



White Paper

A Volunteer's View

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If nothing else, Hurricane Katrina has highlighted for us in graphic detail how systems—governmental, physical, medical, and legal alike—can fail. Yet many systems that were put in place effectively as backup, such as FEMA, the American Red Cross, the Salvation Army, are still failing us with each minute that passes in a thousand subtle ways. It's impossible to measure the impact overall, but to each family that is searching for a lost loved one, or each homeowner who has nowhere to sleep, those failures mean something, and they mean something real.

After spending several days watching horrific news coverage involving wrenching images of refugees, and suave, polished news anchors such as Anderson Cooper repeatedly push back tears before their cameras, I couldn't help but wonder if I was destined to simply sit in front of my television and watch the devastation while others suffered through it. Finally, I decided to call my local American Red Cross chapter in Dallas, Texas, and offer to volunteer—except that I could not get through. The

phone line was busy for six hours straight, and I didn't even see any reports about the crisis affecting Dallas yet. An alternate number offered a useless phone tree, though I did find that if I pressed zero for an operator, I could escape the system, hear a few rings, and then get promptly disconnected.

If only the Red Cross had two phone numbers, one for those offering help, and one for those in need of it, or updated its local chapter web site, it probably could have reduced 90% of its call volume. Then, those in dire straits would not be forced to wait while Betsy in Denton explained why she wanted to donate by postal money order, and not on-line.

When I called again at 7:00 P.M. to ask if the Red Cross needed any help with computer systems in particular, I was told to stop by the local chapter the following day in order to fill out an application. I had rummaged around the Dallas chapter's web site to find the application, and had decided that it wasn't worth doing until I actually knew

that help would be needed. It was fifteen pages long, and required my Social Security Number for a background check, not to mention a lengthy Fair Credit Reporting Act waiver. It struck me as slightly ironic that one had to go through so much trouble just to offer assistance in an emergency situation.

Driving up to 4800 Harry Hines Boulevard the following morning took approximately



thirty-five minutes from my home, but my average speed during the last ten minutes was close to 0 mph. The left-turn lane to get into the chapter's parking lot was backed up for at least seven cars, as there were volunteers in the parking lot, apparently asking drivers who had pulled down their windows whether or not they were there to volunteer or request assistance. Regardless of the answer, everyone was being told to try to find a place to park. Since I would have tried parking without being instructed to do so, I wondered what the point was. A few people turned around in frustration, including the two cars in front of me, in quick maneuvers that I probably couldn't have handled safely with my present driving skills.

When I finally made it into the parking lot, I found a parking space almost immediately, and walked into the building. I was greeted by a few workers behind a small table, handing out applications and nametags. The person in front of me was told to go to "training," referring to the orientation sessions that the American Red Cross requires all volunteers to complete before assisting others in a formal capacity. Yet, before I could ever fill out my nametag, there was a shout.

"That's the last one! Training is full!"

I went to Room 1-C as I had been directed in order to fill out my application. There was a man with a handlebar mustache there, and I could hear the audio stream from CNN in the background discussing flames, rising waters, and Air Force One. It took twenty minutes to complete the application, including a background check authorization, privacy policy receipt acknowledgment, address history, work history, and skill set description. The man with the handlebar mustache dropped it in a tall box with what looked like hundreds of others, and had me write much of the same information down that I had

just written on a separate notepad, which he called the "main register." The man who had just signed it had asked what he should put down as his phone number, because he didn't have a phone.

About six of us were standing around, waiting to be dispatched to provide some assistance. I had already told the man with the mustache that I could probably be most helpful working on computers, but he said that he didn't really have the authority to do much besides make sure that people were filling out their applications, and I believed him. We were told that Estella would be by any minute. None of us knew who Estella was, but after ten minutes, I got the definitive sense that Estella wasn't coming by.

I asked a Red Cross worker walking down the hall, who looked like she had something to do with training, about helping with computers. She told me to go with another woman who she had just turned away for training—but apparently she was going to the "Resource Center," which ended up being a room full of cubicles with telephones.

I immediately recognized the phone system as the same convoluted NEC system that my brother's small private school had attempted to install years before. What should have been an unremarkable event had turned into the one of the most memorable ongoing disasters of the academic year, as lines were often down, and every extension number was forced to change at least once. The American Red Cross was faring only slightly better. It had eight trunk lines, and it probably could have used thirty-two.

I was introduced to a more senior volunteer (who presumably had completed the orientation process) named Charlotte who asked me what I wanted to do. I offered my services with computers, laptop in tow, and she immediately asked



if I could make a list of Red Cross chapter telephone numbers in Louisiana, Alabama and Mississippi. Stunned by the sheer simplicity of the request, I set to work immediately, stealing an ethernet connection from one of the chapter's desktops, which wasn't being used by the volunteer in front of it. All of the desktops were running Windows 2000, and since they weren't typically used minute-by-minute, they were all protected by screen savers that required passwords that nobody knew.

It only took about ten minutes to compile a list of the phone numbers for the three states, though at first some of the Louisiana chapters' numbers were missing. Each chapter hosted its own web site, usually on a separate domain name, and some of the New Orleans chapters appeared to be hosted in New Orleans. One of the few Louisiana chapter sites still in operation turned out to be comprised entirely of large GIF images, with no phone number to be found anywhere. I used the HP Network Printer Install Wizard, which I already had installed on my laptop, to connect to the HP LaserJet 4050 printer two feet away from my makeshift desk, and printed 15 copies for the phone attendants who were already swamped with highlighted papers containing various phone numbers for other agencies. Later, I filled in the missing Louisiana phone numbers with the phone book listings from superpages.com, but it didn't matter since those lines all appeared to be down, anyway.

At one point, I heard a supervisor tell a phone bank staffer that requests for assistance in finding missing family members should simply be turned away. When I protested to Charlotte that there were plenty of sites on the internet, such as Craigslist, that volunteers could search right from their desks as long as they had a name to search by, she seemed to have no idea. Meanwhile, the

office copier continued to break down on 100 copies of Mapquest directions from the Red Cross center to Reunion Arena, where evacuees were beginning to arrive in droves. I printed another 100 copies from Google Maps directly to the printer in the amount of time it took to fix the copier, and instead of being two pages each, each printout was contained neatly on one.

For the rest of the morning and into some of the afternoon, I answered phones myself. Eighty percent of the calls were from the Dallas area codes of 214 and 972—people asking how to volunteer. I knew from experience that neither the national Red Cross web site, nor the local Dallas one, nor the local Dallas volunteer hotline, had the correct instructions: walk into 4800 Harry Hines Boulevard, fill out an application, and take a training course. People wanted to know when the next course would be held; I had no schedule. Others wanted to donate clothes and personal items; I had to find the number for the Salvation Army on my own, since the Red Cross's hadn't provided it. Restaurants wanted to know where to send food for evacuees; I had no idea. We had only been told to tell people not to go to Reunion Arena directly.

If only the Red Cross had two phone numbers, one for those offering help, and one for those in need of it, or updated its local chapter web site, it probably could have reduced 90% of its call volume. All it would have needed was a message, complete with the most recent update timestamp to assure people that they weren't hearing bad information, explaining the volunteering procedure. Then, those in dire straits would not be forced to wait while Betsy in Denton explained why she wanted to donate by postal money order, and not on-line.

The phone calls from flood victims were depressing, but people seemed remarkably com-



posed given the circumstances. Many of those calling in just seemed to be lost on various Dallas highways. I felt bad directing them to Reunion Arena, which I knew would be as chaotic as it would be central to the Dallas relief effort.

The call that I would carry in my mind for the rest of my life came from a woman in Dallas who wanted to help, and who said her husband had already left for Louisiana as a rescue worker. He had left her with explicit instructions not to allow anyone to live in their home overnight—“but,” she said, “he didn’t say I couldn’t feed people during the day while he’s gone, or at least give them a place a stay for a little while!” I was amused by the cheerful glee with which the woman was clearly trying to sidestep her husband’s wishes. She continued, “I even got some more food stamps so that I can give them something to eat—is that OK? Who should I call to donate items?” I tried to give her the number for the Salvation Army, but I wasn’t sure if she noticed when I choked up after the third or fourth digit.

What kind of government was this? Did we really have to rely on welfare recipients to care for our disaster victims? This was “Homeland Security?” Where was Congress? Where was FEMA?

They weren’t in Dallas, and according to everyone but themselves, they weren’t in New Orleans, either.

I left 4800 Harry Hines Boulevard around 2:00 P.M. I was hoping that Red Cross would provide its volunteers with lunch, and the handlebar mustachioed worker had suggested that we’d be fed, but all that was offered was water and the Krispy Kreme donuts that had been sitting near the LaserJet all morning.

An hour later, I was at home, where I was worn out enough just from talking on the tele-

phone for a few hours to collapse on my bed for a long nap. I was dazed by the free-for-all that was one of the arguably more organized centers across the country. After all, Dallas hadn’t experienced any of the hurricane at all, and it wasn’t receiving nearly as many evacuees at Houston, to the south. CNN continued to focus on the chaos in New Orleans all throughout the night. I wasn’t sure I wanted to volunteer again.

The next day, though, the CNN coverage hadn’t changed, and a family friend who was a physician called to ask how my experience had been as a volunteer. She was reporting to the Parkland Hospital Tent outside Reunion Arena at 1:15 P.M. I told her my thoughts, and she voiced a lot of the same worries I had myself, and which were starting to shine through the media coverage of the disaster.

I kept watching the news, and it made me realize that the stream of people in need of help was not going to end anytime soon. I called my friend back, and arranged to go down to Reunion Arena with her. I threw together some code to implement a patient information database as fast as I could, and made a quick trip to CompUSA and Best Buy to purchase the cheapest wireless router I could find. My hope was to provide the makeshift hospital with some sort of record system, other than paper, if they didn’t have one already.

Traffic approaching the Arena was awful, but we finally were able to hop out of the car in the middle of the street since my friend’s relative was driving. We walked through the parking lot, relatively empty given the number of cars still circling the Arena, to the diesel-powered vans outside the Arena that comprised the medical facilities. The main entrance was a mob scene: almost a hundred people, most of them Black, swarmed around a few paid security workers and Texas



National Guardsmen who had clearly been given orders to keep as many people out as possible. Metal dividers snaked across the cement, making it a virtual certainty that you were in the wrong line, since none of the division entrances were labeled, but all of the exits led to armed guards.

The nurses in the sweltering heat raised their eyebrows at the idea of using wireless networks to register and triage patients, but their response seemed to imply that they didn't think it was realistic. Their skepticism was well-informed. A Parkland registered nurse with some IT experience wanted to set up a Virtual Private Network connection so that patients could be registered directly with the hospital's two-day-old Windows database software implementation, but he seemed to be hampered by both a lack of internet access and a lack of computers. It seemed pointless to worry about it, since the doctor in charge of the entire Parkland operation at Reunion Arena was visiting a nearby convention center where thousands more evacuees were arriving. She was apparently considering moving all of the vans there, but no one seemed sure. They also didn't know how to get in touch with her while she was gone. A nurse suggested asking the Red Cross if they needed help. I felt as though I didn't really need to ask, but I agreed to take a look.

Of course, on my first attempt, I got into the wrong line, and my futile attempt to enter the Arena was turned away by several policemen and National Guardsmen. I did find the Texas Volunteer Center table, where I explained that I had already filled out an application, and could provide expert computer and networking help. They looked at me like a space alien, and then assured me that their volunteer forms were all under control. I said I'd go back to the Parkland tents, but everyone there was still waiting for the doc-

tor in charge to return. Hardly any patients seemed to be making use of the facilities, which seemed odd since there were so many people trying to enter the arena. I wondered if they even knew that medical help was available.

I tried once more to get in, this time flagging down a short woman with a plastic Red Cross badge, but she assured me that their computer and telephone situation was under control.

"Yep, we've got laptops and phones already set up. Thanks," she said.

I briefly walked around the Parkland tents, until a nurse caught up with me and suggested calling the Parkland IT nurse on her cell phone to find out exactly what he had in mind. I agreed, and finally got ahold of him. He was trying to use Verizon WWAN broadband service to get internet access in all of the vans regardless of Reunion Arena's internet access, or lack thereof, but he was having trouble getting ahold of Verizon on a Saturday. I wasn't too surprised. I told John that I had trouble getting ahold of anyone intelligent at Verizon no matter what day of the week it was, which was sort of funny, Verizon being a telecommunications company and all. He thanked me for my help.

A man had tried to catch my attention while I was on the phone, but I had assumed that he was mistakenly under the impression that I was a Parkland Hospital employee, so I held up a finger to ask him to wait. After the phone conversation was over, he introduced himself as a victim with an unusually technical background. He claimed that he had designed the telephone system at the New Orleans basketball stadium, and that he had just helped install a switchboard of phones for evacuees to use inside the Arena. Now, he needed a job, and the phone company that had donated the switchboard was willing to hire



him, as long as he had a resume to back up his claims. Somehow he had learned that I was carrying two laptops and a lot of networking gear, and had tracked me down. I agreed to help him, though I wasn't sure where we would find a printer. I also warned him that no one would let me in the arena.

"Don't worry," he reassured me in a manner I was afraid might be a little too smooth. "You'll get in with me." I'm not sure why I believed him, but I did. We went for the entrance, and got stopped by security. One of the female guards bought his story about working on the telephones; one of the male guards did not. The third guard was daydreaming. I opened my bag and started pulling out routers and PCMCIA card boxes, all of which looked technical in nature, if not exactly like telephones. The male guard, still skeptical, pointed to the black box inside my backpack. I opened it, revealing a network toolkit. Finally, we were allowed to pass. Three feet later, we were stopped by the National Guard. Then, by a Red Cross volunteer who wanted to know where we were going. Then, by another, who demanded that we sign in to pass through the floor of the Arena, where miserable-looking people were lying on cots arranged in the eerily-familiar grid pattern I had seen on television. The way it was guarded, I felt like I had entered the inner sanctum of some enemy spy operation. As I had feared, there were no laser printers in sight, nor did I see the laptops that the Red Cross woman had assured me were being put to good use. The National Guard stopped us again in the hall, but left us alone upon hearing the word "telephone."

The man I was helping was especially gregarious, and had no trouble engaging anyone in his sight with any semblance of authority. We finally learned from another phone technician,

employed by the company that the man wanted to work for, that there was a printer near section 105. We took the stairs there, and saw nothing but policemen sitting idle on the sides of the hallway. Then, about fifty feet ahead, I saw computer monitors. It looked like a small computer lab, complete with a Dell 24-port Gigabit ethernet switch—but no printers. I introduced myself to the two men who appeared to be the technical gurus of the operation, and asked how things were going. Reunion Arena, I was told, had broadband wireless internet access throughout the building thanks to a company called AirStream. This was news to me, and I thought the Parkland Hospital people would be very interested to hear it. Sadly, only one of the three desktops in the lab could use it, since the computer lab people had purchased a special PCI wireless card explicitly for that purpose. Now, they were trying to share the connection with the other computers, but they were running into trouble. I tried to explain how I would set up the connection, but they weren't able to get it to work. Using my own laptop which I had brought along, I found a Microsoft knowledge base article that explained how to solve what appeared to be the problem that they were having, but I didn't have time to worry about it myself since my job-seeking friend was busy supplying me with his past work experience. Eventually, he wrote it all down by hand, at which point I re-typed it on my laptop. I convinced him to give up on the printer idea, and finally e-mailed the Word document to the head of the phone company, whose business card he happened to have from setting up the switchboard earlier in the day. Then, I left to go tell the Parkland Hospital people about the internet access point no less than two hundred feet away.

Getting out of the building proved to be just



as difficult as getting in. An American Red Cross volunteer with acute weight and anger-management problems screamed at me repeatedly as I asked how I might be able to get back in again without running the gauntlet.

“There’s no way!” he shouted, barricading one of the two ways out of the building between some strategically-placed trash cans. “I told you once, you are not getting back in this building unless you have some official picture ID!” Ignoring his barking, I told him that I had a matching driver’s license (with picture) and business card. He got angrier. I sidestepped him and went over to a different volunteer table.

“Aaron!” I heard. “Fancy meeting you here!” It was Charlotte, the phone center supervisor from the previous day, who had since been promoted to Assistant Shelter Manager. After chastising me for skipping my training course, which would have been useless for providing technical support anyway, she instructed some other volunteers to make me a nametag right away, and took down my phone number. Another Shelter Manager offered me her cell phone number, which I happily wrote down. I expressed my displeasure with the beast guarding the door. After that, I was never given any trouble entering or exiting the building.

The Parkland Hospital doctor-in-charge was back from the convention center, and was not moving anything. She and John, the IT nurse, were pleasantly surprised to hear about the internet access, but when I suggested moving the vans 100 feet in order to utilize it, I was given the “crazy” look once more. That, she said, would have to be approved by her elders. John seemed intrigued by the idea of sidestepping Verizon, though, and took up my suggestion of testing wireless access levels at different points around the medical staging area. The signal strength was

weak around the part of the building where they were located. I pleaded once more with the supervising doctor to move the vans, since it would mean patient registration could take place in an air conditioned, indoor environment, rather than under the blazing Texas sun. She declined once more—EMS had been in that location the previous day, and she didn’t know if they were coming back. Maybe tomorrow morning, she said, if she got approval.

I went back inside to see how the computer lab setup was working. It had all been donated by a private investment firm that had somehow been granted unusual access to the Arena space (in section 107, not 105) early on in the week. My suggestion for fixing the connection sharing problem had worked, but now the other two desktops were hanging when loading web pages, even though their connections were fine and they could use other internet applications such as FTP with no problem. Both investment firm employees grumbled about unnecessary Microsoft Active Directory security policies at their workplace, and tried to fix the machines for several hours. I tested the setup on my laptop, which worked like a charm. Finally, I gave up trying to make the machines work perfectly, and turned my attention to a family that had been patiently waiting to use a computer.

We spent an hour going over their on-line application for FEMA assistance, which worked fairly well except when I tried to revise some data that I had already entered. Then, we tried to find temporary housing for them in Dallas on <http://www.hurricanehousing.org>. A friend of theirs from New Orleans stopped by and wanted to know why they weren’t looking in Mesquite. I tried to explain that the web site didn’t let me narrow my search for housing by zip code, only “100 miles” from Dallas or “350 miles,” but I



wasn't sure they understood. I doubted they had ever owned a computer, let alone conducted complex search queries on a regular basis. The mother in the family had a hard time simply grasping all the information FEMA wanted her to record: username, password, registration number, and Personal Identification Number, which was actually made up only of letters, and delivered by e-mail, even though this family definitely did not have an e-mail address. Meanwhile, there were still no FEMA workers, nor printers with which we could print this information, anywhere in Reunion Arena. By the time I was finished helping the family, whose last remaining possession appeared to be their son's cell phone, the reinstallation of Windows XP was 33% complete on the computer next to us. No one had been able to use either of the other two desktops for anything productive all day.

On the way back outside, an SBC employee stopped people walking by.

"Do you know Spanish?"

As it happened, I did. He needed someone to make a sign that told people not to dial "1" before the area code when calling out. Using my high school Spanish, I wrote a convoluted sentence saying something to that effect. Unfortunately, the only writing utensil the man had was a pink highlighter, and it wasn't even neon. I signed out once more with the elderly volunteer guarding the entrance to the cot zone.

For the rest of the day, there wasn't much more I could do. John mentioned that a non-profit organization with a generic-sounding name had approached him with an offer to set up a wireless hot spot, which as he now knew, already existed. A Red Cross volunteer with an ability to create large signs stopped by, and pointed out that people probably didn't know about the medical service capabilities literally right next to them.

I pointed out that even if they did know, they might not be allowed outside without considerable difficulty. I still didn't think that many people knew about the free internet access. To me, it seemed like in an ideal situation, anyone registering at a shelter would have to know about the internet's usefulness, since registering at a shelter could update a hypothetical flag indicating a person's status. That way, any lost relatives registering at a different shelter, but with an identical home address, would be able to learn of their relatives' whereabouts immediately, thanks to the internet.

Meanwhile, as I tried to optimize the situation in my head, the Parkland vans weren't moving back as I had suggested, even though John finally agreed that it was a good idea. The desktops inside were still crawling through the process of installing a vulnerable and unpatched version of Windows, which would then be used to transmit Social Security numbers and salary data for the homeless. Most everyone's mobility was severely restricted by the threat of a gun (or several) and a loud voice in their face. No one was in control of anything, the police least of all.

Then, the radio sitting on the registration table for Parkland Hospital crackled to life with a message from the Dallas EMS command center: 117 buses with 50-60 people each were already on their way. Better get ready.

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