

Kelly D. Higgs, Disaster Recovery and Resiliency Coordinator
NJVOAD (New Jersey Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster)
July 11, 2016 House Committee of Homeland Security's Subcommittee on Emergency
Preparedness, Response, and Communications
"A Prepared Community is a Resilient Community"

My name is Kelly Higgs, and I am honored to serve as the Disaster Recovery and Resiliency Coordinator for New Jersey Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (NJVOAD). I was hired post-Sandy to provide support for long-term recovery in impacted communities throughout NJ, while also building resiliency and preparedness efforts in all 21 counties throughout the State. I am thrilled that the House Committee of Homeland Security's Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Communications has convened a hearing around the importance of preparedness and resiliency, and I am honored to be invited to testify on this critical topic.

NJVOAD's mission is to bring together New Jersey organizations active in disaster assistance, and to foster cooperation and coordination in preparedness, response, and recovery in order to offer more effective services to people and communities affected by disaster. Our success is built upon strong relationships with non-profit, and government partners which are built on the foundation of the "Four C's": cooperation, communication, coordination and collaboration. It is my belief and testimony that these same foundational building blocks have contributed to many successful partnerships, projects and outcomes in the aftermath of Sandy. Conversely, when these key ingredients were not present, programs struggled and or failed.

LESSONS LEARNED:

There have been many lessons learned throughout Sandy recovery, but NJVOAD has prioritized these five:

1. The need to build partnerships and relationships at the local, county and regional level BEFORE disaster strikes;
2. The importance of a coordinated effort to broadcast and organize the needs for donated goods and volunteer support;
3. The need for early education and outreach to impacted households;
4. The importance of building partnerships with the philanthropic community and advocating for funding allocation decisions which sustain true long-term recovery efforts;
5. The need for coordination and continuity in the development and implementation of state-managed programs utilizing Community Development and Social Services Block Grant funds.

One of the very early lessons learned was the **need to build partnerships and relationships at the local, county and regional level BEFORE disaster strikes**. NJVOAD saw the benefits of this in areas like Bergen County, where the Bergen VOAD had a strong membership of area non-profits and a solid relationship with the Office of Emergency Management (OEM) prior to Sandy. They were able to quickly mobilize non-profit resources for response and recovery efforts in Moonachie, Little Ferry and other impacted communities. Sadly, Hudson, Essex and Union Counties, three of the nine most impacted counties just to the south of Bergen, did not have a VOAD in place prior to Sandy. These and other communities without a VOAD needed a tremendous amount of support in identifying partners, finding resources, building relationships and gaining trust, which delayed the speed and efficiency of resource and service delivery to impacted individuals.

Another significant challenge New Jersey encountered was the **lack of a coordinated effort to broadcast and organize the needs for donated goods and volunteer support**. So many organizations found themselves overwhelmed with clothing or canned goods that were dropped on their doorstep immediately following Sandy's arrival. Time and money was spent sorting, storing, distributing and disposing of these unsolicited donations while communities lacked many other items which were needed to support response and recovery efforts, such as construction materials, protective masks, etc.

When Sandy struck, there was no centralized platform for volunteers to receive direction about how to help, or for communities and groups in need of volunteer labor to identify and coordinate volunteer efforts. Many volunteers appeared spontaneously in communities which were not equipped to deploy them, while other communities were longing for additional support but did not have the means to reach people to organize efforts. More than 18,000 calls and texts were received on the cell phone of the Executive Director of the NJ Governor's Office of Volunteerism in the days immediately following the storm, but there was no established mechanism in place to connect this desire to help with the needs in affected communities.

Almost four years post-Sandy, the need for support far outweighs the non-profit resources which remain in place to meet that need. This is not due to lack of desire on the part of non-profits, but to lack of funding. There are a limited number of Disaster Case Managers and non-profit builders who are continuing to work with some of the most challenging Sandy-recovery cases. These cases consist primarily of people who fall into two categories: low-income households with limited means for recovery and moderate income households that encountered several challenges navigating the complicated road to recovery. Many of these households began recovery work in their home before documenting the damage, and they have not been able to provide sufficient proof of damage to receive the funds they should be entitled to receive through the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP). Others signed contracts they could not afford or hired disreputable contractors to complete recovery work. There are many lessons we have learned from working alongside these individuals, but the two primary lessons are: the **need for early education and outreach to impacted households** and the importance of **building partnerships with the philanthropic community and advocating for**

funding allocation decisions which sustain true long-term recovery efforts in the wake of a major disaster such as Sandy.

One of the biggest challenges faced by NJ Sandy survivors and non-profit organizations supporting recovery work has been the **lack of coordination and continuity in the development and implementation of state-managed programs utilizing Community Development Block Grant – Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR) and Social Services Block Grant (SSBG) funds.** For instance, NJ's rebuild program, Rehabilitation, Reconstruction, Elevation and Mitigation Program (RREM) was developed without consideration of funding for rental assistance. Rental assistance has been provided through other Federal and State programs, but the coordination and timing of these programs left significant gaps:

- FEMA's Individual and Households (IHP) program provided up to 18 months of rental assistance (or until the maximum grant amount was awarded), which carried most households through the late winter / early spring of 2014.
- NJ's Sandy Homeowner/Renter Assistance Program (SHRAP) launched in November 2013 and covered a maximum of six months of rental assistance (or coverage for other necessities such as utility payments, furniture or household appliances) to a maximum of \$15,000. This money was first come, first served, so many individuals receiving IHP rental assistance applied for SHRAP concurrently and utilized SHRAP funds to cover other expenses to avoid duplication of benefits. Most people had exhausted their SHRAP award or had received the maximum 6 months of service by summer – early fall of 2014.
- There was no governmental program in place to cover rental assistance until the Tenant-Based Rental Assistance (TBRA) program was introduced in March 2015 with first rental payments being disbursed in May 2015. This 12-month program was extended to cover a maximum of 24 months.

Non-profit funding is supposed to be the dollar of last resort to address unmet needs. However, the above timeline left many displaced homeowners turning to the non-profit community to cover their rent for periods of 6 – 9 months. Millions of non-profit donated dollars were expended on rental assistance, so that Sandy survivors could maintain mortgages on their uninhabitable homes. Attempts to advocate with State and Federal agencies to address this and other deficiencies were not productive as each held the other accountable for any roadblocks to progress.

RESOLUTION EFFORTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

NJVOAD members have worked closely with existing partners such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the New Jersey Office of Emergency Management (NJOEM), the NJ Department of Human Services (NJ DHS), and the Governor's Office of Volunteerism to **create and implement collaborative solutions to these lessons learned.** We have also developed new partnerships with the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS),

the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Council of NJ Grantmakers, and many others to build a network which strengthens the preparedness and resiliency of NJ communities.

NJVOAD has been very fortunate to receive grants to support recovery and resiliency throughout the State. We were able to expand the scope of this work through a CNCS grant to utilize VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) members to provide capacity building support for long-term recovery in Sandy-affected communities while building and strengthening preparedness and resilience efforts in all 21 counties. Over the course of two years, NJVOAD has been able to **leverage these resources to support ongoing recovery work and establish a VOAD presence in every county in NJ.** NJVOAD pioneered the utilization of the VISTA program for capacity building in the areas of disaster recovery and community resiliency and preparedness efforts. For example, our team of VISTA members worked in Union County to provide community outreach events for long-term recovery efforts and identify non-profit and governmental partners to be part of the VOAD. VISTA efforts supported long-term recovery efforts in Hudson County, then planned events to transition those relationships into an active VOAD that meets regularly for training and planning purposes. Essex County had a strong showing for the launch of its VOAD group, and has a core team in place which is identifying leadership and organizing a structure that will meet the unique needs of this diverse county. This work has been repeated in all 21 counties throughout NJ where the VOAD movement has been developed or strengthened to ensure greater community preparedness and resiliency. Because of the great work of the two VISTA teams we have had in place, NJVOAD received national recognition and was awarded the 2016 State VOAD of the Year Award. Other state VOADs and relief organizations are looking at this as a model to support disaster response and recovery efforts in the future, and NJVOAD is in discussion with our CNCS and FEMA Region II partners about developing a regional pilot program for New York, New Jersey, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands.

NJVOAD partnered with NJOEM and the Governor's Office of Volunteerism to develop HELPNJNOW.ORG, a web-based solution to address the secondary disasters which result when there is no system to manage unaffiliated volunteers and unsolicited donations. When New Jersey is not responding to a declared disaster (the "blue sky" mode), the focus of this site is on personal preparedness with information and links for people to prepare themselves and their families for potential threats. The site also provides education about the best ways to help when a disaster strikes. One primary focus is to encourage people to register and train as a disaster volunteer before a disaster strikes, as trained volunteers are critical to successful disaster relief efforts. Education about donated goods is also a critical focus, as many people don't realize the burden of shipping, sorting, storing and distributing items.

When a large-scale disaster impacts New Jersey, the site will operate in "gray sky" mode with links to 4 key resources:

- **Monetary Donations:** Cash is the best way to help in any disaster, as organizations can purchase what is needed locally and help rebuild the economy in impacted communities. NJVOAD utilizes GuideStar and Charity Navigator to vet the organizations listed on HELPNJNOW.ORG to minimize potential for fraud or mismanagement.

- **Material Goods:** Information about items needed will be posted, as well as a portal for people to offer donated goods which will be shared with organizations serving impacted communities.
- **Volunteers:** The site becomes a virtual volunteer reception center where people who want to help can complete an online application and skills inventory and sign up for volunteer opportunities.
- **Information/Assistance:** For those in need of help, links and numbers to NJ 2-1-1 are provided as well as a link to Google Crisis Maps that includes evacuation routes, shelter locations, street closures and other critical information.

NJVOAD convened a Call to Collaboration last October to review lessons learned, strengthen partnerships and identify resources to implement many of the proposed solutions born out of our collective recovery experience. One of these initiatives is the **development of educational resources to be utilized in future disasters so that impacted homeowners can make informed decisions before beginning their recovery**. We will be looking to our government partners to assist with methods to disseminate this information publicly in future disasters.

NJVOAD is working closely with the philanthropic community to identify collaborative solutions which will provide for a more effective and sustainable funding stream for future disasters. A big component in the future success of any changes in funding patterns will require education extending to our government partners and the public to ensure a better understanding of the need for funding to sustain recovery efforts long-term. The majority of money is donated in the days and weeks following a major disaster with the expectation, and sometimes mandate, to get the funds out immediately. The reality is that these donated dollars should be disbursed in a calculated manner to ensure that funding is not front-loaded during response and early recovery stages when it is needed least. NJVOAD hopes to **establish a statewide advisory group, with representatives from the philanthropic, government and non-profit communities, to provide guidance and expertise specific to the disaster at hand**.

The one problem area that NJVOAD has been unable to address with any lasting impact is perhaps one of the biggest issues at hand: the lack of coordination and continuity in the development and implementation of state-managed programs. NJVOAD has forged relationships with the New Jersey Division of Consumer Affairs (NJDCA), the State Agency with responsibility for development and implementation of the majority of these programs. After initial resistance, the current leadership has opened up to hearing feedback from the VOAD community and making modest adjustments to existing programs, such as allowing Disaster Case Managers (with written consent) to talk with the Housing Advisors and Project Managers who are managing RREM cases. However, these small concessions don't begin to fill the tremendous gap that exists in how these programs are designed and integrated into the disaster recovery framework. We have seen our VOAD partners in Colorado and other states have a role and input in working with their state government to design and implement programs that are logical and survivor-focused. NJDCA has held public hearings on how they are spending the billions of CDBG-DR funds they have received, but the feedback provided in these hearings has not resulted in any programmatic changes of note. **A stronger citizen action**

plan should be mandated which requires input and involvement of disaster survivors and recovery entities during formation of any proposed disaster recovery action plans.

The Joint Field Office (JFO) model is an inspired structure designed to enhance communication and coordination between federal and state entities in disaster response and recovery. **Better integration and staffing of the JFO to include State decision makers responsible for the development and implementation of recovery programs could go a long way in minimizing duplication of efforts, misunderstanding, miscommunication and lack of integration of governmental programs.**

NJVOAD is committed to working with our public and private sector partners to be part of the solution in implementing lessons learned from Sandy and preparing our communities to weather whatever storms might lie ahead. Thank you for convening this hearing and providing me the opportunity to share this testimony.