



Spotlight Article

Senior Corps—RSVP: Disaster Services and Community Resilience During 2012 Colorado Wildfires

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Introduction

The Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) is an independent federal agency that supports community resilience (CR) and traditional disaster services through National Service programs, including Senior Corps and AmeriCorps (Bullock, Haddow, & Coppola, 2013). CR is the capacity of a community to withstand, respond, and recover from adversity and is a component of the National Health Security Strategy (Chandra et al., 2013; Moore, Chandra, & Feeney, 2013; Plough et al., 2013; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009). Traditional disaster service strategies often require disaster-specific investments, while CR strategies leverage existing non-disaster-specific activity. As communities experience greater fiscal constraints, they need to be able to “leverage work in other areas and engage in activities with dual benefit for both routine and disaster times” (Uscher-Pines, Chandra, & Acosta, 2013).

We present a conceptual framework of how Senior Corps grantees, through the RSVP (a Senior Corps Program), can contribute to both CR dual benefit volunteer service activity and traditional disaster services. RSVP (which originally stood for Retired Senior Volunteer Program) is a flexible volunteer service model that engages Americans age 55 in six national focus areas that includes disaster services. Although older Americans can be at higher risk of mortality during disasters (CDC, 2012; Chiu et al., 2013),

Senior Corps programs like RSVP can engage Americans age 55 and older in support of CR. The RSVP Senior Corps model requires no set service schedules and provides no monetary compensation for volunteers (with the exception of meal and mileage reimbursement), but provides funding for volunteer recruitment, supervision, and training, which are important but time-consuming components of disaster preparedness (Aakko, Weed, Konrad, & Wiesman, 2008). In fiscal year 2012, RSVP engaged over 320,000 volunteers through 676 grants, providing independent living services to 742,800 adults, respite services to nearly 24,000 family or informal caregivers, and mentoring to more than 82,590 children. RSVP also supports traditional disaster services through training and volunteer placements that are specific to disasters. Finally, RSVP funding provides communities the capacity to manage RSVP volunteers in traditional disaster services or redeploy RSVP volunteers in a CR dual benefit roles through existing service relationships.

In 2012, the Denver and Larimer RSVP Projects engaged in disaster response activities associated with the wildfires in Jefferson, El Paso, and Larimer Counties in Colorado (wildfires; Makings, 2013). Some RSVP volunteers served in deployments that reflect traditional disaster services, while others served in their routine volunteer stations in dual benefit roles in support of CR during the wildfires. The flexible nature of RSVP allows grantees to identify and address multiple community needs through National

Service. In advance of the implementation of the new disaster services performance measures, CNCS also worked with the grant sponsor of the Denver and Larimer RSVP Projects to retrospectively review administrative data collected during the wildfires. We now use the Denver and Larimer RSVP experience as a case study to understand the barriers to implementing the national RSVP disaster services performance measures during a disaster to measure both disaster services and CR-related dual benefit activity. Although older Americans can be at higher risk of mortality during disasters (CDC, 2012; Chiu et al., 2013), we seek to demonstrate how Americans age 55 and older can also be part of community solutions to disasters through National Service programs such as RSVP.

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Methods

RSVP grantees include nonprofit organizations and state, local, and tribal governments. The sponsor of the Denver and Larimer County RSVP Projects is the Colorado Branch of Volunteers of America, a national faith-based organization.

In the fall of 2012, CNCS worked with Volunteers of America to assess the barriers to implementing the national RSVP disaster services performance measures. The CNCS Colorado State Office worked with the Denver and Larimer County RSVP Projects to retrospectively report on national performance measures that include measures of unduplicated individuals served and the number of hours served by RSVP volunteers. This analysis used administrative data collected as a routine part of volunteer activity. We now

categorized the RSVP volunteer disaster service activity, as measured by the number of volunteers and volunteer hours, to determine if the activity was typical of traditional disaster activity or represented disaster-related extensions of dual benefit service activity that preceded the wildfires.

Results

The Denver and Larimer County RSVP Projects supported 101 volunteers who served 3,137 hr in response to the wildfires. The majority of RSVP volunteers (83%) responding to the wildfires served in their usual non-disaster service activities (see Table 1). In response to the Larimer County, High Park Fire, 83 Larimer RSVP volunteers served 1,441 hr at their usual volunteer stations in the context of disaster response, which we characterized as dual benefit service activities.

The following are examples of activities characterized as dual benefit: The Larimer RSVP's Handyman Project, which provides home improvements for individuals with disabilities. During the High Park Fire, four RSVP volunteers provided a wheelchair ramp to a disabled evacuee who did not have accessible accommodations. Sixty-five RSVP volunteers who regularly serve at the Colorado Welcome Center and the Downtown Visitors Bureau provided up-to-date information to the public regarding the fire, including helping to direct first responders and helping tourists find safe alternative accommodations. Several RSVP volunteers who regularly serve at the HELP (His Everlasting Love Prevails) International Warehouse, sorting and preparing donations for international disaster relief work provided statewide shipments in response to the wildfires. Five RSVP volunteers who regularly work with the House of Neighborly Service, a human service agency, processed clothing and food donations in response to the wildfires.

Although 83% of RSVP volunteers served through their routine volunteer stations in a dual benefit role, 54% of hours served by RSVP volunteers in response to the fires represented the contribution of 18 volunteers who had

Table 1. RSVP Disaster Response: Disaster-Specific Activity and "Dual Capacity" Volunteer Service

RSVP Program	Disaster-Specific Activity and Stations	"Dual Capacity" Volunteer Service
Denver RSVP	Six RSVP volunteers served 898 hr during the <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jefferson County—Lower North Fork Fire • El Paso County—Waldo Canyon Fire • Larimer County—High Park Fire 	
Larimer RSVP	12 RSVP volunteers served 798 hr during the Larimer County—High Park Fire	83 Larimer RSVP volunteers served 1,441 hr during the Larimer County—High Park Fire
Hours of service by subcategory	18 RSVP volunteers (6 from Denver RSVP and 12 from Larimer RSVP) served 1,696 hr	83 RSVP volunteers served 1,441 hr
Total volunteers and total hours	101 RSVP volunteers served 3,137 hr during the course of the 2012 wildfires in Jefferson, El Paso, and Larimer Counties in Colorado	

received disaster-specific training through RSVP. Six of the Denver RSVP volunteers provided 898 hr of service related to the wildfires (see Table 1). During the Lower North Fork Fire, the Waldo Canyon Fire, the Denver RSVP volunteers stationed with the Colorado Voluntary Organizations Active in Disasters (COVOAD) helped establish and operate the Disaster Recovery Center and served with the Colorado Office of Emergency Management and Mountain Resource Center. RSVP volunteers prepared press releases and public service announcements and coordinating resources with many local and national COVOAD partners. RSVP volunteers also monitored and distributed donations, managed updates on displaced people, and provided resource referrals to evacuees. The RSVP volunteers also assisted other local faith-based groups in organizing their own response activities.

In response to the High Park Fire, 12 Larimer RSVP volunteers served 798 hr in disaster-specific service activities. They assisted the American Red Cross disaster response activities through case management services to 50 family units and through staffing an Emergency Response Vehicle that distributed thousands of meals and bottles of water. RSVP volunteers serving with Catholic Charities Archdiocese of Denver–Larimer County Region provided emergency assistance for evacuees in the form of \$100 gift cards for gasoline, clothing, food, and household items. Eight RSVP volunteers served with the Fort Collins Habitat for Humanity to assist six families in debris removal from sites where their homes once stood.

The administrative data collected in the midst of the disaster were often insufficient to link a specific RSVP service activity to specific unduplicated individuals as required by national performance measures. Because many RSVP volunteers served to support disaster response logistics and capacity and did not work directly with evacuees, it is very difficult to know how many unduplicated survivors were supported in many of these examples.

Discussion

There is initial evidence that RSVP grantees can recruit, train, and deploy volunteers in disaster service-specific roles and in dual benefit roles in support of CR. The vast majority of volunteers who served during the wildfires served at their routine volunteer stations in a dual benefit role in support of CR. The majority of hours served by RSVP volunteers during the wildfires were served by a relatively small group of volunteers with disaster-specific skills; this example reinforces how traditional disaster preparedness

complements CR. Experience with traditional disaster service activity, volunteer coordination capacity, and established service placement relationships may also have been important in the Denver and Larimer County RSVP Projects capacity to redeploy volunteers in support of CR. However, RSVP grantees had difficulty collecting data on the number of unduplicated people served in the midst of a disaster. RSVP grantees will likely need continued technical assistance to collect impact data in future disaster response settings.

The RSVP response to the wildfires demonstrates how National Service investments can leverage ongoing volunteer activity to support CR. In 2013, CNCS provided disaster recovery supplemental grants to the communities of West, Texas (industrial explosion); Moore, Oklahoma (tornado); New York City (Superstorm Sandy), Springfield, Missouri (flooding); and the following communities in Colorado: Denver, Boulder, Broomfield, Larimer, and Weld Counties (flooding). These combined grants totaled over \$750,000 and represent RSVP's capacity to support CR across a range of disasters. Future research should also consider if the presence of a disaster-specific capacity contributes to the volunteer coordination capacity to redirect and deploy volunteers in a dual benefit role in the event of a disaster.

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The Senior Corps RSVP response to the wildfires demonstrate how National Service investments can leverage ongoing volunteer activity to support Community Resilience.

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