Ask anyone who works in corrections ...
Hurricanes, floods, wildfires and earthquakes aren’t the only times you need a good volunteer

By Terry Campbell

AFTER Hurricane Harvey made landfall and walloped Texas and Louisiana last year, and shortly before Hurricane Irma and Hurricane Maria wreaked their havoc in the Caribbean, The Washington Post reported that William “Brock” Long, administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), speaking to a reporter during a telephone interview, said, “This will be a devastating disaster. The recovery to this event is going to last many years.”

Although the FEMA administrator had only been on the job two months, he had plenty to say about the hurricane and coordinating the federal response. But it was his words that spoke more as a cry for help than a pronouncement that were particularly poignant here. “We need citizens to be involved. I am asking for all citizens to get involved here.”

What Long said was needed and what he was “asking for” is actually what those in disaster response and recovery know all too well — when nature brings its wrath and the result is a natural disaster, the most important, and most indispensable tool you “need” are volunteers.

1,000,000,000 volunteers

According to the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) program, a global organization charged with contributing to peace and development through volunteerism, more than 1 billion people volunteer globally every year. Since only a fraction of these committed individuals are responding to hurricanes and earthquakes, other volunteers are used in a variety of ways. Based in Bonn, Germany, UNV’s website, www.unv.org, reveals volunteerism does indeed take on a deeper meaning:

By its very nature, volunteerism is an important vehicle for sustainable development. Volunteerism lets people and communities participate in their own growth. Through volunteering, citizens build their resilience, enhance their knowledge base and gain a sense of responsibility for their own community. Social cohesion and trust is strengthened through individual and collective volunteer action, leading to sustainable outcomes for people, by people.

No wonder every day and everywhere around the world volunteers are doing much more than making their way through flooded streets and combing through damaged homes. Volunteers help to eliminate poverty, improve health, foster education, better the environment, and even unite families and communities. As noted earlier, volunteers can be found working just about everywhere, including a place that might not immediately come to mind — corrections.

Volunteers in corrections

For many who work in corrections, the value and use of volunteers is well-known. Many correctional facilities, in fact, have long had systems and processes in place that maximize the use of volunteers. Volunteer hours, judiciously recorded, managed, and monitored, often find their way on to standard reports. If these correctional volunteer hours were to be gathered together for monetary reimbursement, the costs would be staggering.

Of course, there are times when volunteers become more liability than asset. Some overstep their boundaries, detract from the goal and add little, if any, value to the mission. However, there should be no question that the positives volunteers bring far outweigh the
negatives. From finding employment to simply readjusting to community life, inmates need more help than paid staff can give. The “no one can do it all” adage applies in corrections just as much as it applies anywhere.

At the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP), a subdivision of the U.S. Department of Justice, volunteers, often referred to as “mentors,” guide inmates and help them to foster accountability. BOP volunteers are used (and needed) in a host of uniquely-skilled areas for a variety of programs. The government’s needs list is specific:

Skill areas where volunteers are needed
- Academic.
- Vocational/career.
- Interpersonal.
- Wellness.
- Mental health.
- Cognitive.
- Character.
- Leisure.
- Daily living.

Types of programs
- Vocational training.
- Alcoholics Anonymous.
- Narcotics Anonymous.
- Tutoring.
- Leisure-time activities.
- Spiritual counseling.
- Religious services.
- Marriage and family issues.
- Preparing/participating in mock job fairs.

Other organizations — many nongovernmental, like Volunteers of America (VOA) — need, use and want volunteers. Founded in the late 1800s and based in Alexandria, Virginia, VOA (www.voa.org) is a national, nonprofit, faith-based organization that prides itself on being a ministry. As a “church without walls,” it focuses its programs and initiatives on championing the humane treatment of inmates.

VOA’s touted services: halfway houses and work-release programs, day reporting, diversion and pre-trial services, residential treatment, family supports, and dispute resolution and mediation services.

Maud Booth, VOA co-founder, is reported to have said, “When you have served your time, I will nurse you back to health, I will get you work, above all, I will trust you. I will help you over the rough places but, mind you, I will not carry you.”

Prison Fellowship (www.prisonfellowship.org), considered by some to be the country’s largest Christian nonprofit serving inmates, former inmates and their families, is another organization that seeks to take full advantage of volunteer help. Founded in 1976, the organization is an advocate for criminal justice reform and says it brings restoration to those affected by crime and incarceration while facilitating transformation, supporting families and returning citizens.

“Whether your interests lie in prison ministry, advocacy, or family reconciliation,” according to its website, “Prison Fellowship will partner with you towards making a difference in the lives of prisoners, their families, and their communities.”

While many believe volunteering in corrections tends to lean toward the religious or the spiritual, they are probably right. Many prison systems, for example, have weekly meetings that deal with substance use disorders — Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous. Most of these programs are 30 days in length, but this varies from state to state. It’s a sad fact that at the time a large percentage of individuals commit crimes, they are under the influence of drugs, alcohol or both. Addiction...
is an ongoing daily battle for many. Those once incarcerated who are now released into the community quite often have drug/alcohol treatment-release conditions to obey, including periodic drug/alcohol testing.

Another prison “ministry” many may not be aware of is the Salvation Army or, more specifically, the Salvation Army Prison Ministries (www.salvationarmyusa.org/usn/prison-ministries). This organization is very active in prison rehabilitation programs and crime-prevention initiatives. In many parts of the country, the Salvation Army Services has inmates released to their custody. Some additional activities available consist of “prerelease job-training programs, employment opportunities in cooperation with parole personnel, material aid, and spiritual guidance to both prisoners and their families.” Adult Rehabilitation Centers and Harbor Light Centers are Salvation Army’s halfway houses that provide offenders with the opportunity to attend work-release programs and the opportunity to participate in community service programs at corps community centers.

BOP, VOA, Prison Fellowship and Salvation Army are just a few of the many programs that exist nationwide. The similarities are ubiquitous, but becoming aware of the various volunteer programs and opportunities within prisons and within your community is a worthy task to undertake. Some may even be surprised at the myriad choices available by searching the internet or making a phone call.

**Get involved … get volunteers**

Along with the volunteer outlets mentioned thus far, one can offer one’s availability via the internet to state corrections systems. Many departments of correction are currently recruiting for volunteers in areas such as teaching and/or facilitating GED classes, parenting programs, vocational classes, spiritual programs, life skills, clerical duties, customer service, library services, health services, substance abuse treatment assistance, and working with veterans.

Also, from your own observations, do an assessment and see if you feel these types of programs are beneficial. Do you have any recommendations for program improvements and have you shared these thoughts with anyone at your facility? Are there other programs that should be considered to assist inmates? This is another way for you to get involved. This is an ideal opportunity for probation, parole and other community programs to also conduct an assessment and note areas of improvements. Once this has been identified, then administration can have staff contact various entities to assist in locating volunteers.

We know inmates have limited resources. That is why the ability to pay for programs often equates to nonparticipation and noncompletion. What better way to assist than to have volunteers with certain certifications join the mission? Being creative and thinking outside the box can improve programming throughout the system of utilizing volunteers.

Overall, with correctional resources stretched to the maximum, volunteerism stands out as a cost-effective way to bolster programs and provide needed support. (Recidivism need not fall victim to lack of staff or funds.) There are many people in the community retired, and who have the necessary credentials, to be a part of a robust and vibrant volunteer community.
Make a difference in the world

Whether it was President Kennedy’s founding of the Peace Corps in 1961, or President Clinton’s creation of AmeriCorps in 1993, or President Bush’s President’s Volunteer Service Awards, our nation’s focus on volunteerism has resulted in a growing number of people mobilizing to take action and make a difference in the world. In fact, for the past 40 years, every sitting U.S. president has issued a proclamation during April’s National Volunteer Week, a time set aside to encourage, honor and celebrate volunteers. (It should be noted that countries all over the world recognize the value of volunteerism. Canada, Australia, Rwanda and the United Kingdom are just some of them.)

In 2016, President Barack Obama said, “During National Volunteer Week, let us shed the cynicism that says one person cannot make a difference in the lives of others by embracing each of our individual responsibilities to serve and shape a brighter future for all.” This year, National Volunteer Week was April 23–29, and President Donald Trump said, “We celebrate the spirit of compassion and generosity that drives us to care for others, and we recognize America’s volunteers. Our volunteers are often unsung and unseen, but they are heroes.”

National Volunteer Week, for the foreseeable future, promises to be a day of recognition and a concerted nationwide effort to urge people to get out and volunteer in their communities. This year’s celebration takes place April 15–22, 2018, and charities, hospitals and communities will, once again, recognize volunteers and join together to foster a culture of service in this country.

Corrections professionals bring to the community a tremendous background that can be useful, not just on their jobs, but as volunteers. If you or anyone you know is interested in working with people, have communication skills, interests in helping others becoming part of the community, or interests in sports, music and other activities, then you and they have one of the fundamental volunteer requirements.

Remember this: A person can volunteer in areas that involve the elderly, youth groups, school reading programs and other, substance abuse, leisure-time activities, spiritual counseling, religious services, marriage and family issues, preparing and participating in mock job fairs, community projects, working with the homeless, food banks, churches, fund raisers, coaching, hidden talents to share, and more!

Take the next step. Get involved, so you can say: “I made a difference in the world.”

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Tips for using volunteers

- Make objectives SMART (specific, measure, achievable, realistic and time-bound).
- Make sure volunteers have the support of the administration and staff.
- Constantly identify areas where improvements and adjustments are necessary.
- Be willing to take minimal risk — don’t jeopardize the facility’s safety and security.
- Give the use of volunteers an opportunity and be proactive, not just reactive.
- Have an excellent training program for volunteers that include follow-up training.
- Make sure all uniformed and non-uniformed staff are aware of the volunteers and their roles.
- Give the program an opportunity to succeed.