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State Launches Volunteer Initiative

Will Promote Volunteerism During Natural Disasters and Emergencies

Following record-breaking rainfall and flooding this summer, the state Citizen Corps Council and Wisconsin Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD) have launched an initiative to encourage and prepare Wisconsin citizens to volunteer during emergencies and disasters. The partnership will also work with local governments to better use and incorporate volunteers in disaster response and recovery plans.

“As the response to recent floods showed, in Wisconsin, when people are in need, our citizens come to their aid,” said Governor Jim Doyle. “This initiative will help citizens safely and efficiently join our professional first responders in responding to emergencies, saving lives and protecting communities from disaster.”

The Wisconsin Emergency Volunteer – WeVolunteer – Initiative brings together government emergency response agencies, non-profit disaster service groups and private citizens to increase the number of citizen volunteers statewide and to better integrate them in emergency situations.

Through the new initiative, Wisconsin citizens can more easily find emergency volunteer opportunities. Over 35 different non-profit disaster service organizations with more than 200 local chapters are listed on www.WeVolunteer.wi.gov. Additionally, a statewide volunteer registry currently under development will allow citizens to enroll themselves in a volunteer database, giving emergency responders the ability to search for volunteers with particular skills – medical training or permits to use heavy machinery, for example – and call on them when the need arises.

The initiative will also focus on better incorporating volunteers in emergency response plans. Following a disaster, hundreds and thousands of volunteers spontaneously arrive on scene to offer assistance. Without advanced planning, this critical volunteer resource can be underutilized. Training courses on volunteer management will prepare local officials for the influx of volunteers following a disaster.

Information on the liability a community assumes when using volunteers during a disaster – often cited as a barrier to incorporating volunteers in response plans – is available on the WeVolunteer website. Additionally, when requests for volunteers are made, which were

frequent during the June flooding, messages will be sent to WeVolunteer's network of public and non-profit organizations to organize and dispatch volunteer teams.

The initiative is led by the state Citizen Corps Council, chaired by former Adjutant General Al Wilkening, and the state Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD) council, which includes the American Red Cross, Salvation Army and a number of faith-based disaster relief organizations.

"Volunteers are an excellent resource to communities who are recovering from a recent disaster," said Terri Leece, Disaster Services Director for the Salvation Army and co-chair of the new initiative. "The proper training of volunteers and integration in emergency response plans is essential to ensure the volunteers who arrive on the scene of a disaster can be utilized effectively and safely. This initiative will help to accomplish this purpose."

The Wisconsin Office of Justice Assistance provides staff support for the state Citizen Corps Council and is supporting the new initiative. More information on the WeVolunteer Initiative can be found at www.WeVolunteer.wi.gov.