

America Needs a Disaster Corps

Mutual aid keeps communities afloat in the moments after disasters strike. Why not turn it into a jobs program?

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On the afternoon before Hurricane Helene [made landfall](#) in Florida, Veronica Robleto was coordinating text messages to the 2,500 or so people on her organization's mailing list, telling them to flee. Robleto is the director of the Rural Women's Health Project, a small nonprofit that primarily serves north-central Florida's Spanish-speaking immigrant community, but she and her colleagues found themselves becoming emergency communicators. Some of the messages, which the group also posted to Facebook, were simply Spanish versions of mandatory evacuation orders—some Florida counties don't translate these themselves. Many of the people receiving the texts lived in mobile

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homes, which are particularly unsafe places to be during a hurricane. And not all of those people knew they needed to go.

Now that the hurricane has struck, RWHP's team has started handing out food, hygiene supplies, and mold-mitigation kits. It will organize community health workers to go door-to-door, doing welfare checks. The group also keeps in touch with about a dozen people it calls comunicadores, who are particularly well connected in their communities and are each in contact via WhatsApp with 20 to 100 people. This is grassroots organizing in the most basic sense. And for many people in this population—especially those who might be undocumented (including many of the state's [farmworkers and those hired](#) to clean up after hurricanes) and who may fear going to government-run shelters—it's all they have.

The RWHP is one of a handful of nonprofits in Florida and beyond filling gaps in government disaster relief, with systems to check on people, distribute food, and help navigate FEMA applications. Given that the number of billion-dollar-plus disasters are on the rise, the U.S. is going to confront these same problems over and over again. And instead of continuing to fail in the same ways, the country could start to rethink its relationship to disaster resilience and more directly shore up the work being done through nonprofits such as RWHP, by giving them funding commensurate with their role in reducing harm.

That is, it could create a national disaster corps, of groups already providing community support and of workers trained to serve the more and more constant needs of disaster preparedness and recovery. In a moment like this, when much of the Southeast is surveying the damage from the storm, and western North Carolina has been all but cut off from the rest of the country, creating a more official network of neighbors helping neighbors could better equip communities to make it through.

In her 2009 book, *A Paradise Built in Hell*, the author Rebecca Solnit describes the surge of mutual aid that appears after disasters—neighbors tend to help one another, forming decentralized groups to feed people, check on the vulnerable, and clean up the mess, in many cases long before any government support comes in. And the work feels good: People report feeling fulfilled by making a difference in an otherwise painful situation. I saw that in many of my friends when the pandemic hit New York City and they joined brigades distributing groceries door-to-door during lockdown. In most cases,

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mutual aid's agility is built on deep knowledge; the chain of care can be activated quickly, but it's based on long-term connections. RWHP has established its network of comunicadores by working in the community for more than 30 years. Help has been sent to North Carolina from as far away as [California](#), but in the first hours and even days of a disaster, before outside assistance arrives, the organizations that have always supported a community are best positioned to coordinate survival and initial steps toward recovery.

"There've been a lot of experiments after natural disasters and through COVID around different mutual-aid processes," Andrea Cristina Mercado, the executive director of the progressive organizing group Florida Rising, told me. "What would it look like for the federal government to invest in them and scale them?"

Many states have already more formally tapped into that kind of community care to help residents with chronic medical needs. People caring for their elderly or disabled kin on Medicaid can get [paid through their state government](#) for their work as de facto home-health aids. For disasters, identifying the organizations or individuals best able to help would have to happen ahead of any event, but groups such as RWHP—set up to quickly find out what communities need and quickly respond—would be natural fits. Look at the institutions that have been [doubling as emergency shelters](#) in western North Carolina: churches, high schools, elementary schools, an agricultural center, an athletics center, and a volunteer fire department. These are organizations already at the center of local social networks; they're emergency shelters for a reason. If more of these types of organizations were recognized as disaster responders, perhaps they could more easily access federal resources and direct them according to the flexible needs of the situation. For instance, during the pandemic, a nonprofit called Resilience Force [hired laid-off New Orleans service workers](#) to knock on doors to promote vaccines; when Hurricanes Laura and Ida hit, the same group was activated to distribute goods.

One could also imagine recruiting individuals who already fulfill the role of the caring neighbor familiar with the contours of their community. Everyone knows that neighbor. In my building, her name is Kim. She is the unofficial president of our 60-odd-unit rental complex, knowledgeable about almost everyone in each unit, their kids and grandkids, and, crucially, their problems. When one of us has a building-related crisis—rats bursting through the wall, for example (this is New York City, after all)—we go to Kim. She's a liaison with building management too; they listen to her because she knows what's going on. If New York City decided to experiment in more directly funding mutual

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aid, Kim might be given a formal channel to liaise with a nonprofit, or a city agency, in the event of a broader emergency.

The level of granular community outreach that's helpful in the days before and after disasters requires those intimate connections. The National Guard is activated during many disasters to staff shelters or distribute aid, and its members are already dispersed throughout communities across the country; disaster work could be conceived as an expansion of their job, or even a new branch of the military, which, after all, has installations throughout the country. Both are efficient at channeling government resources into communities. But arguably, people and groups that exist to help community members help one another are particularly well positioned to get people access to those resources, precisely because they're not reaching out to people for the first time during an emergency. They're already in touch.

Saket Soni, a longtime labor organizer and the founder of Resilience Force, has a vision for a disaster corps that goes beyond mutual aid. His group advocates for and trains workers to do the sort of house repairs needed after a disaster, and engages with post-disaster construction companies to get those workers hired. It has some 3,000 members, including about 1,000 in Florida, he told me. But Soni envisions a corps of 1 million traveling resilience workers who are paid well for their work and recognized as a national resource in a country that badly needs them. "Resilience is fundamentally a public good," he said. "There should be a public jobs program around resilience." When disasters hit, insurance companies and private homeowners look for companies that specialize in recovery; Resilience Force helps make sure those companies can then hire people who are "loyal, skilled, professionalized, and vetted," Soni told me. The group received some federal funding for the first time this month, as part of an infrastructure-jobs grant from the Department of Labor, Soni said. Resilience Force will use that money to train another 1,000 workers in Florida to do long-term repairs on disaster-stricken homes. At present, many of the workers doing such jobs are immigrants; plenty are undocumented, which has [led](#) to them working in unsafe conditions and to employers [withholding](#) wages; they are particularly vulnerable in states, [such as Florida](#), with tougher laws against undocumented immigrants. Post-disaster restoration jobs fall to them in part because these are essentially construction jobs, and undocumented immigrants comprise an estimated [23 percent](#) of the construction workforce in the U.S.

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Of course, a U.S. jobs program could—and all but certainly would—require its candidates to be U.S. citizens. A more formal Disaster Corps that offered well-paying jobs only to U.S. citizens might make these jobs more appealing to people who aren't in this line of work. But as of now, disaster-hit towns and cities [struggle](#) to [find](#) enough U.S. citizens to do the rebuilding. It is therefore worth contemplating whether noncitizens could be eligible to work in a Disaster Corps. When I asked Soni if, in his view, hiring a fleet of resilience workers would depend on some version of immigration reform, he replied only that the government would need to channel that work through nonprofits, given its lack of agility for mass hiring. Still, the rise of [anti-immigrant state laws](#) and public [sentiment](#) means that a federal program calling attention to the role of immigrants (documented or not) in recovery work would likely invite criticism, if not outright hostility, in some of the places where they arrive to rebuild.

A critic might also argue that adding a dedicated Disaster Corps would only be a form of government bloat. If community groups are already doing this work without government support, formalizing it might just add bureaucracy and, perversely, limit their flexibility in disasters. (Government programs aren't renowned for their pliability.) Someone in government would have to decide which individuals and groups qualified for the corps, and one could imagine a cadre of people who become experts in, say, helping nonprofit groups join the Disaster Corps in order to better help their communities navigate applications for FEMA assistance.