Episodic Volunteerism after Hurricane Katrina:
Insights from Pass Christian, Mississippi

Alyson L. Greiner, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Department of Geography
Oklahoma State University - 225 Scott Hall
Stillwater, OK 74078-4073 USA
Tel. 405-744-9169 * FAX 405-744-5620 * E-mail: alyson.greiner@okstate.edu

Thomas A. Wikle, Ph.D.
Professor, Department of Geography
Oklahoma State University - 225 Scott Hall
Stillwater, OK 74078-4073 USA
Tel. 405-744-8709 * FAX 405-744-5620 * E-mail: t.wikle@okstate.edu

Abstract
Volunteers and volunteer resource managers play critical roles in the response following a natural disaster. Episodic volunteerism, a key aspect of volunteerism today, has become increasingly important in the disaster recovery process. This article examines episodic volunteerism in the context of the recovery from Hurricane Katrina with a focus on events in the small Mississippi Gulf Coast town of Pass Christian. Drawing on a case study approach using field work, interviews, and secondary resources to collect data, the authors examine the roles of volunteer resource managers in coordinating the volunteer response. Along with a discussion of the nature of episodic volunteerism in Pass Christian, the authors suggest new strategies for volunteer resource managers in engaging episodic volunteers.

Introduction

Episodic volunteerism refers to intermittent, short-term, or task-specific volunteering. These kinds of volunteers have long existed, a fact clearly recognized by Macduff (1991a, p. 19) who coined the actual term "episodic volunteering" in 1990 and published her first book on the topic the following year. Macduff expressed surprise at the fact that episodic volunteering was being received by those in the volunteering community as such an innovative concept. By drawing attention to the short-term volunteer, however, she hoped to improve the strategies for volunteer management, many of which had focused primarily on the "traditional" or long-term volunteer (Macduff 1991b).

Volunteer resource managers know far too well the enormity of the task of organizing and managing volunteer labor and most would agree

that episodic volunteerism presents a series of additional challenges. Weighing the costs and benefits of episodic volunteers, for example, is not always a straightforward exercise. On the one hand, the irregular availability of some episodic volunteers can present a planning nightmare. On the other hand, episodic volunteers may play a crucial role in enhancing social capital and, more broadly, civil society (Handy & Brudney, 2007).

The focus in this study involved the intersection of episodic volunteerism and disaster recovery with an emphasis on the role of the volunteer resource manager (VRM). The study considers some of the ways that episodic volunteerism factored in the disaster recovery process as it unfolded in Pass Christian following Hurricane Katrina. In the process it serves to initiate a dialogue on ways of improving the coordination of episodic volunteers after a massive natural disaster.

Methods

The authors developed a qualitative methodology involving a single-case study approach using interviews, field work, and both primary and secondary resources (including a thorough search of the literature) to collect data (McNabb, 2002). After establishing contacts with church officials in Pass Christian, the authors conducted intensive field work there in the spring of 2007. Additional contacts were made using a snowball or chain sampling method to generate referrals to other key individuals (Patton, 1990). In-depth personal interviews were conducted with VRMs and episodic volunteers.

An important part of the field work involved naturalistic and participatory observation, including riding in the back of pick-up trucks with episodic volunteers as they were transported to different work sites and helping volunteers load and unload project materials at the different sites. Photograph albums recording the different groups of episodic volunteers as well as some of their personal memories and experiences proved to be an extremely valuable and unanticipated primary resource that shed additional light on volunteerism in Pass Christian. Concern about impeding or otherwise interfering with the work of the VRMs and episodic volunteers shaped the entire data collection phase of the research.

Data analysis and interpretation followed standardized procedures for qualitative case studies. Data were organized and extraneous information was separated. Additional study of the data was necessary to identify key themes and patterns, and to develop coding categories that would help assess the role of VRMs and the phenomenon of episodic volunteerism following a massive natural disaster. The findings reported here suggest some new strategies for improving the efficiency of volunteer management.

Previous Research on Volunteering and Disasters

A diverse body of literature documents volunteers, volunteering, and volunteer resource management following disasters. For example, researchers have examined motivations of volunteers (Clary et al., 1998; Fitch, 1987; Knoke & Wright-Isak, 1982; Lammers, 1991; O'Connell, 1983; Ostwald & Runge, 2004) and factors that attract persons to specific types of volunteer organizations (Cook, 1984; Florin, Jones, & Wandersman, 1986).

Studies show that youth are more likely to volunteer if they believe they can positively affect others' lives (Karafantis & Levy, 2004) and that personal interests and self-realization can be more important factors in a decision to volunteer than a sense of obligation or a service ethic (Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003). Volunteerism has been shown to be higher among persons with greater educational attainment (Hodgkinson & Weitzman, 1986; Menchik & Weisbrod, 1987) and income (Auslander & Litwin, 1988; Palisi & Korn, 1989).

A 2006 study by the Corporation for National Community Service (CNCS) found that recent growth in volunteering has been driven by older teenagers (ages 16-19), mid-life adults (ages 45-64) and older adults (ages 65 and older). Research has identified different types of volunteers including episodic, long-term, virtual, and cross-national (Brudney, 2005; Handy & Brudney, 2007; Macduff 1990, 1991a, 1991b). The popularity of short-term volunteer experiences today is attributable to increasingly busy work schedules and social commitments (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2006; Handy, Brodeur, & Cnaan, 2006; Hustix & Lammertyn, 2003).

Volunteer work following a disaster or extreme event can attract significant interest within the public at large. In January of 2003, more than 25,000 volunteers turned out to assist with the recovery effort following Space Shuttle Columbia's tragic breakup (Federal Emergency Management Agency, 2003). The importance of volunteers and volunteer groups in the wake of human and natural disasters has driven research to document the effectiveness and impacts of volunteer

assistance activities (Brennan, Flint, & Barnett, 2005; Drabek & McEntire, 2002; Jackson, Baker, Ridgely, Bartis, & Linn, 2003; Quarantelli & Dynes, 1970; Wolensky, 1979; Zakour, Gillespie, Sherraden, & Streeter, 1991). A number of studies have examined problems associated with spontaneous volunteers, defined as untrained persons who rush to disaster sites in large numbers. For example, Fernandez, Barbera and van Dorp (2006) observed that the absence of strong volunteer management can create life-threatening hazards such as the improper preparation of food or the distribution of contaminated food. Others noted that spontaneous volunteers can distract or interfere with the work of emergency personnel (Barsky, Trainor, Torres, & Aguirre, 2007; Florida Commission on Community Service, 2000; Tierney, 1994). In many cases spontaneous volunteers have been shown to lack skills and logistical support needed to contribute to relief efforts in meaningful ways (Lowe & Fothergill, 2003, Points of Light Foundation, 2008; Tan, 2006).

Faith-based groups have emerged as an important source of volunteer labor and support following disasters (Sutton, 2002; Carafano, Marshall, & Hammond, 2007; Holcombe, 2007; Koenig, 2006; Lacie, 2007). Spring and Grimm (2004) pointed out that about half of religious congregations offering social service programs focus on emergency services. Volunteer support from faith-based groups along the Gulf Coast following Hurricane Katrina was considerable, and has been estimated to have exceeded $600 billion in equivalent labor cost (Townsend 2007). Rodríguez, Trainor and Quarantelli (2006) explained that in the aftermath of Katrina, religious organizations that were already

accustomed to providing help in distributing food and services became "expanded groups" taking on the role of training volunteers. Despite the importance of volunteers following disasters and other extreme events, relatively little research has focused on organizational strategies that work best in facilitating episodic volunteer opportunities (Tierney, Lindell, & Perry, 2001).

The Case Study: Pass Christian, Mississippi

Pass Christian, or "the Pass" as locals call it, is situated about 10 miles west of Gulfport, the state's largest city (Figure 1). Before Katrina, the Pass had a population of approximately 7,000, about one-tenth the size of nearby Gulfport. The city limits of the Pass include six miles of beachfront property adjacent to Highway 90, Mississippi's southernmost east-to-west transect. This stretch of Highway 90 is known as "Scenic Drive," a reference to the stately homes overlooking the Gulf.

On August 29, 2005, Katrina's eye wall swept just west of the Pass, battering the city with 125 mph winds and inundating it with an estimated 30-foot storm surge. The entire business district of the Pass was destroyed and with it civic anchors such as City Hall, the library, and police station. Approximately 1,600 homes, or 80% of the residential dwellings in the Pass, were completely destroyed. Today the population of the Pass stands at about 2,000 people, a decline of 73% since Katrina.

Figure 1. Location of Pass Christian, Mississippi
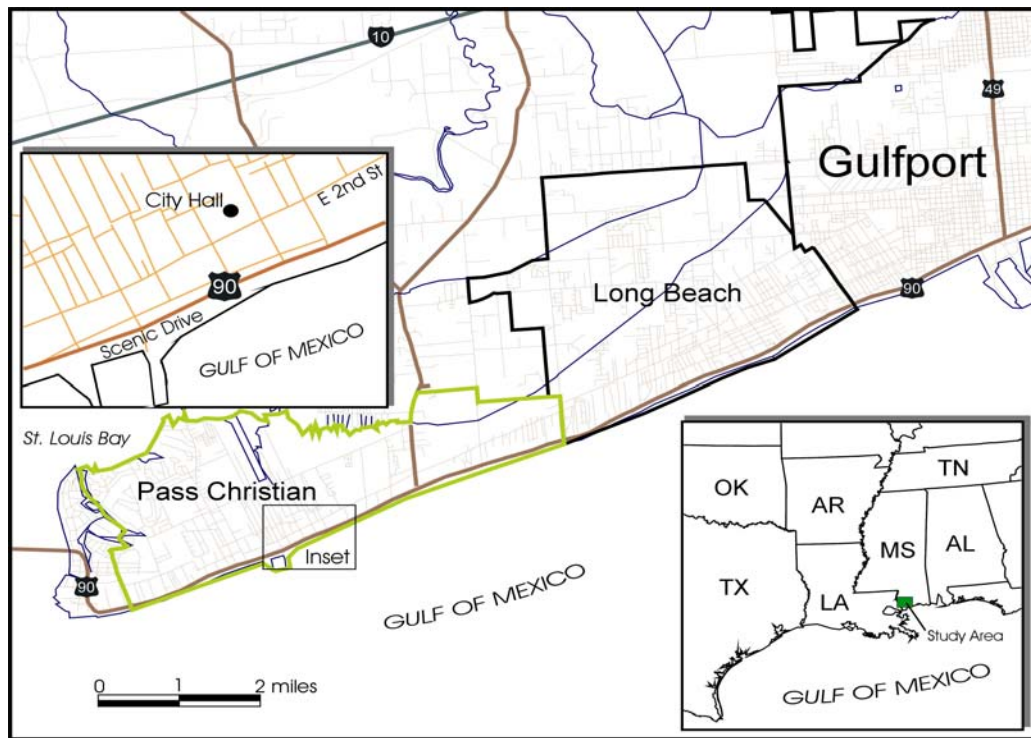
Coordinating Episodic Volunteers in the Pass

One of the first citizen volunteers to arrive in the Pass was a man by the name of Randy who drove from Texas and established a point of distribution (POD) on the beach for disbursing food and clothing. As relief transitioned to reconstruction he found himself coordinating increasingly larger numbers of volunteers involved in small projects that included making repairs to damaged homes and buildings. Among disaster experts the consensus is that the responsibility of volunteer coordination should fall to a local group rather than consume the resources of the agencies managing the disaster recovery. The fact that Randy was willing to assume this leadership role was an important factor in the overall recovery of the Pass.

"Randy's Rangers" was the name subsequently given to the ad-hoc volunteer management program initiated by Randy. For nearly a year and a half he worked from a minimal tent-based camp. By January 2007, with help from some of the volunteers, a more substantial camp had been created with room for about 60 people. The camp included six large, elevated tents with heavy canvas walls, tarp-covered roofs, and showers.

Randy became a recognized coordinator of volunteers and a local contact for maintaining lists of job tasks and priorities, supervising and managing volunteers, and accommodating groups. Volunteer groups interested in coming to the Pass are put in touch with Randy so that the timing of their visit, length of stay, kinds of jobs needing assistance, and other details can be arranged. By our estimate, approximately 80% or more of the volunteers who have stayed at Randy's camp have come as members of mission groups and faith-based high schools and colleges.

What is perhaps most fascinating about Randy's Rangers is that they demonstrate every aspect of episodic volunteering: short-term, one-time, recurrent, and task-specific. The bulk of the groups and their members who served as volunteers came to the Pass only once and stayed on average about a week. For example, a number of college and university organizations offered "alternative spring breaks" in which student volunteers could spend their time off assisting with the post-Katrina recovery.

Interestingly, there existed a kind of "double recurrence" of episodic volunteers, i.e. there were several examples of volunteer groups that came on a recurrent basis and occasionally two to four specific individuals within those groups came for a second, or rarely, a third or fourth visit. These trends can largely be attributed to the decision of officials within the American Baptist Church to "adopt" the city of Pass Christian. More specifically, the American Baptist Church East (associated with the states of Indiana and Kentucky) made a tremendous long-term commitment to the recovery of the Pass. It launched "Project Reclaim" which focuses on rebuilding the city and has a stated goal of providing a minimum of 10 volunteers a week for a period of two years (Goodyear, 2006). In addition, Randy has served as a local contact for the American Baptist Church East and helps coordinate the volunteers from its many different congregations. News of this base camp for volunteers in the Pass spread contagiously via regional newsletters of the American Baptist Church to other congregations in the Midwest, creating an identifiable source

Table 1
Five Leading States Sending Specific Volunteer Numbers to Randy's Rangers in Pass Christian

State	Number of Volunteers
Indiana	190
West Virginia	82
North Carolina	41
Kentucky	39
Wisconsin	37

area for the episodic volunteers to the Pass (Table 1).

As is typical of episodic volunteers, a few of them could provide specialized expertise such as electrical wiring, hanging dry wall, or roofing. By contrast, most of the episodic volunteers who served as Randy's Rangers performed a variety of highly specific tasks like spraying bleach, patching holes, or moving debris. For nearly a year and a half after the storm, recovery efforts were, with one major exception, largely focused on clean-up and debris removal rather than on rebuilding. The Mennonite Disaster Service constituted the exception to this trend. The Mennonites also assisted with clean-up, but because they are able to draw on a pool of skilled laborers as episodic volunteers, they could commence rebuilding sooner and with significant efficiency. As one informant explained, the Mennonites are the "Cadillac of volunteers." In some ways, however, the fact that there was such great need for volunteers to perform basic tasks like clean-up and debris removal made the job of assigning the episodic volunteers task-specific duties somewhat easier. The issue of the availability of skilled versus unskilled volunteer labor still presents an enduring obstacle to the long-term recovery of the Pass.

Modeling the Volunteer Response

The coordination of volunteers by Randy's Rangers was exemplary though not entirely problem-free. In terms of managing volunteers, coordinators faced two basic problems. The first was the issue of skilled volunteers versus unskilled volunteers, long considered an obstacle to the efficient use of volunteer labor. The second issue concerned the seasonality of the arrival of volunteers. To date, there does not appear to be any treatment of these issues within either the volunteer management or disaster literature. Therefore, the model presented here is a work in progress but attempts to integrate these two issues.

By dividing the post-disaster period into three stages, it is possible to visualize the changing needs of the community and, in turn, the kinds of volunteers that are most desirable. During the first stage, the focus is on preservation of life, and professionals trained in emergency response are essential. Unskilled volunteers, though their intentions are good, can actually impede the initial response. Stage 2 involves recovery, and rebuilding occurs in stage 3. Projects coordinated by Randy fall into stages 2 and 3, where volunteer coordination is fundamental to a rapid recovery but is necessarily difficult to organize.

Figure 2. Seasonality of volunteers based on a hypothetical maximum of 100
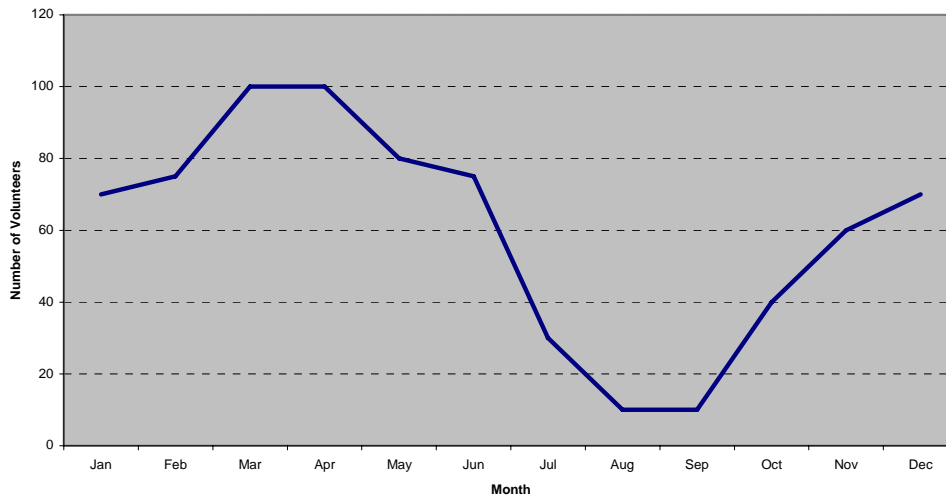
Because of the extent of the devastation caused by Katrina, the stage 2 phase lasted for about one year. While this extended the need for unskilled volunteers, it also introduced a new set of problems. Randy found that he was overwhelmed with volunteers over collegiate spring breaks and in the early part of the summer. Then, later in the summer, the volunteers dropped off (Figure 2). The fact of the matter is that the heat and humidity of southern Mississippi summers were deterrents to volunteers. Depending on the magnitude and location of the disaster, the seasonality issue will not always be a problem. The first step in solving it, however, requires that VRMs be aware that this is a potential problem and take measures to identify episodic volunteers who are more flexible with their time.

A related problem that emerged involved the concept of "efficient days." This is a term that Randy used to explain the cycle of an episodic volunteer arriving on site, gaining familiarity with the place, understanding the requirements of a specific job task, and then departing. He expressed frustration at the fact that if a volunteer came for a single week, he was only able to get about two "efficient days of work" out of her/him. The problem of "efficient days" was compounded by the lack of geographic awareness that any person experiences when s/he arrives in a new place for the first time.

Approximately 8,000 volunteers have now stayed at Randy's camp (Orr, 2008), the majority of whom had never been to that part of the Gulf Coast before. Moreover, the loss of street signs and visible landmarks as a result of Katrina's devastation further complicated the ability of volunteers to orient themselves. For these reasons it is essential that at least one person in the disaster-affected area function as a "geographic liaison." The role of this person would be to introduce volunteers to the geographic context of the disaster area. This would involve reviewing the layout of the volunteer campsite as well as the relationship of the volunteer camp to key intersections or points of significance. This information could be

communicated before the volunteers travel to the disaster-affected area via a conference call, or, ideally, via a Web site with a map and photos. Alternatively, it could be presented in the format of an orientation session once they arrive at the volunteer campsite. Establishing a geographic liaison should not simply be seen as extending the bureaucracy of disaster recovery and volunteer coordination; rather, it is essential to the smooth operation of the long-term recovery process. Indeed, Pass Christian would have benefited from having a local geographic liaison.

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About the Authors

Alyson L. Greiner is an associate professor of geography in the College of Arts and Sciences at Oklahoma State University. Her research interests include geographic education and historic preservation.

Thomas A. Wikle is a professor of geography in the College of Arts and Sciences at Oklahoma State University. His recent research has examined the geography of telecommunications.