



## Disaster Response – Follow in Their Footsteps

# How To: Volunteer Orientation

### CASE STUDY

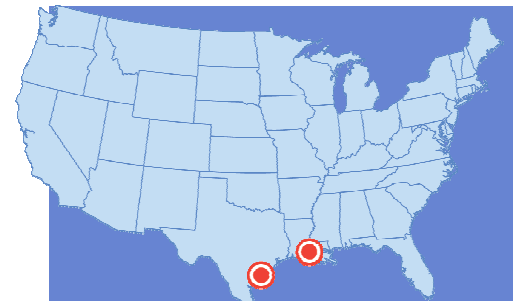
Since Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005, Deacon Elaine Clements has given orientations for all volunteers affiliated with Episcopal programs, as well as some others. She explains the history and importance of New Orleans, how Katrina affected the city, and what volunteers can expect as they work in various neighborhoods. Luke Blount is the Volunteer Coordinator in Galveston, Texas. He gives an orientation to an average of 20-25 volunteers a week who travel to the island to rebuild homes damaged by Hurricane Ike in 2008. For both Elaine and Luke, an important aspect of the volunteer orientation is controlling the narrative. You have to be very clear about how you want volunteers to look at what is happening and what message you want them to take away.



### Biography



Luke Blount is the Volunteer Coordinator for the rebuild program in Galveston, TX. The Rev. Elaine Clements has been orienting volunteers in New Orleans since the first volunteer cleaning crews arrived in 2005.



### START YOUR OWN VOLUNTEER ORIENTATION

#### General suggestions

- **Do your research – read histories, National Weather Service reports, newspaper accounts, attend conferences and info sessions.** *Luke:* As the first point of contact with volunteers, you will be fielding most of their questions – you need to be an expert. Specifically for information on the history of Galveston and Hurricane Ike, I looked at online resources, the National Weather Service and the Galveston Public Library.
- **Grab their attention with humor.** *Elaine:* It's important to open with some humor as well as to keep it going throughout the presentation. It keeps the volunteers interested, and helps in establishing your relationship with them. It's not as difficult as one might think to find the humor either in what's happening or in historical and cultural events.

### Fast Facts



**LOCATION:**  
New Orleans, Louisiana  
Galveston, Texas

**POPULATION:**  
New Orleans: 336,644  
Galveston: 57,466

**TYPE OF DISASTER:** Hurricane  
**PEOPLE DISPLACED:**  
New Orleans: 362,000  
Galveston: 21,802

**DISASTER RELIEF:**  
Volunteer-run home reconstruction



- **Keep your presentation up to date. Talk about obstacles to recovery; make sure you explain what is happening and why it might be taking longer than expected.** *Luke:* Keep track of the news and keep your presentation current. This will also help keep you interested even after you've said it for the thousandth time.
- **Think of the orientation as divided into three sections.** Both Elaine and Luke have three distinct sections within their orientation: historical background, information on the disaster, and work-specific information.

### Section 1: historical background

- **Include a history of the city or area.** *Elaine:* Our situation was unique because people were questioning our right to continue to exist in the same place. So I told people about our 300-year history, the geographical context, and our importance in US history – including the port and the city's claim to fame as the birthplace of jazz.

### Section 2: the disaster

- **Talk about the disaster.** *Elaine:* You have to be prepared to answer, in a non-defensive way, questions you yourself may have – or respond to any objections or concerns volunteers may have – like why people continue to stay in the area or why volunteers should help in rebuilding.
- **It's important that the story being told contextualizes the disaster in a community and is grounded in the people it affected.** *Elaine:* Talk about the people in the community, what they need, and stress the importance of what volunteers are doing. Tell personal stories whenever you can. People remember stories better than facts, figures, and data. And many times this story you tell is what makes volunteers your best advocates when they go home.
- **It may be useful to spend a little time brainstorming some ways that volunteers can continue to help when they go home.** *Elaine:* I actually had a handout sheet updated continually with a number of things on it: things like calling Congressional representatives about various issues which I identified, raising money, hosting fundraisers, writing letters to publications about identified issues, etc.

### Section 3: Work-specific information

- **Good behavior on-site is a must. It's best not to play music onsite if the homeowner is present, and remind volunteers not to add confidential information or pictures that identify the home or homeowners to any trip blogs they are keeping.** *Luke:* I try to remind volunteers that homeowners have been through an extraordinary and traumatic experience. They have to remember that whether it's been a week or two years, homeowners are deeply affected and may have checked out mentally. Volunteers also need to

### Logistics:



- **Make sure you have a space – preferably with bathroom facilities – to give your orientation.** Also make sure the space can seat all your volunteers comfortably
- **Decide what the best way to give this information will be:** In New Orleans, Elaine gives her orientation once a week to all volunteers in the area. Luke gives his orientation once at the beginning of each volunteer group's stay.
- **Give orientations in the morning while crews are still fresh.**
- **Decide if you will give orientations to larger groups or break groups down into smaller teams.** Elaine gives one orientation a week for an average of 40 volunteers because travelling to many different sites and repeating the same orientation is not a very good use of time.
- **Use PowerPoint,** but don't overload the slides with words.
- **Keep orientations under an hour and include time for questions.**
- **Have construction staff with you to answer site-specific questions.**
- **Be sure to give volunteers instructions about pictures.** In New Orleans they ask that volunteers not publish pictures (in newsletters, on facebook, etc.) that could identify the home or pictures of the homeowner.



remember that no matter what the space may look like, they're in someone else's home and need to treat that home with respect.

- **Talk about working on site, include what will be expected of volunteers and how logistics work, and introduce anyone they'll be working with.** *Elaine:* I always made sure to have a site director with me on hand to cover what would be happening on site, the tasks volunteers would be doing, and what tools they would need.
- **Go into safety guidelines – many times these are common sense, but it's good to remind volunteers.** *Luke:* It's always a good idea to remind people to just be mindful of what they're doing and who's around them, to avoid accidents. And especially in Texas in the summer, it's a good idea to remind people to drink water.
- **Explain what they can expect from the city.** *Elaine:* I liked to advise volunteers on how to get around and be safe. It's just practical advice for getting around a very damaged city. I would cover everything from the giant pot holes to how a local will stop at a flashing yellow light whereas a Texas contractor won't.

## Final Thoughts

- **Remember, you are a public relations person both for the city and for the church.** *Elaine:* This is not the place to air personal political views or to criticize either the government or the Church. I try to present a very balanced approach. So for example, when talking about the responsibility of the Corps of Engineers for our disaster, I also talk about the crumbling U.S. infrastructure (such as the bridge that collapsed in the Midwest a few years ago) and the process whereby the Corps requests budgeting from Congress for the amount needed but less is awarded, resulting in a lack of funds. Things are rarely "black and white" but usually much more nuanced. I try to make that clear. It is not my goal to demonize any person or entity no matter what my personal views might be—and right after Katrina, this wasn't so easy!!!

## Quick Tips:



- **Use this interaction as an opportunity to create a relationship with volunteers.** *Elaine:* After each orientation I had established a connection, so volunteers felt comfortable engaging with me later if they needed to talk.
- **Make your presentation a conversation.** *Elaine:* This way volunteers stay engaged and are encouraged to ask more questions.
- **Reiterate anything important many times and in many ways.** *Luke:* Information doesn't always stick when people are being bombarded with many new things. If there's anything crucial for volunteers to know, make sure you repeat it a number of times and not only during the orientation.

## Additional Resources



For more information on hurricane response:

- "How To: Street Ministry"

Share your own disaster response stories or tips to help a community in need at [www.er-d.org](http://www.er-d.org)