

Multi Agency Shelter Assessment Support Program Report

*(A program developed and recently refined during
DR-4022-VT in response to Tropical Storm Irene)*

Written by John Stewart

FEMA VAL – Region 1

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Introduction

In response to Hurricane Irene's effects in the State of Vermont, a Multi Agency Shelter Support Program, consisting of three Task Forces and one Coordination Team, was established. The purpose of this Program was to obtain basic information and shelter figures on non-American Red Cross, or independent shelters in the states impacted by Hurricane Irene. In Vermont, these Independent shelters greatly outnumbered the Red Cross supported shelters. Thus, the ability to obtain information or even learn of the existence of these independent shelters was critical to ensuring the health, safety, and wellbeing of disaster survivors.

Method

In order to maximize outreach to the disaster-affected areas of the state, three Multi Agency Task Forces were deployed throughout Vermont, composed of one FEMA Mass Care specialist and one American Red Cross representative. Simultaneously, the Coordination Team, composed of a FEMA Mass Care Group Supervisor, a Red Cross FEMA Liaison, and a FEMA Voluntary Agency Liaison, partnered to provide support to each Task Force. This organized effort allowed for Task Forces to deploy three days following the incident, while maintaining in constant communication with the Coordination Team stationed at the State Emergency Operations Center, also acting as the FEMA Joint Field Office.

The primary focus of the Task Force deployment was to evaluate the mass care and the emergency assistance situation in the affected area. This included a strong emphasis on addressing issues in shelters that may require an immediate response, as well as information related to disaster mental health, accessibility requirements, and any other functional needs concerns. In addition to surveying shelters, Task Forces were also asked to report on vital services such as feeding, sanitation, shower facilities, and access to emergency communication devices. Task Forces were asked to report these findings by utilizing the "Multi Agency Mass Care Task Force Assessment Form". Information was most frequently compiled as a result of interviews with on-scene officials, as well as volunteer leadership overseeing individual shelters.

Task Forces proved to be most successful in collecting this information by first making contact with town officials such as local emergency management coordinators, town managers, select board representatives, and town clerks. Collaboration with state officials, such as the Vermont State Police, also proved to be a useful tool in identifying pop up shelters that had not yet been identified by our teams. During deployment, each Task Force was equipped with resources to contact these leaders, who were able to refer to nearby shelter locations. This proved to be the most beneficial method of information sharing, as towns were most often aware of shelters established in nearby towns, allowing for more thorough assessment.

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Although the “Multi Agency Mass Care Task Force Assessment Form” was an essential tool for data sharing with the Coordination Team, the most beneficial method of communication was the daily conference call. Facilitated by the Coordination Team, this call was well attended by State Emergency Support Function representatives in order to meet any immediate needs reported. In numerous cases, this attendance was critical to both town and shelter residents receiving immediate life sustaining needs, including water, two-way radios, and trained personnel.

Conclusion

The Program resulted in the location of twenty-two independent shelter locations throughout seven counties within the State of Vermont. An additional fourteen locations were assessed for shelters and emergency care needs, and visits were also made to four American Red Cross shelters established throughout the region. In total, the Multi Agency Shelter Assessment Support Program collectively visited forty individual sites in an eight-day period.

The information gathered from the Task Forces was carefully tracked by the Coordination Team in a reporting matrix, that included key points of contact, as well as referrals made to state agencies for any immediate needs. This information was heavily relied upon in the weeks following the Program's implementation, in order to carefully monitor the progress and needs of survivors still seeking assistance from nearby shelters.

The careful collection of this data was also instrumental in the efforts surrounding Long Term Recovery in the State of Vermont. The many points of contact and strong volunteer leadership documented during site visits positively demonstrated a desire for collaborative community recovery efforts, and have been heavily involved in the months following the incident.