
After the Storm: Reflections on Volunteering at Shelters after Hurricane Harvey

Shu Zhou, LMSW

Graduate College of Social Work, University of Houston

Claire Crawford, LMSW

University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston School of Public Health, Department of Health Promotion and Behavioral Sciences

Correspondence should be addressed to Shu Zhou, University of Houston, Graduate College of Social Work, 3511 Cullen Blvd, Room 110HA, Houston, TX 77204. Email: szhou6@uh.edu

Introduction

As climate change increasingly devastates all areas of the globe through natural disasters, vulnerable populations are disproportionately affected. People with unstable housing, little income, and poor health prior to a major disaster will have access to even fewer resources after their homes, jobs, and environments have been destroyed. Natural disasters such as Hurricanes Harvey in Houston, Irma in Florida, Maria in Puerto Rico, fires along the West Coast of the United States, monsoons in India, and earthquakes in Mexico have ended and disrupted thousands of lives in 2017 alone. The effects of Hurricane Harvey drew social workers from the city of Houston, Texas, to volunteer in droves, whether at shelters, churches, homes, schools, food banks, or other places in need. It was inspiring to watch as social workers from macro and clinical settings, from administration and medicine, from private practice and schools appeared across the city to give their time.

Why did they do it? To help others, of course, but what is at the heart of the social work profession that makes us both so driven to help in a time of need and so uniquely qualified to serve others? And, more importantly, what can we do better next time to ensure that we fully utilize the abundance of skills and time social workers are willing to give after natural disasters? Collectively, the two authors with LMSW spent approximately four days serving as social work volunteers at a large public shelter following Hurricane

Harvey. Based on the authors' own experiences and their conversations with other social work volunteers, this article reflects the authors' perspectives on the social work response to Hurricane Harvey and future disaster relief efforts.

Social Work Response

Motivation to Volunteer

The second author spoke with ten social workers about their experiences volunteering at shelters during Hurricane Harvey. Most of the social workers, including the author herself, cited some source of inner drive that goes by many names. Some said they felt a calling, others cited their service-oriented personality, and many simply stated that they couldn't imagine *not* doing something after seeing their fellow Houstonians in need. Many social workers, including those in higher education administration, research, teaching, or many facets of macro social work do not provide direct client interventions on a regular basis. These social workers felt it was particularly important to volunteer and spend time in the field with those directly affected since they would not encounter the clients in their jobs. Social workers were devastated from watching families struggle to find their most basic needs on local news channels and felt they must contribute to the healing of their city. . Many of the reasons social workers cited for volunteering reflected the reasons they entered the field of social work.

Calls to Action

Whatever motivated social workers to volunteer worked. Major public shelters were established around the city, including the George R. Brown Convention Center (GRB) in downtown Houston, which housed more than 10,000 people, and NRG Park near Reliant Stadium in Houston's medical center, which housed more than 2,000 people (Collier, Satija, & Formby, 2017). Local officials issued urgent requests for killed volunteers at these shelters. Twitter and Facebook posts from Mayor Sylvester Turner, Director of Housing and Community Development Tom McCasland, and the City of Houston elicited help from social workers and other health professionals. For example, the City of Houston (2017) Twitter account tweeted the following in the early days of the hurricane on August 28th: "GEORGE R. BROWN NEEDS LICENSED MEDICAL PROFESSIONALS, RNS & SOCIAL WORKERS. If you can safely get there, go. Find Tom McCasland head of ops." The posts were widely shared and circulated by influential members of the Houston social work community, including the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work (GCSW) dean, Alan Dettlaff. Though some social workers heard about opportunities to volunteer through TV or radio news channels, many cited at least one social media platform as their source of volunteer information. The social media posts often included links to sign up for volunteer shifts online, though the efficiency of these links varied widely. Social workers from around the city responded with zeal to these calls for social work support at shelters. They continued to sign up and show up at the shelters in the weeks after Harvey, sometimes

missing work or skipping sleep to make themselves present for the shelter residents. Often, so many social workers arrived at a shelter that some had to be turned away.

Social Work Skills

Why were social workers so heavily recruited to help in the shelters, and what makes us so uniquely qualified to provide our skills during disaster relief efforts? Perhaps the answer lies in the core values from National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics with which all social workers become familiar during graduate school: social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence. Many of the residents at large shelters were people of color from low socioeconomic households who were in their most vulnerable state; they were driven out of their homes by the floods, forced to leave behind the places and things they had worked so hard to obtain, traumatized by the loss of life as they had known it only days before. Social workers worked toward social justice by ensuring that residents of the shelters (or “guests,” as they were called at NRG) were directed to the resources they needed, including food, shelter, and supplies for themselves and their children. We promoted residents’ dignity through honoring their space; the temporary cots residents were issued were likely meager compared to many residents’ usual dwellings, but the space was the only area of the shelter that was theirs for the time. We used our integrity and leadership to make changes when and where we could that would benefit the residents. We recognized and respected that many guests may display signs of trauma, mental illness, and anger, and we responded to those symptoms with core social work competencies learned recently or many years ago in our social work training.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we focused on the importance of relationships. In such an abbreviated time, with limited privacy or resources, we tried our best to make others feel valued and heard. We worked to reunite parents with children, friends with friends, and people with their beloved pets. A last-minute policy change in the early days of the storm allowed pets to be housed indoors at shelters as a response to complaints during Hurricane Katrina in 2005 from pet owners who were devastated by separation from their pets who were not allowed into the shelters with them (Brulliard, 2017). We formed our own relationships with residents, however fleeting they might have been. We listened. We heard. We validated. Perhaps to other professions, listening seems trivial. However, after all our social work education, training, and years of practice, we know that listening with empathy is an art and a gift. It was, to many residents, an incredibly important gift during a time when they did not need advice or judgment, just an ear to hear what they had endured. As a profession, we understand that there is a time and a place for empathic listening just as there is for advice, and we are trained to know the difference. In the shelters, we focused on strengths and empowered residents to draw upon their deepest wells of strength during a time when life could seem hopeless. The importance of fostering such relationships through the simple act of listening after such a traumatic event cannot be overstated.

Social workers clearly have a vast pool of skills and tools to offer during a natural disaster, and yet some of their efforts were not fully utilized when they arrived at shelters. As noted previously, some social workers were turned away because too many volunteers had already come. Others conducted unskilled, but still useful, tasks such as welcoming people to the shelters or organizing donations. Though these tasks could have been performed by other volunteers, some social work skills such as de-escalation and problem solving proved useful. However, larger missed opportunities occurred when social workers were directed to a designated area for mental health professionals and waited in anticipation for hours without speaking to a single resident. A skilled professional had taken time from her day, made the effort to drive to a shelter, park, and find the mental health area, and her skills were not utilized. For some social workers, these barriers deterred them from attempting to volunteer again. These barriers resulted in volunteers who felt disappointed, demoralized, and useless in a time of need and residents who lost the benefit of a valuable source of support. How can we prevent this from happening in the future such that we are able to adequately use the services offered by volunteer social workers?

Recommendations for Practice

Based on their own experiences, reflections, and conversations with other social workers, the authors have summarized some suggestions for better utilizing social workers' skills in disaster relief volunteer roles.

First, shelter staff should identify professionals' background and specialized skills. When the authors were signing up to volunteer at the NRG shelter, the host organization, Baker Ripley, collected this important information on volunteer applications. In addition to questions regarding current employment, the Baker Ripley online application also asked, "What passions or skills would you like to share?" A multiple-choice list provided options such as teaching and mentoring, healthcare and nutrition, and others. When the authors arrived the NRG shelter on the service day, they had another chance to report their skills to the staff at the check-in table. Staff appeared to document the first author's additional credentials and skills, which included holding a Licensed Master Social Worker (LMSW) and fluency in Chinese Mandarin. All of this information provided the social service agency with a general sense of volunteers' competency and expertise.

However, after the first author entered the NRG shelter, the staff did not appear to assign roles based upon volunteers' skills. The first author waited in the lobby area for hours with many other volunteers who likely lacked specialized mental health care skills, as staff announced various basic needs and the number of volunteers required to accomplish that need. For example, a flood of volunteers who had been waiting for hours rushed forward to be sent to set up cots in the sleeping area, but many had to return to their seats as the staff member only needed a group of five for cot setup. After waiting for

an hour in the lobby for a volunteer assignment, the first author finally assigned to the area where female residents were assigned to sleep in hopes of finding a place where she could be useful.

Therefore, the second suggestion is to assign tasks within the shelter based on volunteers' skills and strengths. Since the volunteer application and the check-in process were both conducted online, the information should be accessible to the volunteer coordinator onsite. Rather than assigning volunteers to tasks based on how long they have been waiting to serve, they should be grouped into skillsets and assigned to tasks where they can be of the most benefit to the organization or the residents. For example, when staff need someone to walk around in the single female area to check in with residents who might be struggling emotionally, they can search in their database for social workers and counselors, who are more likely good at building rapport and actively listening, particularly in such a short period of time.

Third, some areas could use more volunteers to serve as floaters, greeters, and mediators. For example, the first author ultimately decided to volunteer in the section of the shelter designated for handing out donations to residents, and the area would have benefitted from many more volunteers. Even in times when few residents were picking up items, there were many tasks for volunteers to complete. As floaters, they could help to reorganize the diapers and clothes by sizes, rearrange the messy piles of shoes, or just walking around to get familiar with the area as preparation for the next round of picking up and packing. When the pickup line grows and results in longer wait times, volunteers could act as "greeters" and check in with residents as they wait. During these check-ins, the volunteers could collect residents' donation requests, deliver the requests to the "runner" who retrieves items, and explain which information the residents will need to present at the donations check-in. Taking the time to explain the process may make residents feel more comfortable and at ease as they become familiar with the various processes of the shelter. The greeters' conversations with the waiting residents can also help to ease their negative emotions such as anxiety and anger resulting from long time waiting and other general complications.

Though the shelter tries to provide as many supplies, resources, and services to residents as possible, it will inevitably fall short of expectations and cause frustration among residents. For example, runners might be unable to provide a stroller to a resident in need because all strollers have been claimed by other residents, or check-in volunteers accidentally fail to write down all the items residents requested. A professional with mediation and de-escalation skills may provide excellent support as they help residents problem solve in such circumstances. Having a professional as a third person to provide mediation would help less skilled runners and busy check-in volunteers to return to their stations and continue distributing items, while the conflicts can be solved by someone else. Unfortunately, in the first authors' experience, the donation center experienced a high volume of residents in the pick-up line with too few skilled and unskilled staff to

adequately control the area, while many other volunteers were still waiting in the lobby for their assignments. When accidents occurred, the involved volunteers including the first author had to stop working to comfort unsatisfied residents, causing the wait and dissatisfaction to grow exponentially. This example demonstrates that even shelter areas that are not specifically designated to mental health or resources may benefit greatly from the presence of professionals who can lend their skills to maintain a peaceful environment for residents and volunteers alike.

Conclusions

The devastating aftermath of Hurricane Harvey in Houston, TX, inspired many social workers, including the two authors, to contribute their time and skills through volunteering at large local shelters. Social workers identified opportunities to volunteer primarily through social media posts that informed them when and where their skills were needed. Social work volunteers contributed many valuable skills at the shelters, including empathy, listening, mediation, de-escalation, and problem solving. The experience was often rewarding, fulfilling, and frustrating due to changeable organizational factors. As climate change becomes a growing concern, the need for social workers to mobilize in future disaster situations is imminent. To best serve the people who will need us most, we need to ensure that we are prepared to fully utilize the skills social workers and other professionals can offer. Shelter staff should identify the professionals' specialized skills and interests, create and assign tasks that are relevant to those interests, and use specialized volunteers in complementary roles with general volunteers to maximize effectiveness. These recommendations will help shelters use social workers' unique skillset, and help social work volunteers feel more valued, and encourage volunteers to return to the shelter for additional shifts.

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Shu Zhou, LMSW, is a doctoral teaching assistant and student ambassador at the Graduate College of Social Work, University of Houston. She has received the Future Faculty Fellowship, Graduate Tuition Fellowship, and the Presidential Scholarship. Ms. Zhou received her Bachelor of Law in Social Work from Central China Normal University and her MSW with Mediation Certificate from Colorado State University. She is a Licensed Master Social Worker in the State of Texas and has received intensive training in child welfare and case management from Arizona Department of Economic Security and Arizona State University. As an international student from Mainland China, Ms. Zhou has been contributing her experience to practice, research and teaching in both China and the U.S. She is a columnist for five Chinese social work magazines and websites, and has published 22 articles in *China Social Work*, a top social work magazine in China. Currently, she serves as a Teaching Assistant for the MSW Foundation program. Ms. Zhou's research interests are related to child welfare, social work education and supervision.

Claire Crawford, LMSW, is a medical social worker at Texas Children's Hospital and a second-year PhD student in the Department of Health Promotion and Behavioral Science at the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston School of Public Health in Houston, TX. She received her Master of Social Work degree at the University of Houston Graduate College Of Social Work in 2016 with a specialization in Social Support for Children with Physical Differences. Claire is dedicated to promoting the intersection of social work and public health to facilitate higher quality of life among vulnerable populations. Her research and practice interests include social support in medical settings and maternal child health.

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Perspectives on Social Work Graduate College of Social Work University of Houston
Houston, TX 77204-4492 swjourna@central.uh.edu