



Leading in times  
of need: Disaster  
volunteering  
in the modern era

POINTS  
OF LIGHT

*“Responding to community needs in times of disaster requires more than just logistics and speed. There must be a human element that is driven at the community level. The visceral response that neighbors have to help their fellow neighbors is more effective when those of us who are leading organizations work together to amplify their local expertise with national resources.”*

**Natalye Paquin**, President & CEO, Points of Light

## Leading in times of need: Disaster volunteering in the modern era

In August of 2017, Hurricane Harvey, a Category 4 storm, made landfall near Houston, Texas. Its effects were catastrophic. 41 counties in southeast Texas were designated as federal disaster areas. More than 888,000 individual assistance applications were received by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and USD 8.73 billion in federal funds were provided to affected Texans.<sup>1</sup>

In response to Harvey, volunteer efforts brought individuals from across Texas and the United States to support the impacted areas. The response was impressive, but the scale of both the disaster and the response stretched volunteer management systems beyond capacity.

Harvey’s impact put extraordinary stress on volunteer management systems at a time when other disasters still required assistance. When Hurricanes Irma and Maria followed shortly after Harvey, they further strained the disaster ecosystem. Issues that might otherwise have been manageable were magnified by the sheer size and volume of the aftermath.

Though the mass mobilization of volunteers was impressive, it relied on what could be viewed as the traditional model of volunteerism – organizations recruiting volunteers, training them and assigning them to jobs. However, that model was not structured to withstand an outpouring of this magnitude. In the case of Houston, hundreds of volunteers arrived only to find that the locations in need had been miscommunicated or the needed task had already been filled. While systems were in place, it became apparent very quickly that they were not built to endure the scale of the damage created by Harvey. While unfortunate, these events provide an opportunity for assessment and evaluation.

<sup>1</sup> An Early Assessment of Hurricane Harvey’s Impact on Vulnerable Texans in the Gulf Coast Region: Their Voices and Priorities to Inform Rebuilding Efforts,” Liz Hamel, Bryan Wu, Mollyann Brodie, Shao-Chee Sim and Elena Marks. Henry J Kaiser Family Foundation. <https://kaiserf.am/2M0vBPf>

*“So many organizations on the ground in Houston worked without clearly communicating their intent, or updating the systems available to us. This led to unnecessary competition, duplication of efforts, and quality of work standards all over the board. Oftentimes volunteers from one organization would be working on a home, go to lunch, and return to find another group had replaced them. If responding organizations chose to coordinate between themselves, we could fill the service gaps, and better provide for the communities we’re there to serve.”*

**Mariana Micheli**, Disaster Response Manager,  
NECHAMA – Jewish Response to Disaster

It became clear that there was a need for improvement in how volunteers are mobilized, empowered and managed across the disaster management cycle. In February 2018, IBM and Points of Light, the world’s largest organization dedicated to volunteer service, convened a collaborative, cross-sector design session, where representatives from various organizations active in the volunteer ecosystem for Harvey came together to develop improvements to responses to future disasters. This paper is a result of this design session. It makes the case for an organization active in the volunteer space with expertise in disaster volunteerism to assume a leadership role. It explains how this role can enhance volunteer coordination and the efficacy of volunteer contributions in responding to disasters.

Given the magnitude of Harvey, as well as the impact of the two other hurricanes and the wildfires in California that followed, the disasters of 2017 provide an opportunity for cross-sector conversations and to make changes that will drive improved coordination and cooperation in the future.

## The disaster volunteer ecosystem

When disaster strikes, people come together – either individually or through organizations – to help affected residents and their communities recover. Many disaster organizations rely on volunteers to provide the skills and services that are needed to respond to and recover from an event. These organizations interact with and—ideally—cooperate and collaborate with each other to help aid those affected by the disaster. These roles, interactions, data and value exchanged are called a Disaster Volunteer Ecosystem. One example is shown in Figure 1.

# Disaster volunteer ecosystem

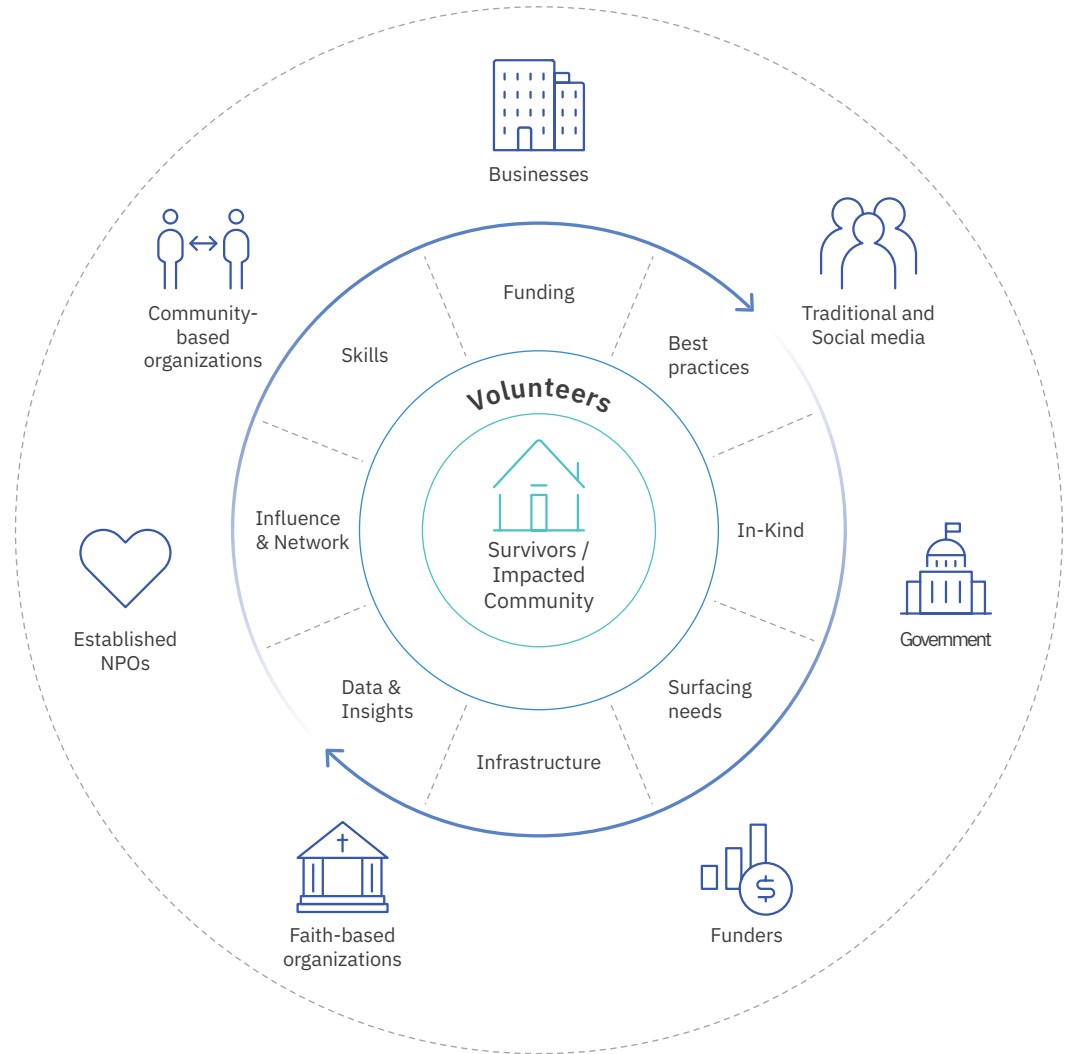


Figure 1: The disaster volunteer ecosystem

The Disaster Volunteer Ecosystem is a collection of organizations and individuals involved in the mobilization, engagement and management of volunteers within the disaster management cycle. Key constituents of the disaster volunteer ecosystem include<sup>2</sup>:

- **Businesses:** For-profit entities that contribute skills, resources and technologies critical to disaster recovery and provide solutions to better prepare for future disasters.
- **Community-based organizations:** Groups within the communities that have local networks can quickly mobilize human resources in response to a disaster.
- **Not-for-profit organizations (NPOs):** Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOADs) and other NPOs can contribute skills, programs and resources.
- **Faith-based organizations:** Religiously-affiliated organizations can mobilize post-disaster and provide critical assistance through a variety of avenues.
- **Funders and donors:** Corporations, foundations or philanthropists can provide funding to respond to or bolster community needs in times of disaster.

- **Local, state, and federal agencies:** When the local and state governments cannot provide the needed resources, the federal government through FEMA and local Emergency Management Programs (EMPs) direct disaster preparedness and response. They typically hold authority and the funding to mandate action.
- **Media – Traditional and social:** Shared, publicly accessible communication channels tell and amplify the story of the emergency. This includes entities or individuals that capture the attention of the public, provide accounts of disaster events and have the capacity to amplify messages of need and direct calls to action.
- **Volunteers:** Individuals that contribute their time or talent to the community before, during and after a disaster. Volunteers can be unaffiliated with a dedicated organization or choose to volunteer independent of their affiliation. They can also be affiliated with a dedicated organization or function as a “digital humanitarian.” These digital humanitarians use social media to bring attention to issues that develop during and after the disaster.

Survivors are the propelling force behind the ecosystem. Their needs for rescue, shelter, food, medical treatment and other necessities drive the actions and the volume of responses by ecosystem members. Survivors, beyond being just beneficiaries of support, often become part of the volunteer contingent as well, by assisting fellow survivors who are worse off or who have needs they can meet.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.fema.gov/news-release/2017/09/22/historic-disaster-response-hurricane-harvey-texas>

## Traditional disaster volunteerism

Every disaster is different, and every collective response to a disaster is necessarily different as well. So are volunteer mobilization, empowerment and use. Even still, organizations that comprise the volunteer ecosystem have established scenarios for cooperation and shared communication that allow the ecosystem to work together.

Affiliated volunteers tend to be trained prior to a disaster to provide the skills their organization is equipped to offer. They may also use existing professional skills that are in need during a time of crisis. Until recent years, volunteer affiliation has been an accepted norm. Many organizations rely on volunteers with specific training in the response to a disaster. However, volunteers—affiliated or not—without specialized training and skills can be employed in times of disaster as well. One example is through Volunteer Reception Centers (VRCs). A VRC is a physical or virtual place for volunteers to be connected to critical community needs. A VRC can manage spontaneous volunteers more efficiently and is scalable to fit the volunteer inflow. Once volunteers have registered with a VRC, they can then engage on an ongoing basis throughout the recovery and beyond.

## The rise of spontaneous unaffiliated volunteers for Harvey

The unaffiliated volunteer response has come to define the repercussions of Hurricane Harvey. According to FEMA, Neighbors, strangers, nonprofit organizations and governments at all levels joined together to mount an extraordinary effort to save lives and meet the needs of thousands of people who suffered from the storm and subsequent flooding.

Beyond the more traditional volunteer efforts from known VOADs, Harvey was noted for the rise of the spontaneous, unaffiliated volunteers (SUVs). SUVs are volunteers that are not associated with a VOAD, but organize amongst themselves, either autonomously or through social media, to respond to perceived needs.

Greg Forrester, President and CEO of National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (NVOAD), alluded to the immense response for Harvey, stating, “The VOADs were overwhelmed by the spontaneous unaffiliated volunteers that wanted to step up. Volunteers are great as long as they are trained and equipped, and you know where to deploy them.

“After Harvey, there were 3000 volunteers registered in our Volunteer Intake Portal on the first day. By the end of the second week, there were 57,000. Including the response in Florida, there were over 70,000 registered volunteers.”

## The influence of social media

- Social media apps not specifically designed for disaster response were repurposed during Harvey’s humanitarian rescue.
- Twitter hashtags #SOSHouston and #SOSHarvey were used for rescue requests by people trapped in floodwaters.
- Google forms created by citizen rescuers, victims and volunteers provided rescuers with crucial details about victims’ location and health.
- Facebook became a vital tool for receiving civilian reports of people in need of rescue, with reports of response units finding trapped individuals as a result of Facebook posts.

The response from SUVs provided valuable support to communities in need, but the ecosystem did not have the capacity or infrastructure to take advantage of it. Successful volunteer management disruptors used social media to deliver an accurate catalog of needs, matched resources with that need, and reported if the need had been filled, all viewable on a survivor’s or a volunteer’s phone.

Sketch City, a Houston-based nonprofit community of technology advocates, built rapid response applications, including the Harvey Needs API, to empower Houstonians with information and provide immediate emergency relief. This enabled citizen rescuers to take on roles typically owned by the National Guard or the Coast Guard. Even the Texas National Guard sometimes found their cellphones more useful than radios, which have limited range. Other disasters in 2017 saw a similar digital response, contributing not only to the initiative started by Sketch City but using lessons learned with Hurricane Harvey to bolster response to Hurricane Irma in Florida. Volunteers recognized by Points of Light with a Daily Point of Light Award created [irmaresponse.org](http://irmaresponse.org), which served as a source of information on needs, capacity, and locations of shelters.

Harvey also saw the emergence of “grassroots community organizers.” These were individual members of the impacted community that helped facilitate disaster response and recovery. They connected local volunteers and resources to specific needs without interfering with resulting efforts.

Even organizations that rely on affiliated volunteers trained prior to an event needed to recruit and train volunteers during the rescue and recovery. However, the Harvey volunteer management ecosystem was not able to consistently pair volunteers with needs.

Not all volunteers need to be trained or necessarily want to be affiliated with an organization. The processes and paperwork required by disaster organizations often discouraged these volunteers, and resulted in a longer-than-expected activation process. As a result, many potential volunteers were lost, or they went directly to victims to contribute.

## Learning opportunities for improvement

While the response to Harvey was tremendous, the magnitude of damage and the resulting response highlighted challenges and imperfections which provided opportunities to learn and develop innovative approaches to volunteer management in disaster recovery. In response, a first of its kind, cross-sector design session convened representatives from across the ecosystem to explore issues and challenges that arose while managing the volunteer response to Harvey. Breakdowns in communications and challenges in collaboration between members of the ecosystem were common themes.

Clear communication between members of the disaster volunteer ecosystem is crucial to effective coordination and deployment of volunteer resources, especially during the immediate response period after a disaster. It is critical that community needs are identified and assessed collectively, so that volunteers can be recruited based on relevant criteria—skills, location and availability, for example—and be deployed in a prioritized and synchronized fashion.

### **The ecosystem works best when:**

- **Organizations collaborate transparently**
- **Communities identify and communicate needs quickly**
- **Partners match and assemble a response with the indicated skillset**

During and immediately following Hurricane Harvey, organizations such as the American Red Cross, AmeriCorps and Points of Light were able to communicate and collaborate to provide direct assistance to those in need. When needed skills were identified and candidates were directly targeted, the response to the call for help was seamless. This was the case in the deployment of Americorps alumni through collaboration between Points of Light and the American Red Cross. The Red Cross had specific skill needs in shelter management that were quickly filled by Points of Light through surveying and coordination of AmeriCorps alumni by Points of Light.

### **Communication in the ecosystem**

VOAD-coordinated conference calls have generally provided the central means of communication across disaster volunteering organizations. These are invitation-only calls, typically facilitated by the local VOAD leadership and consisting of traditional disaster response agencies. National or other external agencies may join but rarely contribute information or updates during the call. These calls function to share updates, expose gaps and unmet needs, and identify agencies who, through offline collaboration, can resolve issues.



For Harvey, however, this process could not effectively manage the full number of invested response agencies. Although the calls are not necessarily the platform to make decisions, decision-making authority was unclear, and decision making often did not keep pace with the need. In some cases, agencies provided duplicate, rather than complementary services. Rather than wait for permission, traditional agencies began to “claim” a town, zip code or a neighborhood as their service area and ask for forgiveness if they overlapped with another agency. Furthermore, because these coordinating calls were created by, and for, traditional disaster response agencies, new agencies and any innovative solutions had little opportunity to be included within the existing response framework.

### **Matching volunteers to needs**

The Harvey disaster volunteer ecosystem did not have a reliable, comprehensive or broadly-adopted process to identify needs, associate needs with the appropriate agency, and then point volunteers to agencies requesting additional volunteer support. In smaller disasters, this is accomplished through a VRC. Because the needs from Harvey were so large, individual and sometimes competing organizations implemented separate processes for identifying needs and matching needs to volunteers. Community-based and faith-based groups, in particular, perhaps unaware of traditional coordination efforts, performed each of the requirements for themselves.

This is not to say that all volunteers were not matched to response needs, but sometimes it happened serendipitously. One example involved Crisis Cleanup working with a faith-based organization. According to Aaron Titus, Executive Director, Crisis Cleanup, “A couple of weeks into Harvey, we got a call from a pastor who was helping neighbors. He and his church had finished mucking 12 homes, working 14- to 18-hour days for a solid week. They were about to demobilize when they called to see if there was anything left to do. You could hear them gasp when they heard that there were 4000 unclaimed work orders. They didn’t realize there was that much work to do, because in the neighborhood where they were working, they did everything they could see. They were about to pack up and go home simply because they did not have access to the right information at the right time. That group went on for another two weeks and helped survivors save \$200,000-\$300,000.”

There was a distinct lack of real-time volunteer event information, leading to volunteers showing up at incorrect locations. Communication channels were not in place to coordinate movement and provide timely updates of needs of mobilizing organizations. This led to missed opportunities. Those who wanted to volunteer didn’t know where the need was, so they either thought the work was done or formed their own subgroups and went looking outside the system.

## Messaging

Unified messaging and educating partners and the public on how to support the impacted communities is critical in any disaster response. Public messaging is essential to mobilizing volunteers, particularly spontaneous volunteers. During Hurricane Harvey, messaging was not unified. When a lead organization asked for volunteers unaffiliated, untrained individuals arrived in droves at shelters and volunteer sites throughout the affected communities. While the message—the need for volunteers—was accurate, the instructions were not. This put a strain on the system and prevented volunteer administrators from focusing on the most acute needs.

## Working together within the ecosystem

Orchestration between ecosystem members was in place, but, the scale of Hurricane Harvey revealed opportunities for improvement, such as the poor deployment of SUVs. This prompted individuals to self-deploy or express frustration. NVOAD's virtual VRC allowed prospective volunteers to select from among its member organizations and register to be notified when opportunities were available. This virtual VRC allowed national and local community-based agencies to catch up with volunteer interest. Of the nearly 70,000 volunteers registered through the NVOAD Virtual VRC, 8400 completed background checks. The number used is still unclear.

Although anecdotal, it seems many unaffiliated volunteers bypassed formal systems, either creating their own projects or joining projects they found on social media.

In response to the need for improved coordination, FEMA, NVOAD and several NVOAD members created a pilot program called Project Comeback: Texas to develop effective management of volunteer work. The program will implement a disaster case management mechanism that allows each agency to focus on their areas of expertise.

## A more effective ecosystem

The disasters of 2017 forced organizations to evaluate the ecosystem and infrastructure and encourage conversations. This will yield insights and areas for improvements. In particular, this evaluation will shed light on how the disaster volunteer ecosystem can:

- **Improve communication between its members, both new and traditional**
- **Open communication channels to all members of the ecosystem**
- **Improve matching of volunteers to needs**
- **Deploy consistent messaging to the public**
- **Collaborate better between ecosystem members**

Points of Light has called for an entity or coalition in the disaster volunteer ecosystem to lead the collective collaboration between all members of the ecosystem, particularly as it applies to the full spectrum of volunteer management. They call this role the Lead Convener. The entity or entities filling this role would serve as the steward for volunteer management across the ecosystem for the entire disaster management cycle.

For Hurricane Harvey, there was a massive demand for volunteers as well as a massive supply, particularly of SUVs. The natural reaction of the ecosystem was to try to fit these volunteers into the current volunteer model, randomly associating them with voluntary organizations. The ecosystem became saturated and there was a backlog of interest. It is believed that many of the SUVs were never contacted or used. A Lead Convener, whether an individual organization or coalition, has the potential to manage speed to impact, scalability of work, efficiency and coordination.

Members of the disaster volunteer ecosystem need to explore how to quickly mobilize SUVs rather than trying to fit them into existing models. From response to recovery and to an amplified focus on preparation, improved management of volunteers can ensure communities are best equipped to face recovery needs and ongoing challenges brought by disasters. The Lead Convener would help establish common practices to quickly mobilize SUVs without trying to force them into existing programs or processes. The priority will be to understand who the volunteers are and then match them to the needs of the community.

The primary objective of the Lead Convener would be to create a flexible and agile disaster volunteer ecosystem. This is critical considering models of volunteer engagement that illustrate “passion into action,”

that is, spontaneous, unaffiliated volunteers, digital humanitarianism and so forth. Without proper coordination and communication, these efforts can become counterproductive, as was evident with Hurricane Harvey.

The Lead Convener is not necessarily a new role. It has been deployed quite effectively in previous disasters. For example:

- **New York Cares and Jersey Cares:** These organizations are notable examples of local conveners after Hurricane Sandy. New York Cares, designated by the New York City Office of Emergency Management (OEM) as the lead agency for mobilizing volunteers in case of city-wide emergencies, filled 22,000 volunteer slots on 1640 relief projects in impacted areas after Hurricane Sandy. Jersey Cares partners with local non-profits in New Jersey to identify needs and implement volunteer projects. They provided more than 16,000 service hours on 801 relief projects for Hurricane Sandy.
- **Coordinated Assistance Network (CAN):** CAN is a multi-organizational partnership that coordinates services and shares information in the aftermath of disasters. CAN provides a collaborative database where agencies use case records initiated by the American Red Cross or they can enter records for new clients. The agencies then assign a case manager to unassigned cases. They can also enter their services and programs into the database to maximize the availability of services to the impacted communities.

Not every organization is equipped to take on the Lead Convener role. Many organizations are highly effective because they have a focused, specific mission and that should not change. We can, however, define specific characteristics that are critical for a Lead Convener to be successful, as shown in Figure 2.

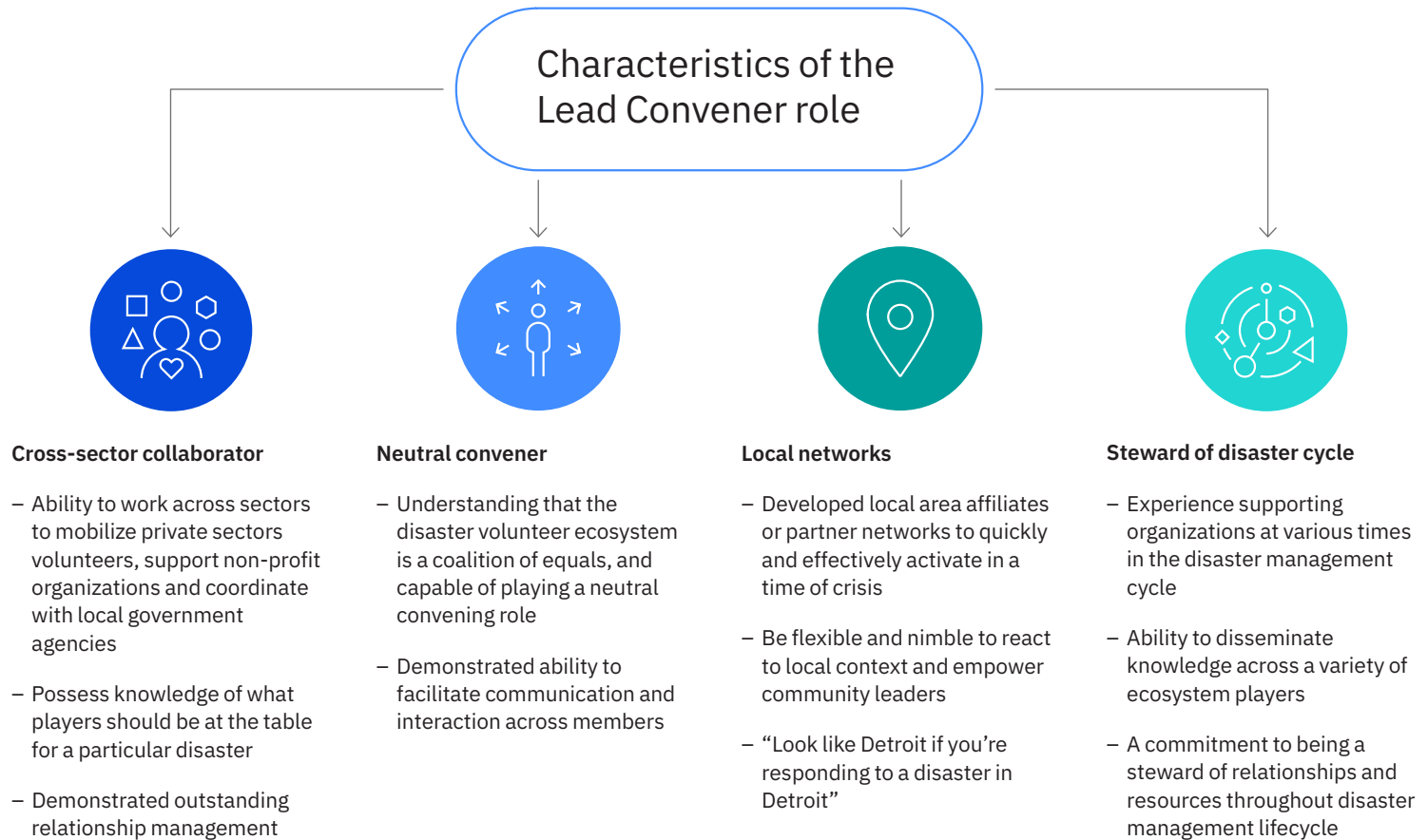


Figure 2: Lead Convener roles

*“In order for the disaster volunteering ecosystem to come together and decide its future, there seem to be three essential ingredients – know-how, motivation, and opportunity. And these are abundant now. Harvey revealed many insights as well as challenges. As IBM’s Design Thinking session showed, ecosystem members are not shying away from trading insights and facing challenges together. The passion and expertise that these organizations bring, if harnessed, can help this collaborative work become something that will create lasting change.”*

**Diane Melley**, VP of Global Citizenship Initiatives, IBM

## Call to action: Elevating the value exchange

The disaster recovery ecosystem accomplished much. As the disaster volunteer ecosystem reviews its responses to recovery efforts, it can identify the obstacles that were faced. The disaster recovery ecosystem will be working together when the next disaster strikes, proactive and armed with the knowledge gained through the Hurricane Harvey experience.

Discussions and collaborative insights should be a part of an ongoing conversation among traditional and emerging members. Just as the outcomes of the workshop were the result of collaboration, the Lead Convener role itself may not, in fact, be a single organization. It may be a coalition of partners within the ecosystem. But to make this vision a reality, the convener role should understand that the model of disaster volunteerism is evolving. Only if we work together can we maximize the effectiveness of all potential volunteers in times of disaster.

### Are you ready to join the conversation?

- What could your organization gain by collaborating within the ecosystem?
- Would it benefit your organization to have clear articulation of volunteer leadership?
- How can your organization become more effective in employing unaffiliated volunteers?
- How can non-traditional players get a voice in the ecosystem?
- How can national networks be used to standardize metrics and language for disaster volunteering so that data can be shared?
- How can funding be oriented to the full disaster cycle, rather than event-based?

## Acknowledgements

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- Kimberlee Kemble, IBM
- Tracey Nguyen Mang, IBM

### Acknowledgements:

IBM and Points of Light would like to thank the IBM Design Team and the following organizations for having representatives join and contribute to the rich discourse in the Design Session and other discussions informing this publication:

- All Hands and Hearts
- Avviato (HandsOn Connect Cloud Solutions)
- Center for Volunteer & Nonprofit Leadership (CVNL)
- Crisis Cleanup
- CrowdRescue Resources
- FEMA

- Galaxy Digital
- Good360
- Hands On Central Texas
- ToolBank USA
- Information Technology Disaster Resource Center (ITDRC)
- Mormon Helping Hands
- Long Island Volunteer Center
- NECHAMA
- NJVOAD
- OneStar Foundation
- Sketch City
- Susan and Michael Dell Foundation
- National Voluntary Organizations  
Active in Disaster (NVOAD)
- United Way Worldwide
- UPS Foundation
- VisionLink
- Ying Bank

This publication is dedicated to the countless survivors and volunteers and to the communities impacted by all of the natural and manmade disasters of 2017.



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Produced in the United States of America  
June 2018

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92017092USEN-01