



Getting Prepared to be a Volunteer at a Disaster

Participant Guide

Copyright © 2024

Midwest Consortium for Hazardous Waste Worker Training

Acknowledgments

The Midwest Consortium (MWC) developed this introduction to health and safety considerations for volunteers who will be traveling to a disaster to assist the local community in clean-up under cooperative agreement number U45 ES 06184 from the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences. We gratefully acknowledge the input to content from the New England Consortium (TNEC) Hazardous Materials & Emergency Response Training Program, particularly David J. Coffey, Robert Zalewski and Craig Slatin and use of TNEC photos of 24-hour and 72-hour packs. We also acknowledge review comments from Mary Williams of the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice that strengthened the program.

We encourage you to comment on these materials. Please give your suggestions to those leading the program in which you are now enrolled or click on 'contact us' at <https://mwc.umn.edu>.

Warning

This material has been copyrighted by the Midwest Consortium for Hazardous Waste Worker Training. A recipient of the material, other than the Federal Government, may not reproduce it without permission of the copyright owner.

The material was prepared for use by experienced instructors who are providing an introduction to health and safety considerations to persons who are or who anticipate volunteering for clean-up operations. Users are cautioned that the subject is constantly evolving. Therefore, the material may require additions, deletions, or modifications to incorporate the effects of that evolution occurring after the date of this material preparation.

This training does not substitute for on-site training and regular updates. Additional, task-specific training may be required on-site.

This guide was updated May 22, 2024 and all web links are active as of that date; if you find an error, please inform the facilitator so that it can be updated.

Getting Prepared for Volunteer Activities

You plan to or have volunteered to help at a disaster site. This program has been designed to help you prepare before you depart your home and be ready to stay safe and healthy as you serve the community that has been affected.

After this program you will be better able to:

- Identify what you need to know before you depart
- Recognize factors to consider in packing
- Recognize possible hazards
- Identify resources to minimize exposure to hazards

Your feedback to the content, discussion and activities will be most appreciated.

What do I need to know before I leave?

You will be away from home for several days or weeks. Asking questions of those who are organizing this volunteer effort will help you prepare efficiently, and help assure that you have what you need when you arrive. First, obtain and review any fact sheets or Question/Answer documents they have prepared. Then ask for more information to cover topics such as:

- Where I will be going?
- Who else is going?
- How will I get there?
- What activities or anticipated tasks am I going to be doing?
- Will I just be in one place, or moving to other location(s)?
- Do I need medical clearance or immunizations such as tetanus?
- What are the expected weather conditions?
- Whom do I report to?
- Where is that person located and how do I make contact?
- Where will I be living? Is there Electricity? Is there a Bed? Is there a Roof for shelter?
- Will sleeping quarters change during my efforts?
- Where will I eat?
- Where will I get logistical (supplies, planning information) needs met?
- What back-up contact information can I give my family?
- Will I be able to communicate with family via cell phone or text?
- What identification should I have?
- Are there known safety and health exposures?
- Where would I get medical care if needed?
- Will there be certified medical staff on-site?
- Are volunteers coming from other locations?
- Is this a part of a national or regional group activity?

Activity: Discuss as a group other questions you might want to ask before you leave. Add these to the list, above.

What to pack?

From the expected duration of your volunteer effort, and an understanding of the conditions where you will be working, you can plan to pack. Unlike usual travel, you may not be able to buy anything where you are going!

There are three guiding rules:

- Pack only as much as you can easily carry
- Bags should have a lock
- Do not take valuable jewelry, or documents that cannot be replaced

Consider the following when packing (based on weather, expected activities):

- Copy of Medical Insurance Card
- Copy of any medical conditions or allergies
- Copy of government issued ID such as a driver's license or passport
- Copy of special skills certification, such as first-aid/CPR
- Layered clothing to protect against the environment - (sun/cold/heat/bug/wet)
- Clothes made from moisture-wicking material that will dry quickly, up to three changes (be prepared with detergent to wash then wear)
- Comfortable closed toe shoes and work boots (steel toe may be recommended). No sandals or flip flops.
- Rain gear
- Cold weather gear (if needed)
- PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) : gloves (cut resistant), eye protection, hearing protection, reflective vest, hard hat (if needed)
- Water bottle(s)
- Flashlight (headlamp) / extra batteries
- Sufficient medicines for the duration of your stay, including prescribed and over-the-counter pain reliever and allergy relief medicine.

- Any special dietary needs
- Personal care products (in quantities that are needed only)
- Bug Spray
- Sun Screen
- Hand Sanitizer
- Reflective vest
- Toilet paper and other paper products
- Healthy snacks
- Book/playing cards
- Notebook/pencil (to record activities)

Short-term re-packing

Be prepared to stow what you need for the day in a 'day pack'. This might include sun screen, extra PPE (like gloves, single use respiratory protection), another layer like a wind breaker, dry socks. A small back pack or fanny pack should be sufficient to carry what is needed as a day pack until you return to your housing.

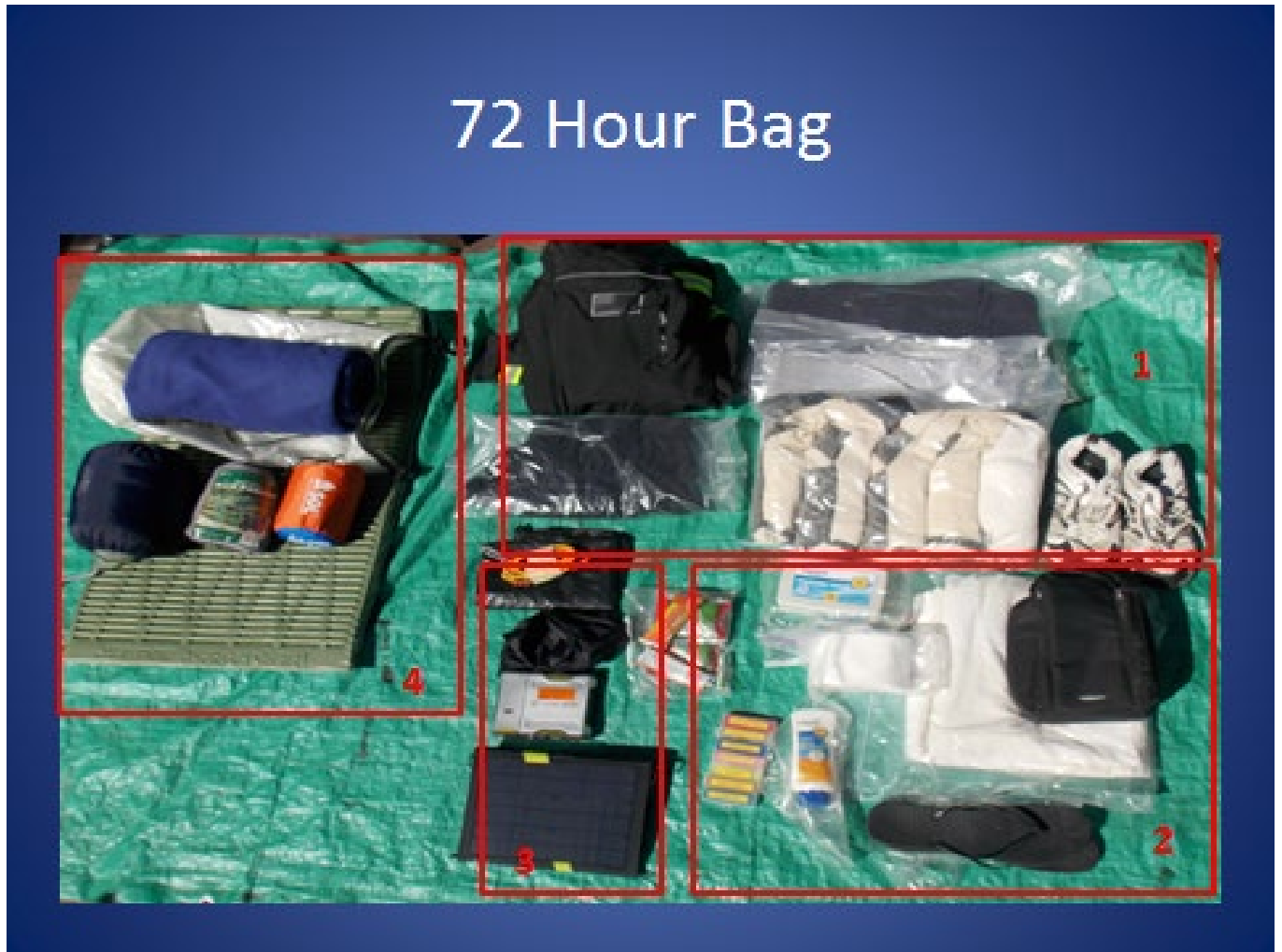
If you have been told to prepare for multiple locations, prepare to match duration away with supplies that will be needed. See the two figures below of contents for a 24-hour and 72-hour pack, respectively.

The 24 hour pack: This will include equipment and personal items (medications, special dietary items) you will need for 24 hours.



1. Medicine and first aid 2. Personal hygiene 3. Extra clothing 4. Travel mugs and snacks 5. PPE 6. Safety supplies—rope, tape, knife, marking tools 7. Electronics

The 72 hour pack. This collection of supplies is designed to support your needs to live in the field for more than one day. It includes your sleeping bag and other long-term comfort items. The major constraint is how much you can carry.



1. Clothes
2. Personal hygiene, medicine, first aid
3. Safety supplies, electronics
4. Sleeping gear

What else prepares me to do volunteer work safely?

Resources

Based on what you know of the disaster and your expected work, one or more of the following resources may be useful:

High Winds: <https://mwc.umn.edu>

Earthquake: <https://tools.niehs.nih.gov/wetp/index.cfm?id=2479>

Hurricane or Flood: <https://tools.niehs.nih.gov/wetp/index.cfm?id=2472>

Wild fire: <https://tools.niehs.nih.gov/wetp/index.cfm?id=2455>

Oil spill: <https://tools.niehs.nih.gov/wetp/index.cfm?id=2495>

Response-related Work Stress:

<https://tools.niehs.nih.gov/wetp/index.cfm?id=2528>

Review these resources, as applicable, and any received from organizers before you leave.

On-site training and briefings

The most important source of information about the specific work and potential hazards will be included in the on-site briefing or training before you start work. This will include:

- Specific work activities
- Potential health and hazards
- How to avoid/control these potential hazards
 - Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)
 - Work in teams
 - Work practices
- Who and how to contact if you
 - Identify a hazard that was not expected
 - Need help in a work assignment
 - You or a co-worker is hurt, do not feel well, or have a medical emergency

The training you receive on-site will depend on the scope of the event that you are responding to and your duties.

If you are injured or feel sick:

- Stop volunteer duties
- Inform your supervisor or contact
- Seek first aid or medical attention
- Complete any required report form

You may receive an identification badge and be asked to sign in and out each shift. This is a routine procedure to assure that your location is known.

Keep notes about your activities and any exposures each day during the effort. While it is not expected that any health effect will be determined later, notes may assist your health care provider in understanding the work you did as a volunteer and answering any questions you may have.

Exercise

Work in small groups to access one or more of the resources above. If you are going to a known event in the near future, select a resource for that response. If you are participating because you may volunteer in the future, pick an event that might occur in your state or a nearby state.

Complete the following table:

Responding to: _____ Resource: _____

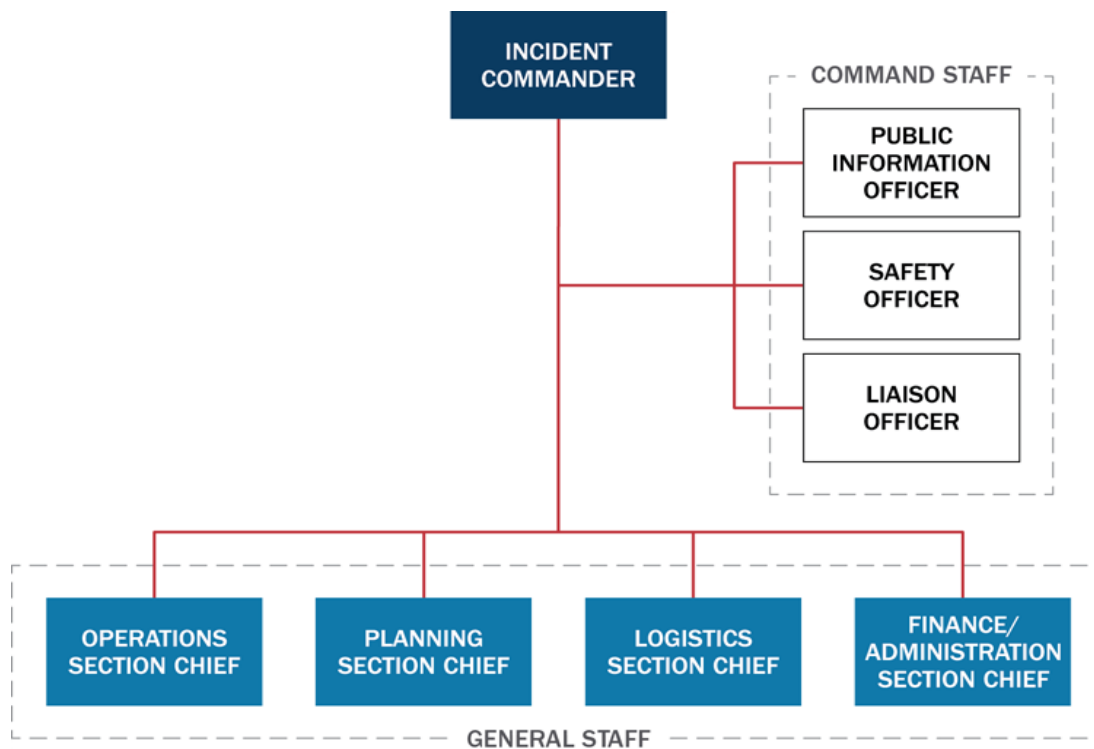
Hazard	Injury or Health Effect	How to Reduce/Eliminate

Someone from your group should share the work with the other volunteers during a report-back. Report any unexpected hazard or need for assistance to complete a task to your supervisor.

The organization of a response: Incident Command System

In large-scale responses where volunteers are coordinated by the American Red Cross or a faith-based groups such as the Southern Baptist Disaster Relief or Lutheran Social Services, there will be an overall structure called Incident Command System (ICS) in place when you arrive. This structure helps assure efficient use of resources, including volunteer efforts. An example of an incident command organizational chart is shown below.

Incident Command System Organizational Chart



Source: https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/2020-07/fema_nims_doctrine-2017.pdf

Note: This chart is adapted to the specific needs of the event. Other personnel may be added.

Using this structure, the incident commander follows a plan, call the Emergency Response Plan (ERP)—the ‘what to do and how to do it safely’ guide to getting all the work done that results from the emergency event. Initially the Incident Commander may be the Fire Chief, but command can be handed off to a state or federal official,

depending on the scope of effort. More information is shown here:

<https://www.fema.gov/emergency-managers/nims>

When an ICS is in place, training and daily briefings, badging and sign in/out procedures are managed by ICS personnel, in accordance with the Emergency Response Plan. A summary of the incident is posted in the briefing center; it is called the Incident Status Summary or form ICS 209 as shown here:

[https://training.fema.gov/emiweb/is/icsresource/assets/ics%20forms/ics%20form%20209,%20incident%20status%20summary%20\(v3\).pdf](https://training.fema.gov/emiweb/is/icsresource/assets/ics%20forms/ics%20form%20209,%20incident%20status%20summary%20(v3).pdf)

Training provided on-site will be matched to the tasks to be completed. For example, those assisting in an evacuation center might be required to have had first aid training and be given training on the reporting of possible infectious diseases or recognizing possible need for trauma counseling. Volunteers who help muck out a home that has been flooded might be trained to use protective gear to keep debris and mud off of clothing and limit inhalation of dust, and recognize hazards of snakes.

There may be reference to a number of Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) standards that apply to paid workers. As a volunteer, you are exempt from enforcement, but hazards do not choose between a paid worker and a volunteer. A falling tree limb just falls—paid and volunteer workers in the path are hurt equally. Follow any practices put in place to comply with OSHA regulations—stay safe and healthy. OSHA regulations are cited in the resources above.

Groups that organize volunteers

States have information for volunteers and may identify groups recognized in the State to coordinate volunteers. For example, see:

Illinois: <https://www2.illinois.gov/ready/after/Pages/Volunteer-Opportunities.aspx>

Indiana: <https://www.in.gov/serveindiana/>

Kentucky: <http://kyem.ky.gov/recovery/Pages/Volunteer-Coordination.aspx>

Michigan: <https://www.michigan.gov/mdhhs/inside-mdhhs/comm-resources-volunteer>

Minnesota: <https://mn.gov/portal/residents/volunteer.jsp>

North Dakota: <http://www.ndhealth.gov/epr/hp/phevr/>

Ohio: <https://ohio.gov/residents/topic-hubs/home-and-community/volunteer>

Tennessee: <https://www.tn.gov/volunteer-tennessee/disaster-services/disaster-volunteer-opportunities.html>

Wisconsin: <https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/preparedness/volunteerservices.htm>

Forms to fill out

You will be asked through the ICS to complete a number of forms, including:

A registration form that includes special skills you have

Documentation of special skills

Release from Liability or Hold Harmless

See Good Samaritan provisions, by state, here:

<https://recreation-law.com/2014/05/28/good-samaritan-laws-by-state/>

Family notification form

Sign in for training/acknowledge receipt of training

Work sign in/out (each day or shift)

Summary and closing

Thank you for participating in this introduction to health and safety for volunteers who will be supporting efforts at a disaster clean-up.

This program was designed as an introduction to health safety considerations during volunteer work at a disaster. On the evaluation form, please provide feedback on your ability after the session to:

- Identify what you need to know before you depart
- Recognize factors to consider in packing
- Recognize possible hazards
- Identify resources to minimize exposure to hazards

Please ask any remaining questions.

If you have additional suggestions when you get back from the volunteer efforts, please contact the training center.