some form of volunteer identification (many used hospital bracelets),
- Referral to an agency needing their help, and
- Documentation of where and when the volunteers were referred.

The scarcity of available facilities, unavailability of gas due to transportation difficulties, and the need for expediency were the factors that had the most profound impact on how the VRCs operated. The staff of several VRCs completed volunteers' applications and made referrals over the phone, relying on the agencies receiving them to secure waivers and provide identification. In some cases, the agencies receiving the volunteers agreed to complete the entire registration process and provide the documentation to the VRC. Volunteers in one of Florida's geographically large but predominantly rural counties complained about having to drive many miles to register.

In response, the VRC posted its registration form on the county's website and then made them available at distribution sites throughout the county, as well, so volunteers could register on-site.

One VRC registered far fewer volunteers than they expected, due to similar efforts of a local radio station. About 90% of the county's needs were met through the media station, which took requests for volunteers and supplies and matched them with people responding over the radio. The Volunteer Center plans to develop a working relationship with the station in order to share the Center's volunteer management experience and expertise in the area of risk management, while taking advantage of the station's access to thousands of potential volunteers. Liability and risk management will be discussed further in another section.

In a county that sustained comparatively little damage, two VRCs registered hundreds of volunteers who ultimately served in several neighboring, severely impacted counties. The coastal county in which Hurricane Charley made landfall was so thoroughly devastated, however, that authorities did not permit volunteers to enter the county for more than a week. By registering people in a neighboring county in anticipation of near-future service, the VRC prevented many would-be volunteers from venturing into unauthorized, dangerous areas and possibly interfering with search and rescue operations. When the Corps of Engineers eventually requested volunteers to assist with the Blue Roof program, the VRCs' home county government provided personnel to enter registered volunteers into a database and utilized the county's reverse 9-1-1 system to recruit volunteers for the project.

One coastal county Volunteer Center operated a VRC in a rural inland community in which the Center had no organizational contacts or relationship with emergency management. With no social service agencies to which to refer the thousands of volunteers who streamed into the community, VRC staff took exceptional liberties with the risk management policies generally accepted by volunteer managers. Under a huge tent in a field, the VRC registered the volunteers, provided IDs and safety briefings, and then sent teams – often family groups – with assessment forms, newly created by VRC staff, to canvass streets lined with homes and vehicles crushed by fallen trees. The teams made notes about each family's immediate needs and returned to the VRC or a distribution site to pick up and deliver the needed items. While this was probably not a safe situation for either the families or the volunteers, it was a decision that, in light of the alternative, made sense at the time.

A post-disaster debriefing meeting illuminated an interesting paradox. Even as the Centers were explaining how different their physical facilities, methods of operation and local agency relationships were from those of their counterparts, some expressed the need for more standardization of policies, procedures and forms across the State.

**Recommendation:** Volunteer Florida should convene a task force of Volunteer Center representatives, emergency managers and county budget department personnel to review the forms and procedures that were used during the 2004 season, make recommendations for needed changes and submit them for review by all Volunteer Centers and a larger sampling of emergency management and budget departments.

### **Rapid Succession of Storms**

When asked how such severe back-to-back events impacted their operations, participants' responses were oddly both negative and positive.

By the time the VRCs opened, their directors and staff were already tired and stressed. Most had sustained damage to either their homes or offices, or had family or staff members who had.

For most, this was their first opportunity to make good on assurances to their communities that (1) volunteers would show up, be manageable and provide valuable service, and (2) their agency had the capacity to effectively manage this resource. Due to damage in virtually every Florida county, fewer volunteers than anticipated actually reported to VRCs across the State. People who might have been first in line to volunteer after a less pervasive disaster were faced with extensive damage to their own homes, vehicles and places of work.

This caused volunteer managers concern that they might not be able to deliver the needed volunteers. If agencies had depended on utilizing pre-registered and pre-trained volunteers to fill pre-determined roles in their organizations, the non-availability of those volunteers

carried the potential to hamper those agencies' relief efforts.

In a personal comment, one Volunteer Center director submitted, "We were burned out, crabby and tired. The pre-affiliated volunteers diminished with each subsequent storm, forcing us to train new staff on the fly and to do the best we could. We provided many volunteers to other agencies, allowing them to meet their missions, when we probably could have used many of them ourselves to help us operate more efficiently."

Said another, "The number of volunteers willing to assist...was diminishing at an alarming rate and many of our trained and skilled volunteers were evacuated or unable to assist due to their own needs."

On the other hand, their prolonged activation provided ample opportunity to improve their procedures and gain solid individual and organizational experience that will serve them well in future disasters. Several respondents said that it got "easier because we learned along the way."

One commented, "It was exhausting. Though we seemed to 'get it' after the first storm and knew better what we were doing."

One summarized the effect of multiple-impacts this way: "Impact is cumulative and takes its toll not only on staff, but also on the availability of volunteers. Operating in a disaster mode or maintaining a VRC for an extended period of time has a major impact on the entire operation of the Volunteer Center – loss of revenue, suspension of other programs and services, etc. That impacts our reports to our funders."

### **Unaffiliated Volunteers Provided a Myriad of Services**

Collectively, thousands of volunteers with no disaster training or experience were referred from VRCs to provide the following services, as well as many others:

- Updated special needs registries prior to the storms
- Served at EOCs, handling phone calls from citizens
- Coordinated outreach (public information) projects for local emergency management
- Served at ARC and special needs shelters
- Checked the homes of citizens in special needs shelters to determine whether they had power and access so clients could be transported home
- Passed out ice and water at distribution sites
- Assisted with a community blood drive
- Sorted and organized donations at sharing centers
- Helped with data entry of damage assessments to meet Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) requirements



- Secured *Right of Entry* forms for the Corps of Engineers Blue Roof program
- Matched the debris removal needs of elderly and disabled residents with faith, corporate, school and community-based volunteer groups
- Coordinated pick-up and distribution of supplies
- Served in church kitchens, feeding survivors and responders
- Provided counseling in community organizations
- Provided amateur radio communication at shelters
- Photocopied licenses for volunteer doctors and nurses
- Removed debris
- Provided childcare at FEMA Disaster Recovery Centers

### **Training Provided to Volunteers and the Agencies Receiving Them**

Orientation and training, two key elements of successful volunteer programs, are critical to safety and risk management in disaster. The basic safety briefing that VRC operators had been taught to administer was, paradoxically, too much and not enough.

Volunteer Centers had been taught to update their safety briefings regularly as changes in the emergency situation required; to record the date and time of the change; and to require volunteers to sign a training attendance log, showing the date and time of the briefing. Designed to document the good-faith efforts of volunteer organizers to keep volunteers safe, the system was cumbersome and more time intensive than real-time VRCs permitted.

In reality, some variation of this system was used by VRCs that processed walk-in volunteers. Safety briefings provided to volunteers registering by phone were somewhat limited. As procedures were modified or streamlined to meet local needs, many briefings were conducted orally, or the responsibility for safety training was shifted to the agencies receiving the volunteers. While this process may have provided safety information to volunteers, it did little to protect those operating the VRC, who could possibly have been considered liable for sending a volunteer into an unsafe situation.

Even as some VRC directors reported that their safety briefings and corresponding documentation had deteriorated over the activation period, some advocated adding a component on disaster mental health to the training provided to volunteers, as well as training for VRC staff and volunteers on observing signs of stress in their peers or family members. VRC operators concur that disaster responders, whether they are providing assistance directly to survivors or assisting agencies, need an opportunity to talk about their experiences, share their feelings and process some of the sights, sounds and pain associated with their disaster work.

Several VRC operators recognized that training first-shift volunteers on their roles and responsibilities and then relying on them to train successive shifts was generally not

successful. Equipping all volunteers with first-hand training by a qualified trainer resulted in a higher, more consistent quality of the work done by volunteers. One director added that, due to the complex nature of some volunteer roles – especially in medical settings – job descriptions and training should be provided pre-disaster.

**Recommendation:** Volunteer Centers should add further clarification to aspects of their VRC plans that deal with training on safety and risk management issues, as well as mental health issues for both staff and volunteers.

### **Documentation of Volunteer Services Provided to the Community**

Most VRCs used the forms provided by Volunteer Florida for registering and referring volunteers and for documenting referrals and volunteers' hours served. Many customized them, adding their agency name and contact information and localizing the release of liability statement on the registration form. Some sent volunteers to their worksites with time logs in hand, requesting that they return them in person or by fax, mail or email to the VRC. Understanding their counties' need for documentation to support a request for FEMA reimbursement, all VRCs made a conscientious effort to keep accurate records.

Throughout the response and early recovery period, Volunteer Florida used statistics provided by voluntary agencies of all kinds to publicize the relief effort and garner contributions from individuals and corporate donors in support of hurricane relief efforts. With the tremendous responsibility and workload already placed on Volunteer Centers and other VRC operators, all were very gracious in their efforts to provide the requested information.

Suggestions for improving the accuracy and consistency of the documentation included:

- Storing sufficient quantities of forms and other supplies in VRC operators' vehicles
- Providing a packet of forms and instructions to relief agencies that would be requesting unaffiliated volunteers
- Working with a county experienced in documenting volunteer hours as match for FEMA reimbursement to create a template for use by other county budget offices
- Providing VRCs a log or record on which to add daily statistics, to simplify the process of reporting accomplishments to state and local public information officers

**Recommendation:** Volunteer Florida should convene a task force, comprised of appropriate staff and Volunteer Center representatives, to update and disseminate standardized forms to document volunteer hours and other necessary information.

### **Software Used by VRCs and Volunteer Florida**

The software most commonly used by Volunteer Centers and VRCs to maintain volunteer records was Microsoft Access. Other systems used included MS Excel, eCoordinator,

Volunteer Works, volunteersolutions.org, a Fox Pro system, a customized application designed by a county programmer, and another designed by the American Red Cross. All survey respondents agreed that simpler is better. All agreed that thorough familiarity with the disaster volunteer management system prior to a disaster is critical to successfully managing unaffiliated volunteers and alleviating stress associated with that responsibility.

Volunteer Florida had recognized for several years that Florida needed a Web-accessible application that would allow volunteers to register on-line and agencies to communicate their capabilities and needs to each other and the State ESF 15. The needed system was not yet in place when Hurricane Charley struck Florida. Just days after the Florida Volunteer and Donations Hotline was activated, a representative from the Disaster Help Network contacted ESF 15 staff at the State EOC to offer complimentary use of Disaster Help Network's Web-based eCoordinator software for the duration of the response and recovery from Hurricane Charley. Disaster Help Network ultimately extended their gracious offer through the entire 2004 hurricane season. Passwords were assigned to ESF 15 staff and Disaster Help Network personnel provided technical assistance on the system via telephone as needed 24 hours a day.

By the time ESF 15 personnel began to learn to use eCoordinator, they had been working long hours under very stressful conditions. Within several days, it became evident that telephone technical assistance, though helpful, was not sufficient to prepare the staff to fully utilize the system. There was more functionality to eCoordinator than the staff was able to master without hands-on assistance. A Disaster Help Network representative traveled to the State EOC and subsequently to several other areas of the State to help state and county ESF 15 personnel learn to use the system, all at no charge to the users.

The staff of the VRCs that began to use eCoordinator achieved varying degrees of success with the system. Fatigue, stress, lack of sufficient training time and many other factors contributed to some users' frustration with trying to learn a new system in mid-disaster.

One respondent felt that attempting to use eCoordinator or any other new system so far into the response to the first hurricane was not the best course of action. While eCoordinator "could have been a very useful tool," reported one Center, Volunteer Centers needed to be trained prior to the disaster. Another Center felt the strength of this software was its email capabilities, but that the system is not user-friendly for volunteer referrals and scheduling. One issue that several VRCs cited was volunteer complaints about having registered online, being asked to fill out another form when they arrived at the VRC, and sometimes having to complete a third form for the agency in which the volunteer ultimately served.

When asked for recommendations for preparing in advance for the next disaster, several opinions were expressed. One Volunteer Center would like to see the Points of Light Foundation's 1-800-VOLUNTEER become the statewide standard. The director of a county-operated VRC advocated a universal volunteer registration suitable for both disaster and non-

disaster volunteerism. Under this system all volunteers would register with one statewide entity and receive a photo ID card with personal information, including the volunteer's skills. The intent would be to minimize paperwork and time spent registering with multiple agencies. It would also produce a statewide database of volunteers to call on for various specialized tasks.

**Recommendation:** Representatives of the various stakeholder groups – State ESF 15, Volunteer Centers and county governments – should oversee the selection or development of a suitable software package, receive training in advance of a disaster and provide training to Hotline operators and other designated users.

**Recommendation:** A report entitled *Volunteer Registration Form* that would allow volunteers to print their registration forms and carry them to the VRC should be created in eCoordinator or other selected software application.

## Liability Issues

The liability concerns expressed by VRC operators are issues that have been discussed by emergency and volunteer managers for years. According to a survey of Florida emergency managers conducted by Volunteer Florida in June 2000, volunteer safety and liability were among the top reasons for avoiding the issue of unaffiliated volunteers. Volunteer managers are accustomed to a moderate level of risk, but they, too, recognize the elevated risk of personal injury when inexperienced volunteers work in dangerous settings, often with emotions or adrenalin running high.

All respondents agreed that the thousands of unaffiliated volunteers who presented themselves as concerned citizens were an unknown quantity. Three were concerned about referring unknown volunteers to survivors' homes. Distressed or desperate survivors could pose a threat to well-meaning volunteers, as well.

Because survivors' immediate needs were debris removal and application of tarps to damaged roofs, difficult decisions had to be made. The decisions usually favored getting desperately needed help to survivors. Those VRCs that accepted the risks of referring volunteers to this kind of service relied on waivers signed by volunteers or their parents to protect them from legal action in the event of an injury or worse.

The safety of children and youth volunteers was a concern of several respondents. One did not allow anyone under 18 to register. Another reported that parents had dropped off children without signing the release of liability statement required of all volunteers registering with the VRC.

The use of waivers or release of liability statements on volunteer registration forms had been addressed in all disaster volunteer management training provided by Volunteer Florida.

Volunteer Center and VRC directors understood that waivers don't prevent legal action from being taken against their organizations. Waivers, along with documentation of safety and job training, do become part of the documentation that:

- Volunteer organizers had provided warning to volunteers that there was risk involved in disaster volunteer work,
- The VRC and relief agencies had provided safety and job training, and
- Parents had specifically granted permission for their minor children to participate.

It has been observed that, before disasters occur, risk and emergency managers are highly motivated to establish policies that would minimize, regulate or restrict disaster volunteer participation, in an effort to protect volunteers from harm and survivors from additional injury. In the post-disaster environment, however, the risks inherent in not allowing volunteers to meet survivors' needs often overshadow the risks of participating. For example, one of the teams that canvassed neighborhoods to assess survivors' needs found a gentleman in desperate need of a medication that kept him alive. With no family in the area, he had been out of the medicine for several days. Those volunteers completed their shift with the satisfaction of having saved a life that day.

### **Where There is Disaster, There is Stress**

Managing volunteers and volunteer programs is not a profession that people enter for the financial rewards. Committed to the ideal of service, salaried volunteer management professionals *volunteer* by working long hours to ensure that their programs and volunteers meet the needs of their communities. Volunteer managers bring this culture of high personal expectations with them into the post-disaster environment, demanding even more of themselves than usual.

When asked how they took care of themselves during their activation, one respondent said, "We didn't do that very well. In our role we pushed ourselves to try to meet all volunteers,' agencies,' and citizens' needs."

Another respondent added, "We and our volunteers worked long hours, when we were victims ourselves."

Another agreed. "We did not take care of ourselves. It was too much, too quick." This director added, "...the mistake I made was not taking some time off" when backup was available.

One added, "[It was] hard to pay attention to ourselves when [we were] so focused on recovery."



Working long hours, even in a routine environment, is fatiguing. Working double shifts in such a stressful atmosphere required staff to dig deep into their personal resources of physical strength and emotional stability. Several mentioned wishing they had trained additional backup for themselves prior to the storms. All agreed that training volunteer coordinators from other local agencies to manage and staff the VRC would have helped to provide the support they needed. “Hurricane humor” surfaced everywhere, often releasing the pressure just before it reached the boiling point.

It was difficult for some supervisors and family members to cope with the long hours their VRC staff members were working. Some VRC directors had spouses or other family members also involved in the recovery effort. Sharing a spouse’s pain sometimes helped, but sometimes added to the stress. Some VRC directors made a point of encouraging their staff to talk with each other about their work and frustrations. Even with the support of regular conference calls with their FAVC peers and Volunteer Florida staff, most reported experiencing feelings of isolation and extreme fatigue.

One respondent mentioned that, “Critical Incident Stress Management teams are often in [impacted] areas, but because VRC staff are not ‘in the field,’ they may well be overlooked as persons in need of such service.” Several suggested that each VRC should have a trained mental health professional available to observe staff for signs of stress and offer assistance.

VRC directors expressed deep appreciation to Volunteer Florida for making possible an extended meeting of FAVC. One said, “The debriefing with fellow FAVC members was the most significant (non-family or friend) support received...during or following the multiple storm events,” and hoped to conduct a similar debriefing or retreat with the rest of her staff.

**Recommendation:** Volunteer Centers should recruit and train experienced volunteer coordinators from local government, nonprofits and corporations to help staff the VRC.

**Recommendation:** Volunteer Centers should develop MOUs with local mental health professionals to provide pre-disaster training for VRC staff and to assist at VRCs during disaster response.

### Looking Ahead Toward Mutual Support

Respondents were asked to suggest planning steps for development of a mutual support plan among Volunteer Centers and others responsible for operating VRCs. They were also asked for their thoughts on preparing counties without Volunteer Centers to manage unaffiliated volunteers. Their responses seemed to suggest components of a strategic planning process to ensure that all Florida counties develop the capacity to manage this resource.

**Recommendation:** Volunteer Florida should convene a meeting with representatives from

the Florida Division of Emergency Management, Volunteer Florida staff, FAVC and County Emergency Management Agencies. The agenda could include:

- Identification of additional stakeholders who should be included in future meetings
- Discussion of the successes and challenges of volunteer management operations statewide during the 2004 hurricane season
- Consideration of the desired end outcomes of a statewide mutual support plan
- Identification of the required inputs to ensure success
- Identification of interim objectives, which might include:
- Presentation to County Emergency Management Directors at annual Current Issues Meeting at State EOC to secure the buy-in of county emergency managers
- Adoption of statewide policies for unaffiliated volunteer management to protect survivors, volunteers, Volunteer Centers/VRCs and local governments from additional harm
- Standardization of volunteer management forms and VRC procedures
- Training of county budget personnel to utilize volunteer hours worked as local match for FEMA reimbursement of disaster expenses
- Training on procedures by which VRC operators request reimbursement of disaster-related expenses
- Mapping Volunteer Center coverage areas
- Timeline and assignment of planning tasks

### Florida Statutes Directly Related to General Volunteer Management

The following links are provided to facilitate the gathering of information directly from Florida Statutes. This not an exhaustive list, as there are references to volunteer entitlements and restrictions throughout the Statutes.

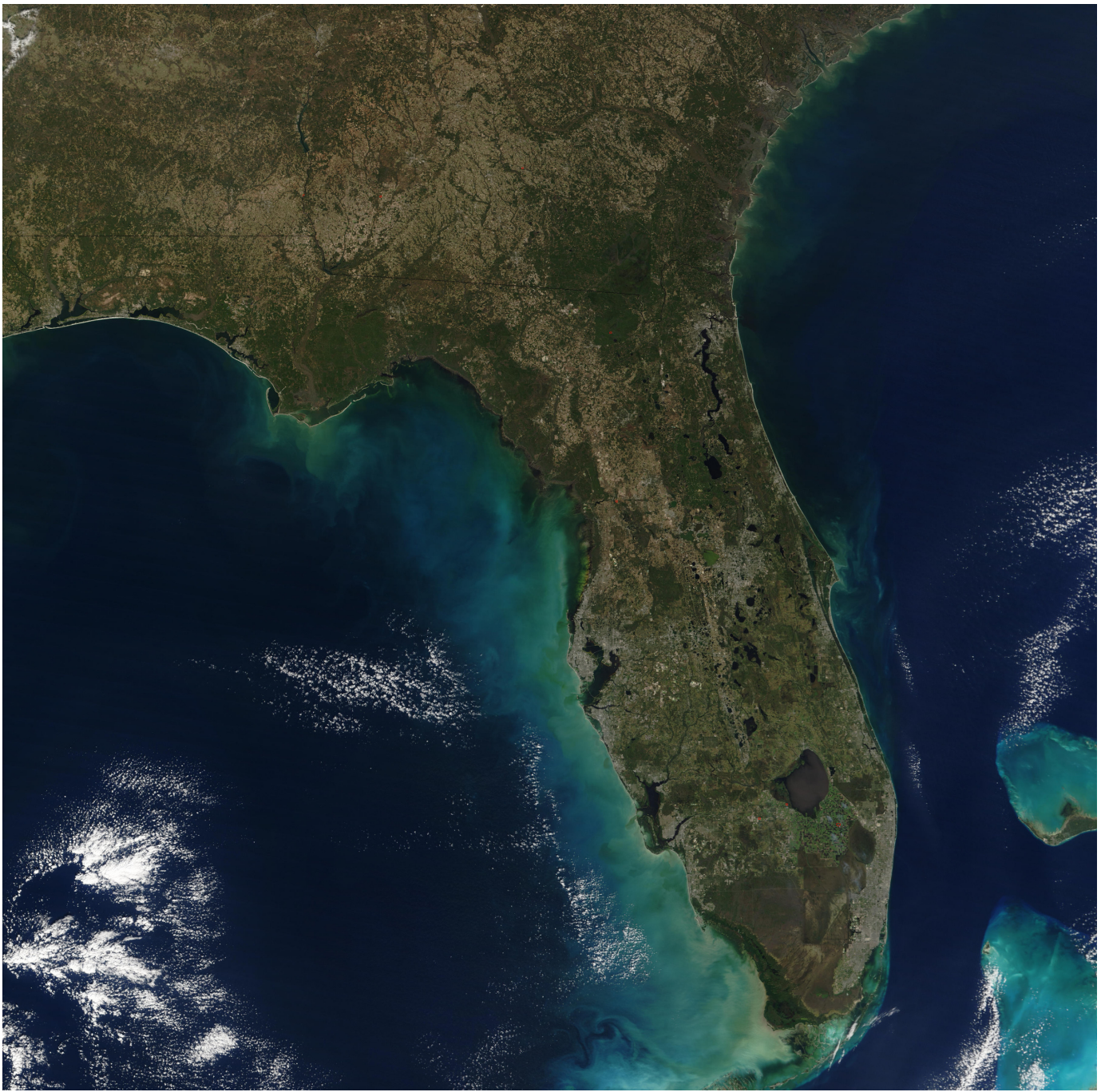
Florida's "**Florida Volunteer Protection Act**" can be found in the Florida Statutes at  
[http://www.leg.state.fl.us/Statutes/index.cfm?  
App\\_mode=Display\\_Statute&URL=0700-0799/0768/Sections/0768.1355.html](http://www.leg.state.fl.us/Statutes/index.cfm?App_mode=Display_Statute&URL=0700-0799/0768/Sections/0768.1355.html)

State law regarding "**Release or covenant not to sue**" can be found at:  
<https://www.flsenate.gov/Laws/Statutes/2010/768.31>

Florida's "**Good Samaritan Act**" can be viewed at:  
[http://www.leg.state.fl.us/Statutes/index.cfm?  
App\\_mode=Display\\_Statute&URL=0700-0799/0768/Sections/0768.13.html](http://www.leg.state.fl.us/Statutes/index.cfm?App_mode=Display_Statute&URL=0700-0799/0768/Sections/0768.13.html)

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