

## No More Homeless Pets Forum

**Date: June 25-29, 2007**

**Topic: Rapid Response Volunteers – No More Homeless Pets**

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It's volunteers to the rescue when 50+ animals need care at once! Tiffani Hill, Best Friends' rapid response volunteer manager, makes sense out of natural disasters or other emergencies that can stretch animal rescue organizations to the limit.

### **Introduction from Tiffani Hill**

As the 2007 hurricane season approached, disaster response groups assessed their capacity and prepped their supplies, gearing up for what hopefully will be a quiet season. However, rains in Texas and a tornado in Kansas have kept some local and national groups busy. Are you building a formal disaster volunteer program? Do you have the capacity to respond with volunteers and can you cover the financial and legal responsibilities?

This year's National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disasters (NVOAD) conference offered a variety of workshops for both animal and human rescue groups. There was much discussion about "affiliated" versus "unaffiliated" volunteers. "Affiliated" means that the volunteer is already signed up and trained to respond with your organization. "Unaffiliated" refers to people who show up at a disaster willing to help but not assigned to a particular group.

The movement is toward affiliating volunteers and directing last-minute volunteers to a regional volunteer center for screening and orientation. This helps organizations focus on their plan of action with their known supplies and staffing. Referring "unaffiliated" volunteers to a center will also help cut down on the number of "looky-loos" – people who say they are volunteering but are actually sightseeing. FEMA has set some new standards to encourage affiliation, including requiring specific independent study courses for volunteers to complete pre-deployment to a federally declared disaster zone. You can review how Best Friends incorporated those courses into our volunteer pre-requisites by visiting our online community: [network.bestfriends.org/rapidresponse](http://network.bestfriends.org/rapidresponse).

For many of us, our "response" programs handle cries for help from other large-scale animal rescue situations in addition to natural disasters. At Best Friends, we've learned through experience that all high-stress deployments require careful project planning and volunteer management. We've divided the country into regions and are establishing a network of affiliated volunteers, some in leadership roles such as regional coordinator. Regional coordinators will build relationships with their FEMA VALs (voluntary agency liaisons) and local VOADs to enhance the lines of communication between our group and those who may find themselves in need of assistance. And, we've just finished our three-day Field Operations Training at our sanctuary in Utah. Thank you for inviting me to share what we've learned with you.

## Bio for Tiffani Hill

Tiffani Hill, CVA, is a certified volunteer administrator currently on staff with Best Friends as the volunteer manager. She has worked in both animal welfare and human social services. With nine years of experience managing volunteer programs, she enjoys volunteering as a trainer and coach in a variety of nonprofit areas. She has a particular interest in risk management issues surrounding the use of nonpaid staff. She is also an active advocate for recognizing the profession of volunteer administration.

Tiffani currently volunteers with the Nonprofit Support Center of Santa Barbara, and as a transport and foster volunteer with Southland Collie Rescue. She lives in Ventura, California, with her veterinarian husband, an agility dog, her two cats and a very loud parrot.

**Note from moderator:** Below is a conglomeration of quick questions from current and potential Best Friends rapid response volunteers, and responses from Tiffani Hill. Questions from outside groups wanting to shore up their own disaster response volunteer programs are welcome!

## Grab bag of rapid response volunteer questions and answers!

### Questions

- To respond with Best Friends, do you need to have their volunteer training or will all the other workshops, FEMA courses, Red Cross courses, etc., suffice?
- Is it true that if there is ever an incident that involves FEMA and Best Friends, any responder with Best Friends will need to be FEMA-certified and have the certificates on hand during the incident?
- I am planning on taking the online FEMA courses. Please let me know when the next training session is. I would absolutely love to become a rapid response volunteer and tried to go to the FEMA site to look into their courses that are required by the rapid response program, but I couldn't figure out exactly which courses were which, if I had to pay for them, or what! Any help would be wonderful. Also, do you know what your training schedule will be like at the sanctuary for this?

**Response from Tiffani Hill:** At this time, we are accepting field training from other organizations, Red Cross courses, and related workshops along with FEMA certificates and Best Friends training. Any training obtained through Best Friends, such as dog handling and T-Touch, is recorded on your volunteer record if you let us know you completed it.

FEMA requirements: FEMA is setting stricter rules about who can and cannot volunteer at a federally declared disaster situation. This includes not allowing people in who have not completed the basic FEMA certificates. This helps to control the number of unaffiliated volunteers and "looky-loos" who show up on site. To make sure that our volunteers can get into any disaster zone, we are requiring ALL of our volunteers to have at least our basic level courses completed before being eligible to deploy. Your qualifications will be listed on your official Best Friends name badge, so you will not need

to carry your certificates with you. Detailed information about our prerequisite levels is on the Rapid Response Community ([network.bestfriends.org/rapidresponse](http://network.bestfriends.org/rapidresponse)).

Tip for taking FEMA courses: Print off the test questions first so that you can refer to them during your study J.

Best Friends' schedule of training: Once we have a schedule of Best Friends Field Operations Training available, we will post it on the Rapid Response Community. Joining that community is the easiest way to get updated information about all of our rapid response activities. To join, please login to the Best Friends Network (it's free and secure) at [network.bestfriends.org/rapidresponse](http://network.bestfriends.org/rapidresponse) and click on "Join this community." You'll have the chance to be listed on the Rapid Response Members page, receive Network Mail updates from the community manager, and be notified via the Alerts feature of new content (news, forum discussions, etc.) on the Rapid Response Community.

## Who is qualified to help in an emergency?

**Questions from Tooky and Lisa:** Hi, Tiffani! I agree that the rapid response training was an exceptional experience!! I am truly hoping that this training opportunity will be made available again, soon, for the hundreds of people out there who want to be qualified to help in the next disaster that affects our animal friends! Some folks I recently volunteered with are already highly skilled in animal rescue, handling, and care and would be invaluable resources in an emergency. Is there a method being considered for qualifying these types of people, who already have the skills, but just need to get FEMA certification and get a Q Card (name badge)? Also, it was briefly discussed at the training that there is a possibility of a list being comprised of people interested in staying in touch with each other, personally, or for resources.

**Response from Tiffani Hill:** Regarding skilled volunteers affiliating with Best Friends: Best Friends welcomes skilled and experienced volunteers into our rapid response program. We are open to accepting training and certification from other avenues. In fact, we welcome these volunteers! However, the FEMA certificates are a must in addition to any other training.

All new volunteers must complete a volunteer application, sign our volunteer agreement, have two references checked, and provide documentation of their current qualifications. If they are accepted into our program, they will receive a name badge.

Shelley Thayer has taken on the responsibility of signing on new volunteers. She can be reached via [responsevols@bestfriends.org](mailto:responsevols@bestfriends.org).

Regarding the attendee list: An attendee list will be made available soon. These lists will be distributed via e-mail to all attendees.

## Steps to a fully operational response team

**Question from Travis:** What steps does an organization need to take in order to have a fully operational incident response team? What are the necessary components to being "ready"?

**Response from Tiffani Hill:** The saying "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" applies to taking any program from concept to implementation. Two resources that I have found particularly helpful have been the FEMA Independent Study Course IS244 "Developing and Managing Volunteers" and the booklet "Managing Spontaneous Volunteers in Times of Disaster: The Synergy of Structure and Good Intentions" ([www.nvoad.org/ManagingSpontaneousVol.pdf](http://www.nvoad.org/ManagingSpontaneousVol.pdf)).

Regarding what steps an organization should take, here's a series of questions that you should ask yourself, your board, or your committee:

- Review your mission statement: Does having an incident response program fit with our mission? If so, how?
- Have we thoroughly assessed our capacity to respond? Can we afford this?
- Can we spare staff and volunteers? Do we have space to take in additional animals? Or will we just assist with personnel and donations?
- What types of situations are we able to respond to?
- What geographical area can we comfortably cover?
- Do we have a designated staff person, a small team of staff, or a volunteer committee to oversee the program? It's highly recommended that you have a paid staff person as your chief decision-maker on a program like this.
- Will you need to do additional fundraising and/or seek sponsorships? How will a response impact your budget?
- Will you need to ramp up your volunteer program – through additional recruiting, screening, orientations and trainings? Do you have the resources to manage response volunteers? Are you implementing sound volunteer practices in your current programs? I recommend you do the readiness assessment called "Elements of a Volunteer Program" (from "A Guide to Investing in Your Volunteer Resources Management: Improve Your Philanthropic Portfolio" by the UPS Foundation in collaboration with the Points of Light Foundation"). A copy can be found in the Resources section of the Volunteer Resources Managers community ([network.bestfriends.org/volunteermanagers](http://network.bestfriends.org/volunteermanagers)).
- After researching best practices in disaster response, have you set clear criteria that both staff and volunteers must meet before being considered for deployment?
- Have you considered joining another organization, such as NVOAD? You should definitely have a relationship with your local VOAD. (See [www.nvoad.org](http://www.nvoad.org), IAEM: [www.iaem.org](http://www.iaem.org), or DERA: [www.disasters.org](http://www.disasters.org).)
- Do you have a place to store all of your response supplies and donations? Do you have a donation management process in place?

- Do you need transport vehicles? Can you do annual DMV checks on all of your drivers?
- Do you have sufficient liability insurance? Do you need volunteer coverage or do you have a policy stating that volunteers must use their own insurance?
- Can you create a structure for the program, including a comprehensive manual and organizational chart?
- Have you considered all of the risks? Remember, plan for the worst and hope for the best.

An incident response program is no small undertaking. A group can quickly find themselves over-committed if they're not careful. Do your homework if you're considering being available to respond.

Questions specifically relating to volunteering with Best Friends' rapid response or attending Best Friends-sponsored trainings should be e-mailed to [responsevols@bestfriends.org](mailto:responsevols@bestfriends.org).

## Helping from home

**Question from Sheryl:** The RR training was terrific. It was my first visit to the sanctuary and the experience was more exhilarating than I had anticipated. I had asked a question which there wasn't a specific answer to, as all of this is an evolving process...

In addition to the training and on-site information people are asking about, I'm interested in learning more about coordinator positions that could be staffed off-site from the disaster scene.

After Katrina, I volunteered with Best Friends at Celebration Station near New Orleans, which was life-changing and so rewarding for me. The chance to help was therapeutic in ways I couldn't have imagined and I made a dear friend.

I hope to attend a Best Friends Disaster Response Training and, if needed, deploy again. But if I'm not available to travel on-site, I'd like to be able to help from home.

**Response from Tiffani Hill:** You are doing an amazing job as our New England network team leader! And, thank you for your assistance in writing the disaster psychology section of the Rapid Response Volunteer Manual. We couldn't do anything at Best Friends without volunteers stepping up into leadership roles like our new state and regional coordinator positions.

Basically, we're structuring our rapid response leadership team to include both paid staff and volunteers. Volunteers can apply for the position of regional coordinator if they are interested and available to help with pre-deployment volunteer screening and training, scheduling and coordinating transport during a deployment, and following up with volunteers after they return home (providing care for the volunteers themselves). Regions consist of several states: the list is on the Rapid Response Community. As we build out this new program, we will be placing state coordinators to help with individual states.

The state coordinators and the regional coordinators will work as a team on all of the above-mentioned tasks. Between major deployments, we are encouraging our coordinators to network with their FEMA VAL (voluntary agency liaison) and VOAD, if one exists.

What qualifies someone to apply as a regional or state coordinator? The more disaster-related training, from any source, the better. Previous positive experience with a Best Friends deployment. And/or previous positive deployment with another disaster response program.

For more information about these positions or our non-leadership response positions, please e-mail Shelley at [responsevols@bestfriends.org](mailto:responsevols@bestfriends.org).

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