



Red Tape and Volunteer Rescuers in Louisiana

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In the wake of the devastating floods in Louisiana, many people have been stranded in places that are difficult to access, some needing rescue and others running dangerously low on basic supplies.

The federal response has gotten mixed reviews so far, but some residents in Louisiana saw the real need for help and decided to step up and do what they could for their friends and neighbors.

“All of a sudden before the feds could react, we got thousands of boats in the water, with locals helping each other,” said Kevin Dietz.

The “Cajun Navy” as it has been called, consists of dozens of people with boats and coordinators who work together to deliver supplies or rescue people from flooded areas.

These volunteers are not just some disorganized rag-tag group, many of them might know how to navigate their neighborhoods better than the government officials, and they are utilizing new technologies to share their GPS locations with each other and organize their communications onto dedicated channels.

State Senator Jonathan Perry is now in the middle of a maelstrom after a report came out that he was working on a proposal that could require these would-be rescuers to undergo training or get a permit in order to help.

To be fair to Senator Perry, he contends that he is trying to figure out a way to remove the layers of red tape that prohibit volunteers from helping with the rescue efforts, as under current law it is illegal for them to cross the barriers set up by law enforcement and many of them are prevented from doing so.

In the current framework these volunteers are being turned away and prevented from doing what they can at the same time that people are stranded and waiting for help.

This dynamic is not unique to situations like the flooding in Louisiana. Dozens of cities have passed bans making it illegal for private citizens and charities to feed the homeless, which leads

to situations like this 90-year-old man and two being charged in Florida for violating the ban. Occupational licensing makes it much more difficult for medical professionals to volunteer their medical and dental services at free clinics through organizations like Remote Area Medical.

There is a rich history in America of people coming together to help others: one report from Giving USA claimed 2015 was “America’s most-generous year ever” when it comes to donating money to charities, and almost 63 million Americans volunteered their time in some capacity, although the volunteer rate has declined in recent years. These private efforts have enormous capacity to help solve problems if they are not deterred by burdensome red tape.

As one member of the Cajun Navy put it, “How can you regulate people helping people, that doesn’t make sense to me.”

Unfortunately, it’s all too common for government regulations to erect barriers and layers of red tape that make it harder for people to help.

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