

US Senate Special Committee on Aging Hearing
November 18, 2021
Opening Statement by Randy Creamer of Columbia, South Carolina

Good morning, Chairman Casey, Ranking Member Scott, and members of the Committee. My name is Randy Creamer, a native and resident of South Carolina. For over 15 years I served as a local church pastor and volunteer assisting those affected by natural and man-made disasters. For almost 20 years I have worked professionally in disaster relief. Bringing help, healing and hope to individuals, families, and communities has been the most rewarding work of my life. Thank you for the opportunity to share a brief testimony.

National VOAD (Volunteer Organizations Active in Disaster) promotes Cooperation, Communication, Coordination, and Collaboration and fosters more effective delivery of services to communities affected by disaster. Founded over 50 years ago, National VOAD is a coalition of 70+ of the nation's most reputable national organizations (faith-based, community-based, and other non-profit organizations) and 56 State or Territory VOADs.

South Carolina VOAD is committed to the 4 C's with a strong focus on communication amongst members engaged in a specific response. We strive to enable each VOAD member to exercise its own strengths in complete freedom – our VOAD is NOT operational in the sense of telling an organization what they can or cannot do, or where they can or cannot serve – we strive to enhance effectiveness in assisting those who are hurting.

Disaster events do not require every VOAD member to respond simultaneously. Many volunteer organizations are involved in the initial response only; others may not be involved for weeks or even months. Each organization brings its strengths to the table, and few, if any, are engaged from the first hours to the complete recovery which may be several years later.

The South Carolina Baptist Convention became involved in disaster relief in 1990 following the ravages of Hurricane Hugo. Today we have 2,500 volunteers who have attended training, completed background checks as a part of our credentialing process, and prepared to assist others affected by disasters in SC, across the US, and on occasion internationally. We are part of the larger Southern Baptist Disaster Relief network that encompasses all 50 states. This year, South Carolina Baptist Convention sent 19 teams to Louisiana and Pennsylvania in response to Hurricane Ida.

Our primary task in South Carolina is to provide immediate assistance after various wind events, such as tornadoes, hurricanes, and thunderstorms, or flood events resulting from tropical systems or other heavy rain events. Our volunteers typically sleep in church buildings on cots or blow-up mattresses and bring mobile shower and laundry trailers, volunteer cooking teams, and other logistical support for such operations.

Another major task is to partner with The Salvation Army and the American Red Cross when mass feeding is required to support those evacuated from their homes or unable to prepare meals for themselves. We have five mobile kitchens with a total capacity of approximately 55,000 meals per day.

Aside from myself and two co-workers, **All** South Carolina Baptist service is provided by volunteers, most of whom are retired. **All** equipment – trailers loaded with chainsaws, power washers, generators,

convection ovens, tilt skillets, sanitation equipment, tractors, skid steers, etc. – is owned by local Baptist associations or churches, and prepared and maintained by volunteers with the support of an occasional local business. Our volunteers are motivated by their personal faith in Jesus Christ and desire to love God and love others – they are our most valuable resource.

In South Carolina the American Red Cross and The Salvation Army lead the way in providing mass care. United Methodist congregations provide much the same service as Baptists in initial debris removal and flood recovery. Presbyterian Disaster Relief and Adventist Community Services Disaster Response are other major partners in SC that lead the way into long-term recovery. We are blessed with numerous other partners.

We have learned a lot of lessons over the years:

- Disaster impacts increase substantially on structures/houses that have pre-existing deferred maintenance issues.
- Don't try to do everything; find your niche and do it well.
- We can't help everyone – we must prioritize and identify the most vulnerable/needy cases. Our priority is on those who are unable to help themselves, who lack financial resources, or have no one else to assist them. For example – widows, senior adults, grandparents raising grandchildren, single parents, uninsured/underinsured; we also count it a privilege to assist first responders who usually delay their family and property needs to serve their community.
- Allow volunteers to respond in additional spontaneous ways – like replacing a refrigerator and spoiled food for an elderly woman where we were simply removing trees from her roof; assisting an African-American congregation with not just the removal of flooded contents but long-term repairs; seeing displaced residents living in tents in Mexico Beach, FL, and providing everything from food to toilet paper; or realizing an older man you'd waved at as you passed his home for three days had died suddenly and responding by preparing meals for his grieving family for three days around his funeral.

In closing, I am pleased to say that for 54 years Southern Baptist Disaster Relief has depended on retirees for most of our volunteers – as one generation 'ages out' the next steps up. In recent years a growing number of college students are volunteering – it is an energetic scene to see the generational gap bridged. We see a similar trend in other South Carolina VOAD members, and we look forward to serving our neighbors in disaster relief for many years to come.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our story. I look forward to your questions.