



Universities Rebuilding America Partnership

**A Toolkit for Organizing Group Service Trips
to the Gulf Coast to Help Communities
Recover From the Hurricanes of 2005**



Corporation for
**NATIONAL &
COMMUNITY
SERVICE** 

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The National Crime Prevention Council's primary mission is to enable people to create safer and more caring communities by addressing the causes of crime and violence and reducing the opportunities for crime to occur.

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Contents

Introduction	2
Before You Go: Important Points to Consider	3
Critical Areas of Need Where Students Can Have an Impact.....	5
Choosing a Project and Sponsoring Organization	6
Selecting, Training, Preparing, and Providing for Members of Your Group	8
Making Travel and Lodging Arrangements	10
Things to Bring on Your Gulf Coast Service Trip.....	11
Reporting Accomplishments.....	12

Introduction

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina, a Category 4 hurricane, slammed into the Gulf Coast region of the United States. Katrina's wrath was felt in southern Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana but was particularly intense in New Orleans. The greatest damage to that city came after Katrina had moved through; the levees gave way causing major flooding. Hurricane Rita, which followed Katrina by just four weeks, reopened levees and inflicted new damage on southwestern Louisiana and southeastern Texas. Since this time, Hurricane Wilma has inflicted more damage. Experts predict that recovery to the region will take considerable time and effort.

America's Response

Response to this disaster from the American people has been unprecedented. As relief organizations began moving into the Gulf Coast area, individuals across the country opened their hearts, homes, and wallets to help the storms' victims. Communities, organizations, churches, and individuals collected food, equipment, and supplies and sent them south by the truckloads. Many volunteers, on their own and deployed by the Red Cross and other disaster agencies, poured into the Gulf Coast region to help the recovery.

Universities responded by offering displaced students and faculty a place on their campuses, often waiving fees and requirements. Student organizations held fundraisers and assembled books, supplies, clothing, and other necessities and, in some cases, delivered them personally to people who were suffering. In areas housing Katrina evacuees, college students volunteered in shelters, schools, and community centers. Then they turned their sights on helping the Gulf Coast recovery by organizing teams to go to the region to aid in the long-term process of rebuilding.

This Toolkit

The Corporation for National and Community Service has developed this toolkit to help college students and staff prepare for group trips to help rebuild the devastated areas of the Gulf Coast region. In addition to providing practical information, the toolkit is designed to help campus organizers think through important elements of the travel and work experience such as choosing the best sites and sponsoring organizations that fit the goals and needs of the group; orienting group members for the work trip, including training and education; and providing opportunities for individual and group reflection. Advanced planning can make your service more meaningful—and even life changing. Not surprisingly, these factors are basic to the best practices of service-learning and the programs of the Corporation for National and Community Service.

This toolkit relies heavily on the materials and experiences of the leading organization in education and service trips for higher education: Break Away, the Alternative Break Connection (www.alternativebreaks.org). Other resources included the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse, the National Crime Prevention Council, Learn and Serve America, Louisiana Campus Compact, and Mississippi Campus Compact.

Before You Go: Important Points to Consider

The uncertainty of conditions in states affected by hurricanes are likely to make your volunteers' experience challenging and demanding. It is important, therefore, that you consider all aspects of your trip so that you maintain your own health and safety and that of other participants as well.

In the early stages of hurricane relief efforts, it is best that volunteer groups have an assigned role with a recognized organization or agency before traveling to the Gulf Coast region to help in the disaster relief.

By October 2005, volunteer relief efforts were being coordinated primarily through the American Red Cross (www.redcross.org). The agency continues to recruit and train new volunteers who are willing to travel to disaster areas for specific short-term assignments or who can assist in local operations.

After training and depending on where you are assigned, you will receive traveling instructions and information about accommodations from the Red Cross. Be prepared for challenging conditions such as the following:

- Lodging will be in temporary housing, campgrounds, shelters, and other group living situations.
- Power and electricity will be spotty, with little refrigeration or air-conditioning.
- Water supplies for drinking may be

disrupted.

- There will be little fresh food, and special dietary needs will be difficult to meet.
- Access to medical care may be limited.
- Weather will be hot and humid.
- Emotional stresses may be high and working conditions difficult.
- Travel to work assignments may involve long distances; transportation options at the disaster site may be limited.

As relief efforts become more organized, other national organizations can be sources of volunteer placement in the Gulf Coast region. Below is a partial list:

- American Red Cross:
www.redcross.org
- Salvation Army: www.uss.salvationarmy.org
- America's Second Harvest:
www.secondharvest.org
- Habitat for Humanity:
www.habitat.org
- USA Freedom Corps:
www.usafreedomcorps.gov
- SERVENet:
www.servenet.org
- Network for Good:
www.networkforgood.org
- Humane Society of the United States:
www.hsus.org
- Volunteer.gov/gov: Building America's Communities of Service:
www.volunteer.gov/gov
- United Way:
<http://national.unitedway.org>
- Points of Light Foundation:
www.pointsoflight.org
- Hands On Network:
www.handsonnetwork.org
- National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (NVOAD):
www.nvoad.org
- VolunteerMatch:
www.volunteermatch.org
- America's Promise:
www.katrinaskidsusa.org

Many people including children and families are scattered across the country, seeking to rebuild lives in neighborhoods and communities far away from their homes.

Whereas, this toolkit focuses on those groups traveling to the Gulf Coast region, efforts to help evacuees are under way all across the country.

Remember: You don't have to leave home to help. Contact a local Red Cross or other service organizations for more information on how to support displaced children and families in other geographic areas.

Health and Safety Issues

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) cautions relief workers that shortages of electricity, safe water, and food distribution systems are common in areas affected by the hurricanes.

The CDC website (www.bt.cdc.gov) has important health and safety information that relief workers should consider before traveling to the Gulf Coast. These include the following:

- **What you should know about vaccines and immunizations:** You are not required to get immunizations, but it is recommended that you have up-to-date tetanus, influenza, and Hepatitis A vaccinations.
- **How to protect yourself against illness and injury:** The website provides tips and reminders about keeping food and water safe and preventing carbon monoxide poisoning, animal and insect bites, infections, etc. Local authorities will tell you if the water is safe to drink and to use for cooking.
- **Mental health resources for coping with disasters:** The website suggests general strategies for promoting mental health and resilience based on experiences in prior disasters.

Risk Management and Insurance

Safety is a major concern if you are taking a group to help with hurricane relief. It is important that trip leaders and your institution are aware of liability in the event that injuries or mishaps occur. Make sure to contact risk management experts on your campus or with your organization who can guide you in making decisions about the trip.

It may be necessary to purchase insurance for the members of the group who are traveling to and working in the Gulf Coast region. Insurance agents in your locality may be able to provide coverage for your trip at a reasonable price. You may want to include a share of insurance expenses in the students' costs for the trip.

Remember: Having insurance does not replace caution and common sense. Constantly challenge yourself and others to be safe while traveling to and serving in the disaster area.

Critical Areas of Need Where Students Can Have an Impact

Restoring and rebuilding towns, neighborhoods, and lives following Hurricane Katrina will take many months. Identifying needs in these areas and matching your group's skills with those needs will be essential to the success of your effort.

Here are some service projects to consider as you determine the focus of your group's efforts in the Gulf Coast region:

Restoration: Student groups can be helpful in restoring community centers, libraries, schools, and other public buildings. Under the guidance of restoration experts, for example, student organizations can clean up, paint, or replace ruined furniture and rooms; repair books; and replant gardens. (Suggested skills: the ability to lift and move heavy objects, some ability to use tools)

Distributing supplies: While in the Gulf Coast area, groups can join members of the local community in distributing much-needed donations and supplies to people in hard-hit neighborhoods. (Suggested skills: the ability to lift and move heavy objects, organizational skills)

Tutoring: Many students in the Gulf Coast area lost precious days of learning while schools were closed. Group members can help students make up what they may have lost by working with them on reading, math, and other subjects. Students affected by Hurricane Katrina may also be dealing with fear and loss. Older volunteers can help these children talk about their experiences and express their feelings. (Suggested skills: tutoring or mentoring experience, empathy and listening skills)

Health care: Recent articles point to the negative health effects of Hurricane Katrina caused by damage to clinics and other health resources and the resulting lack of medication, sanitation, and other health supports. Members of student groups can assist with health screening and referring residents to sources of support. (Suggested skills: basic first-aid training, some health care training, listening skills, organizational skills)

Temporary Housing: Evacuees may be living in temporary housing for many months while they wait for permanent housing to be restored or made available. Providing service, comfort, and aid to residents can fill a critical community need. Elderly residents who have endured the loss may need special attention but may be overlooked. (Suggested skills: basic first aid, organizational skills, some counseling training, empathy and listening skills.)

Testing for water quality and other environmental effects: Salinity, toxic chemicals, and waste have affected the environmental quality in urban places and in beachfront and coastal areas. The richly dense plant and animal habitat may have been altered significantly. Testing, recording, and observing the environmental effects can be critical to restoring and creating ecosystems to support plants, wildlife, and coastline. (Suggested skills: basic biology laboratory work, ability to observe and keep clear records and to work in teams, experience using testing equipment)

Pre-trip service: While the service trip is the group's central focus, you may want to include a pre-break service activity. The service can include fundraising or collecting donations that will go to the community you will serve. You may choose to work with evacuees who have moved temporarily to your area from the Gulf Coast region. Whatever the service, the group experience can be valuable in creating a positive group dynamic on which to build your Gulf Coast service project.

Choosing a Project and Sponsoring Organization

Finding a service site for your group's trip may be challenging, depending on the degree to which national relief agencies, their local chapters, and other institutions are organized when you begin your search.

Questions to ask about the organization and the relief work:

- Nature of the proposed project: What tasks will be available?
- What might be completed in a week? How does the group fit into the project?
- What sorts of facilities/living/meal arrangements are available? Will the group be housed together, with community members, camping in a park or facility, primitive camping?
- How many students can be accommodated in the living arrangements? How many can be involved in the project?
- What skills are required and useful?
- What tools and protection will participants need? Who will supply them? (If your institution will need to supply the tools, such as shovels or generators, or protection, such as hard hats, safety glasses, or mold respirators, you will need to factor these into your planning and expenses.)
- Will group members need to be trained before arriving at the site?
- Is there a possibility for cultural and informational exchanges on issues involved at the site?
- Will a supervisor or consultant be available?
- Does the organization have experience working with students or a group program?
- Would community people work alongside the group team?
- What are the potential problems?

You will need to develop criteria for choosing one site over another. Here are some important questions to consider when choosing the site for your project.

- Does the site match your group's goals? For example, if your group is focused on service to children and youth, does the location give your group this opportunity?
- Will the site supply your group's individual needs? How important is location? Are there certain issues around which the service should be organized (environment, social, health care)?
- Does the project fit with the host site's needs? Can your group provide the service that will help the community being served? If your group consists of medical students, for example, will health care be what the community needs at the time of the trip?
- Finally, are conditions at the site compatible with the group's expectations and ability to endure hardships?

SITE INFORMATION CHECKLIST FOR GULF COAST VOLUNTEER GROUP

Use this form to record information about the project and agency or organization for which you propose to volunteer.

Contact date _____ Follow-up _____

Organization name _____ Address _____ Phone _____

Contact name _____ Title _____ Phone _____

Email _____

Agency or organization description:

- Grassroots Religious Federal/state/local government National/regional nonprofit Other

Project description: _____

Project(s) _____

Team size _____ Group or individual _____

- Physical labor Social services Educational Advocacy

Special needs or preparation necessary for group members: _____

Immunizations required _____

Tools or equipment required _____

Accommodations (check one): Group housing Community/family placement Camping Cost _____

Food (check one): Food/meals provided Group provides/ prepares food Cost _____

Projected costs:

Student contribution _____ Transportation _____ Lodging _____ Food _____ Other _____

Ability of agency to handle volunteer group size: (circle one) 1-5 6-1 10-15 16-19 20 or more

- Community living conditions: Massive destruction, minimal services, rebuilding beginning, little community restoration
 Some destruction, services returning, rebuilding underway, community restoration ongoing
 Some destruction, community rebuilding nearing finish, community restoration nearly complete

Resources of agency (financial ability to help with travel, housing, food, meals, supplies):

- Educational opportunities: Contact with local population, schools, colleges, culture
 Educational speakers and resources
 Tours, observation, orientation

Recreational opportunities: Access to hiking, parks, entertainment

Local transportation: Type _____ Reliability _____

Requirements of agency: Agency provides _____ Need coverage by university/college _____

Access to medical facilities: Type _____ Reliability _____

Liability and risk coverage: Agency provides _____ Need coverage by university/college _____

Emergency communications access: Type _____ Reliability _____

Closest commercial airport: _____

Selecting, Training, Preparing, and Providing for Members of Your Group

Many people may be eager to join your trip to serve the communities and people of the Gulf Coast region. However, the challenging conditions your group may encounter in the devastated area and the nature of the projects you will carrying out mean that you should be careful in selecting the members of the group. You may want to institute an application process to help gauge individuals' experience, commitment, and understanding of the project. A good application will inform people about your program and require them to contemplate their motivations for going and the challenges they might face.

Before you can ask questions of your prospective participants, you should supply them with some basic information.

- Brief statement of program philosophy
- List of the site(s) and description of the work and challenges
- List of cost for participants, what costs will cover, obligations to help with fundraising (if any)
- Number of participants in each group
- Requirements: orientation, post-break responsibilities, and other expectations
- Interviews or meetings that will be part of the application process

Some sample questions that may help probe motivations and lead applicants to consider the challenges of the project:

- What good do you hope to accomplish in one week? What qualities and skills do you possess that would help you achieve this goal?
- Why do you want to go to the Gulf Coast region on this service project?
- What has been your best experience in service? Please explain and tell why this experience affected you the way it did.
- You are assigned to work in a neighborhood that is badly damaged, yet appears salvage-

able with the help of your group. Some of the residents, however, seem ungrateful for your help and maybe even hostile to your team's efforts. How would that make you feel? What do you think you should do?

Reviewing the Applications

Before reviewing the applications, you should determine the criteria for selection of members of the team. There are many issues involved in setting selection standards. For example, should cultural, ethnic, or religious background play a role? Should you adjust the numbers so that you get a fairly even male/female ratio? Do people who have the ability to pay the full cost of the trip get first choice? Do you choose only graduate students or juniors and seniors as members or include representatives of all education levels? Do you want the group to represent a certain range of majors?

It may be necessary to conduct interviews to help make the final choices of team members. Be careful to keep the goals of the project and the selection criteria in mind in conducting the interviews and making the final selections.

Determining Skills, Experience, or Training Needed for Volunteers

Host organizations in the Gulf Coast area will have their own procedures for determining how your group's particular skills might apply to their volunteer opportunities. Make sure that you have understood clearly the expected skill levels that are needed for your group's assignments.

Training

If members of your group do not have the right (or best) experience to be effective volunteers for particular assignments in the Gulf Coast region, they may be able to get training in advance of the trip. Many organizations, including the American Red Cross, will provide training before you go. (Contact your local chapter of the American Red

Cross, Salvation Army, or Habitat for Humanity for training opportunities.) You may also look to faculty or other experts who can provide specialized training if it is needed.

Preparing Members for the Service Trip

Once the members of the group are chosen, they should receive preparation for their service. The preparation can include orientation, background reading, group discussions, and other activities that give them information about the trip. You might want to include information about what to expect in terms of travel, accommodations, food, and other arrangements, as well as a realistic picture of the living conditions they will be facing. Relief workers who have returned from the region may be able to give group members a “reality check” and answer questions. The orientation can include team-building activities meant to foster a positive group dynamic and present the philosophy and concepts of service-learning and civic engagement. In other sessions, you may also want to include presentations on grief and loss and instruction and practice in active listening.

Providing for Group Members

Because of the nature of the Gulf Coast service, institutions may need to provide significant support for their groups. These may include the following:

Identification: Badges, nametags, shirts, hats, or other means to identify your group members and let the community know who they are

Tools and safety equipment: Shovels, rakes, mops, crowbars, plastic bags, hammers, trowels, chain saws, water-testing devices, safety glasses, mold respirators, ladders, paint brushes, hard hats, generators

First-aid and health supplies: Rags, bleach, sanitation supplies, bandages, antibacterial soap, over-the-counter anti-diarrhea medication, anti-septic

Meal and food provisions: Cook stoves, propane, charcoal, matches, ice chests, lanterns, canned goods, kitchen implements, water

Supervision by trained staff and faculty: Certified first-aid providers, trained adult disaster volunteers, certified chain-saw operators, experienced tool and equipment supervisors, experienced truck and van drivers, seasoned team leaders.

Adapted with permission from “Organizing an Alternative Spring Break,” Break Away, The Alternative Break Connection, Inc., www.alternativebreaks.org

Making Travel and Lodging Arrangements

Here are some tips for making travel and lodging arrangements for your group:

- If you are volunteering on an American Red Cross relief project, the Red Cross may help pay for transportation, lodging, and food for your trip. Check with your local Red Cross chapter for information.
- If you are traveling in cars or vans, you may be able to get special rates on rentals for the trip. Check with individual vehicle rental agencies and online travel companies. Most car rental agencies require that drivers be over 25; make sure you have drivers who are old enough to take the wheel.
- Many colleges and universities have vans and buses. Check with campus officials to see if you can use the institution's van or bus for your trip.
- Local truck rental agencies may be giving special rates for transporting supplies and relief items to the Gulf Coast region.
- Craigslist, the online resource, continues to have a section relating to Hurricane Katrina (<http://neworleans.craigslist.org>), which has ridesharing to major cities in the Gulf Coast region as well as housing information for when you arrive.
- Your contacts in the Gulf Coast region may be able to provide or suggest lodging. These accommodations may turn out to be in campgrounds, group quarters, shelters, or family homes. Make sure to have lodging plans (and equipment you may need) arranged before you leave.

Things to Bring on Your Gulf Coast Service Trip

You should pack as lightly as possible because of space limitations. Bring only one suitcase or duffel bag and a small carry-on bag or backpack, if necessary. Plan to wear layers of clothing as the weather may vary.

Necessities:

- Good sleeping bag
- Sturdy work shoes/boots
- Good work gloves (leather)
- Socks/underwear/thermal underwear
- Jeans/work pants
- T-shirts/long-sleeved shirts
- Sweater/sweat shirt
- Light jacket
- Rain gear/poncho
- Towel/washcloth
- Soap/toothpaste/shampoo/razor/ etc.
- Eating/cooking utensils
- Prescribed medications
- Plastic “zipper” bags
- Watch
- Credit card, ATM card, cash, driver’s license

Suggested items:

- Sleeping pad
- Hat/bandana
- Cards/games/small musical instruments
- Sunglasses/extra glasses/extra contacts/wetting solution
- Small mirror
- Lip balm/sunblock/heavy duty bug repellent/antibacterial hand soap
- Flashlight/batteries
- Camera and film
- Notebook/pen/pencil
- Immunizations recommended: Tetanus, influenza, and Hepatitis A.

What not to bring: Don’t bring anything you would be devastated to lose—jewelry, keepsakes, electronic equipment, etc.

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Reporting Accomplishments

Service trips are challenging, educational, and potentially intense experiences because they place students and other groups of volunteers in unfamiliar surroundings, in different cultures, and in with people different from themselves. At the same time, volunteer groups are committed to improving the lives of those affected by the hurricane; helping rebuild the communities where they serve; and preserving the culture, history, and environment of the region.

It is useful, then, that students and other groups create a record of their observations and accomplishments—both as individuals and as a team.

Reflection

Individual accomplishments can be chronicled through group reflection and through journals that members keep during the service trip.

Group reflection can be conducted during the evening, at a meal, or at other times during the day. It does not have to be formal, but it should be held in a place where the group can sit together so that all group members can see each other. There are many approaches, but reflection usually begins with check-in and reports from group members on thoughts or ideas they had during their service or in personal, educational, or cultural interactions.

A good way to structure the reflection is to concentrate on “the what”—what happened that day; the “so what”—the difference the experience made to individual; and the “now what”—the lessons learned from the experience that can be reapplied to other situations and the larger picture.

Reflections also can be one-on-one discussions with the trip leader, faculty, or staff.

Journals or written diaries can help volunteers record daily impressions, interactions, and accomplishments. Later, they can help individuals process the experience, and they can become the basis of further writing, class papers, or discussions spurred by the service.

Data

It’s also important to gather information on the group’s accomplishments, such as the following:

Data about the area:

- Population before and after Katrina
- Demographic information
- Size of the town
- Economic base
- Estimated hurricane damage to the area
- Overseeing and cooperating organizations
- Other historic or cultural information

Statistical information:

- Number of hours of service
- Types of service
- Number of people directly benefiting
- Number of meals served
- Number of houses and buildings painted, etc.

Records of the group’s service:

- Photographs, video
- News accounts
- Interviews
- Testimonials

Other useful information includes contact information for individuals who have led, supervised, or been involved in the project (for follow-up, connecting other groups from your institution, thank-you letters).

When you return home, you can use this information in several ways:

- Publicize your group’s service on campus and in the community
- Celebrate your group’s work and encourage others to join a future service trip

- Reach out to local foundations, corporations, and organizations to support continued involvement
- Publish a record of your group's service, with reflections, pictures, and testimonials

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