

Smart Practice White Paper DR-4227-WY  
Long Term Recovery Group formed 30 days after impact, 1 day before declaration

Written by FEMA Region VIII Voluntary Agency Liaisons (VALs)  
Brooks MacRoberts and Mathew Cedar  
October 07, 2015

**Bottom Line Up Front (BLUF)**

- Pre-disaster rapport with external partners is critical to the success of the VAL mission.
- This rapport is best built through face to face engagement pre-disaster, as well as by traveling early to the impacted area (at the request of the State) utilizing surge account funding.
- Early VAL engagement allows Long Term Recovery Groups (LTRGs) to form rapidly, and also increases the likelihood they will adopt nationwide best practices and templates.
- Early VAL engagement increases voluntary agency participation, and these agencies can be invited to offer their services directly to survivors and support volunteer disaster case management at Disaster Recovery Centers (DRCs).
- Early VAL engagement helps external partners differentiate individual recovery from community recovery, thereby helping to focus the correct resources on the correct problems. This maximizes the effectiveness and efficiency of these resources, which speeds the overall response and recovery efforts.

**Background**

Following a federal disaster declaration, a tremendous amount of government resources are made available to individuals and households that have been impacted by a disaster. However, voluntary organizations, community organizations and local leaders do not wait for a federal disaster declaration before providing their services. Without a coordinated effort, survivors can potentially receive duplication of benefits, which can result in voluntary and donated resources going toward needs that could have been filled by government programs. This can adversely affect a survivor's eligibility for additional forms of assistance, and may negatively impact the survivor financially if government agencies require recoupment of duplicated funds. Additionally, without a coordinated and collaborative approach to individual recovery, the survivor may not be able to fully access the various forms of assistance from local, state, and national Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD) partners.

The FEMA Voluntary Agency Liaison works with both government and non-government partners before, during and after disasters in order to build collaborative working groups that address issues pertaining to survivor recovery. The chances that the VAL will be successful in this mission is very much improved and directly affected by the ability to meet face to face with all stakeholders in this process. This is true because these interactions unquestionably lead to meaningful relationships that withstand the pressures of response and recovery. After an event, the VAL mission is likewise best served by having a physical

presence in the impact zone to build those relationships with local partners and to provide training and technical assistance as soon as possible; preferably before a disaster is even declared.

In the twelve month period prior to the incident discussed in this paper, the Region VIII FEMA VAL met face to face with WY Office of Homeland Security (WYOHS) staff and WYVOAD partners five times. He also attended eleven conference calls with these same partners. These personal interactions allowed the VAL to develop a relationship and rapport that was built on mutual trust and respect. This strong relationship created an environment such that when the storms came, our partners were comfortable reaching out to the Region to request technical assistance. They had confidence in us, knowing that we were cognizant of our role of support rather than that of control. Had we not put forth the effort and spent the time and money to develop and maintain these relationships, it is clear that a request for technical assistance would not have been forthcoming.

So when the VAL was invited to support WYOHS response and recovery efforts shortly after the incident, he was able to do so very quickly. WYOHS, WYVOAD and the VAL were not hampered by getting to know each other and didn't have to waste time defining their respective roles. Rather, we were all able to get to work immediately. As a highly efficient and effective team, we offered and considered possible solutions to the many situations that arose.

At the invitation of, and in close coordination with the WYOHS, the VAL traveled to the scene soon after feeding and sheltering operations were ramping down. The VAL did so on surge account funding.

### **The Event**

Beginning June 5, 2015, the Region VIII FEMA VAL provided daily technical assistance while attending WYVOAD flood coordination calls. The VAL then traveled to the impacted area using "surge funds" the week of June 22-26. This allowed the VAL to begin offering face to face training and technical assistance 16 days from the date of the eventual end of the incident period. This was only possible because the VAL was able to travel to the site, pre-declaration. The benefit of the early training and technical assistance is reflected in the rapid development of the local LTRG, including its four subcommittees as detailed below:

The incident period for DR-4227-WY was May 24 through June 6, 2015. The LTRG elected its officers on July 6, a day before the event was declared on July 7. Active (volunteer) disaster case management began on July 24, before the LTRG had their mission statement and by-laws in place on July 30. (The LTRG understood the critical importance of volunteer case management, and didn't want that process to be delayed while they voted on their policies. They trusted the advice the VAL provided.)

Of particular note is the expedited development and operation of the two primary subcommittees; case management and unmet needs. These two subcommittees were able to gain the support of critical National VOAD (NVOAD) partners early in the process, which meant that volunteer disaster case management services were being delivered to survivors 48 days from impact, 17 days from declaration. Experience shows that the complete development of a LTRG to the point where they are fully able to support case management services can take upwards of 6 months or more from the date of declaration. It

takes even longer if we consider the date from impact. (Bear in mind that survivors will continue to suffer until the LTRG support mechanisms are in place and active). This delay in LTRG growth can be attributed to “bad habits” that groups often develop in the absence of a VAL presence. The early and steady presence of a VAL, as they offer best practices and guidance, minimizes the chances that “bad habits” will form and simultaneously increases the coordination and thus the effectiveness of the overall voluntary effort.

### **Problem**

Disasters often affect communities with limited resources and little experience in the disaster field. Following a disaster, community members and leaders are often eager to step up to address the immediate needs of their residents. While this is well intentioned, without coordination this can lead to a duplication of benefits the survivor might receive. If the survivor receives assistance from a private entity and government agencies for the same need, these government agencies are legally obligated to take that money back from the client through a recoupment process. This can mean that these government agencies can demand repayment from the client, which can lead to wage garnishing, loss of tax rebates, or other penalties until the money is repaid. This causes unnecessary stress and re-traumatizes the survivor at their most vulnerable time; just when they are beginning to make progress in their own recovery.

State and local government oftentimes have limited experience in this area. Their staff may be overwhelmed and may likewise be challenged in providing the quality training and technical assistance regarding individual long term recovery that can best be offered by the Regional FEMA VAL. If the VAL is able to provide this insight early, it helps all stakeholders avoid the potential duplication of benefits in the first place.

Without the type of guidance best provided by a VAL, competing networks of assistance can arise. This usually means that in the absence of a formalized case management process, limited resources are provided (spent) too quickly without regard to duplication, and not in a way that is best for the survivors. Additionally, it increases the likelihood that valuable time will be spent re-inventing processes that already exist.

### **Solutions and Recommended Practices**

The following are key elements that have a demonstrated impact in completing the VAL mission:

- The VAL had Regional travel funding support that enabled him to meet face to face with partners five times in the twelve month period prior to the event.
  - The strong relationships built with partners through these prior face to face engagements helped the WYOHS feel comfortable requesting VAL technical assistance and facilitated their invitation and request for his physical presence in the affected area.
- The DR-4227-WY VAL mission was initiated pre-declaration through conference calls and with a single unit resource 5 day deployment using surge account funding. This was followed up with a 42 day disaster deployment. The VAL was subsequently able to support operations remotely at the end of those deployments. Before demobilizing, 56 cases were opened, 3 cases were presented, and 8 cases were closed by the LTRG case managers.
- Availability of the surge account permitted the VAL to travel to the disaster zone before the declaration which allowed the VAL to facilitate an increase in communication, collaboration,

cooperation and coordination among partner agencies which garnered their early support in response as well as for long term recovery efforts.

- It is important to lay this groundwork early on, so that the local leaders, who are often inexperienced in disaster recovery, avoid pitfalls in the recovery process and ensures that donated and tax-payer dollars are not wasted or misused.
- The efficient use of both donor and tax-payer dollars reduces the overall amount of resources needed to achieve survivor recovery. This efficient use of resources is supported by the DHS/FEMA responsibilities outlined in the MOA signed by NVOAD and FEMA in May 2015.<sup>1</sup>
- This is also important because it expedites the recovery process. Without the early engagement of the VAL, the establishment of a LTRG can take anywhere from six months to a year. Having a VAL presence early on is shown to establish coordinated voluntary agency recovery efforts within a matter of days and weeks, as opposed to months and years.
- Being on-site quickly after the incident and before the declaration allowed the VAL to lay the ground work for developing a LTRG that utilized nationally recognized best practices and acted in accordance with the signed Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) signed by NVOAD and FEMA in May 2015.
- Having a presence early on allowed the VAL to identify gaps in recovery, and to work with local community leaders to make targeted, specific requests of NVOAD partners. This allowed partners to come to the community with the exact resources that were needed to fill the local gaps.
- Because the VAL was on-site before the declaration, the capacity of the local community to perform disaster case management was assessed and determined to be insufficient. This permitted the VAL to assist the community to build the proper relationships with NVOAD partners and helped them to invite qualified volunteer disaster case managers from outside the community.
  - The rapid engagement of NVOAD partners, facilitated by the VAL, allowed volunteer disaster case managers to have a seat in the Disaster Recovery Center (DRC) and to perform client intake concurrent with speaking with FEMA. The registered survivors were then promptly able to potentially access additional VOAD and LTRG services as well as gaining the opportunity to learn more about other federal programs (SBA, USDA, etc.). This face to face customer service from FEMA, other federal agencies, and case managers helped prevent duplication of services. This is a best practice that is not possible when volunteer disaster case management is not in place, and is a practice that is supported by the MOA signed by NVOAD and FEMA in May 2015.
- Being on-site quickly allowed the VAL to gain much needed support of elected and other government officials, but through partnership rather than membership of the LTRG. This helped all stakeholders distinguish individual recovery from community recovery. By doing so, the VAL managed to keep the LTRG focused on its mission - getting individuals into a sustainable, safe, sanitary and functional living situation. It also allowed government to remain focused on its mission – solving land use, service continuity, and economic recovery issues.

---

<sup>1</sup> [https://intranet.fema.net/org/orr/orr\\_programs/recovery\\_programs/ia\\_programs/Documents/FEMA-NVOAD\\_MOA\\_20150515\\_\(FINAL\\_signed\\_508\).pdf](https://intranet.fema.net/org/orr/orr_programs/recovery_programs/ia_programs/Documents/FEMA-NVOAD_MOA_20150515_(FINAL_signed_508).pdf)

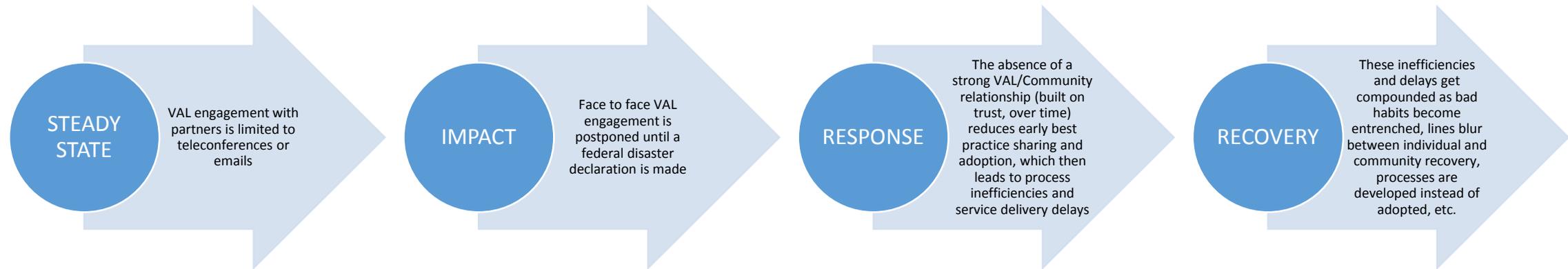
- By separating individual recovery issues from community recovery issues, it allowed the Joint Field Office (JFO) command and general staff to better determine the need and best timing of an Advanced Evaluation Team (AET) deployment, the need for a Federal Disaster Recovery Coordinator (FDRC), and ultimately to determine which specific Recovery Support Functions (RSFs) might actually need to be initiated.

### **Conclusion**

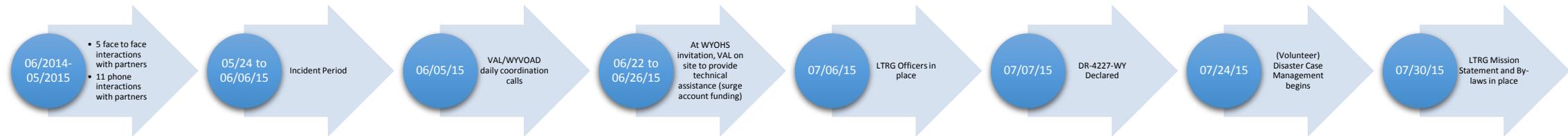
The availability and expenditure of Regional travel funding support directly affects the ability of VALs to establish, foster, and maintain relationships among government, voluntary, faith-based, and community partners that not only strengthens their capabilities but also enhances the delivery of inclusive, equitable services by empowering communities to address disaster-related unmet needs. At the invitation of the State, permitting the VAL to travel to an impact zone on the surge account before a potential disaster declaration is made allows the VAL to demonstrate to a community how they can best maximize the utility of voluntary/donated resources, and then force multiply those resources in conjunction with any available government programs. This leads to a rapidly organized collaborative effort to help disaster survivors move on with their recovery, and helps the larger community establish its new normal more quickly. All stakeholders in response and recovery have an interest in expediting these processes as much as practicable. Additionally, the early and steady presence of the VAL allows non-government partners to link local, state, tribal and federal recovery programs, which also speeds delivery of services to survivors of a disaster.

In short, the sooner a VAL is engaged face to face with partners, the better the chances the LTRG will form utilizing nationally recognized best practices, which increases the effectiveness of their work, which ultimately speeds survivor recovery. This early engagement also reduces the overall costs of utilizing the VAL, since they do not have to spend time breaking “bad habits” and teaching new ones. This results in reducing the overall cost to FEMA by reducing the required length of a VAL’s deployment, and helps to promote successful cooperation among local, state, federal, tribal and non-governmental stakeholders.

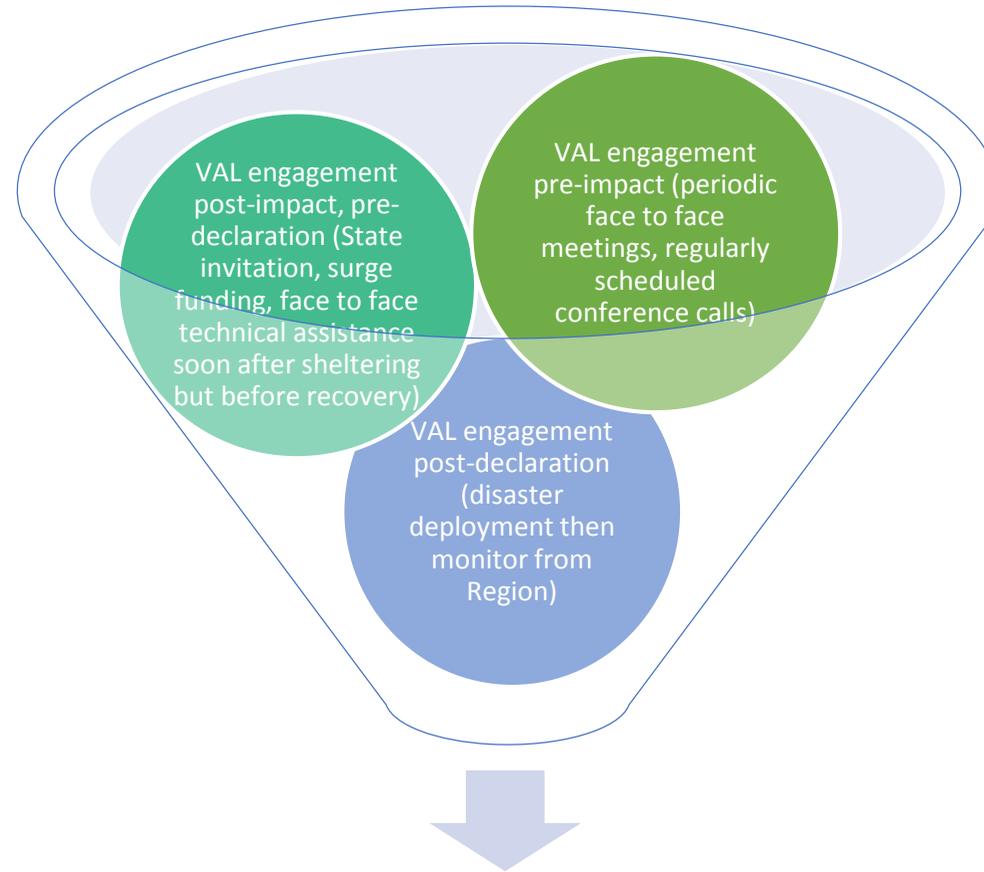
# Standard Practice



# Smart Practice: DR-4227-WY Illustration



## Smart Practice: Regional support of VAL (travel funding)



**VAL engagement before, during, and after an impact speeds survivor recovery and reduces disaster operation costs**