

Testimony of

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Joint Hearing:

“Lessons Learned: Ensuring the Delivery of Donated Goods to Survivors of Catastrophes”

July 24, 2008

House Committee on Homeland Security’s
Subcommittee on Emergency Communications, Preparedness, and Response

and

Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs’
Ad Hoc Subcommittee on Disaster Recovery

Good afternoon, Chairman Thompson, Chairman Cuellar, Congressman Dent and Chairwoman Landrieu and Members of the Subcommittees.

As a Senior Advisor for Emergency Services for The Humane Society of the United States, I work with government agencies, national nonprofit organizations, and other state and local partners to strengthen the critical work in communities to protect animals and people with animals from the impact of disaster. (WWW.HumaneSociety.org) I served 20 years in the Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance, USAID, and I am a disaster advisor to the Business Civic Leadership Center, US Chamber of Commerce.

I am here today as a member since 1989 of the Donations Management Committee of National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster, or National VOAD (WWW.NVOAD.org). National VOAD is a national, nonprofit, nonpartisan forum where member organizations share knowledge and resources throughout the disaster cycle—preparation, response, and recovery—to help disaster survivors and their communities. National VOAD coordinates planning efforts by voluntary organizations responding to disaster. Member organizations provide more effective and less duplicative service by planning and training together before disasters strike. Once disasters occur, National VOAD, or an affiliated state or U.S. Territory VOAD, encourages members and other voluntary agencies to coordinate on site. This cooperative effort has proven to be the most effective way for a wide variety of voluntary organizations and government to work together in a crisis.

The Donations Management Committee of National VOAD brings voluntary organizations, state and federal government, and private partners together to plan for and manage unsolicited goods and services. Managing the potentially overwhelming influx of unsolicited donated goods from the public can maximize these potential resources, because when uncoordinated, they have caused a disaster within a disaster.

FEMA has worked closely with its partners since Hurricane Andrew (1992) and has increased this effort as a result of the Hurricane Katrina experience. Recent changes include updates to the National Response Framework which includes National VOAD and its member organizations in the plans; the creation of a technology tool for the organization of offers of goods, cash, and volunteer services; and the establishment of a national public-private coordination team to support the policies and procedures for more effective unaffiliated volunteer and unsolicited donations management.

Although today's hearing is focused on how FEMA received and managed the donations made in 2005 to help those in the Gulf Coast, National VOAD members want to highlight and summarize the donation management lessons from numerous events.

Donation Management Lessons

- *Every "offer" is not an appropriate disaster donation – relief is to provide the right material when needed most.*
- *Donations are not free – expenses include transport, storage and management.*

- *Government transportation and storage can be helpful to ensure the use of donated goods and reduce the need for government purchases.*
- *Experienced state government donation coordinators are one important key to success.*
- **A massive influx of goods distributed free can have a negative impact on a local economy, especially small businesses.**
- *After Action Reviews, although at times painful, can yield valuable lessons, if implemented.*
- *Congressional referrals of offers can be helpful; however, congressional influence, not supported by sound technical evaluation, can be counterproductive and costly.*

Significant progress has been made to improve policy and to build a more streamlined process for donation management by FEMA in cooperation with states and with nonprofit partners. However, more effort and support is required to turn appropriate donations into disaster relief and recovery resources.

FEMA could increase support for National VOAD to:

- *Work with and support voluntary agencies, state and local government and the business community (e.g. National VOAD, Chamber of Commerce, and trade and professional associations) in the development of standards and common operating procedures.*
- *Increase Donation Management Training opportunities for voluntary agency and state government staff.*
- *Include donation and volunteer management issues in government disaster exercises.*
- *Conduct public education campaigns and conferences to promote “appropriate donation methods” (See The Center for International Disaster Information, WWW.CIDI.Org, supported by USAID).*
- *Provide funding for capacity building so that National VOAD and its Donations Management Committee can independently develop the systems needed by its members to effectively get these well-intentioned goods to the appropriate organization and ultimately to the community in need.*