



Embargoed until Delivery
Tuesday, July 9, 2013
10:00 am (EDT)

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**Before the U.S. House Homeland Security Committee
Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Communications**

***Emergency MGMT: 2.0 How #SocialMedia and New Tech are Transforming Preparedness,
Response, & Recovery #Disasters, #Part2, #Govt/NGOs***

Good morning, Chairman Brooks, Ranking Member Payne, Members and staff of the Subcommittee. The American Red Cross appreciates the opportunity to share our experience using social media and new technology to help people stay safe and recover from disasters and other emergencies. Chairman Brooks, we applaud the personal interest you and the Ranking Member have in this area, as evidenced by your visit earlier this year to our Digital Operations Center, and we look forward to further engagement with you and the entire Committee.

The destructive disasters we have seen across our country – from wildfires in the West, to the Oklahoma tornadoes, Superstorm Sandy, which impacted Ranking Member Payne’s state of New Jersey and, the outbreak of tornadoes that devastated Henryville in Chairman Brooks’ home state of Indiana, – underscore the fact that disasters can strike anywhere at any time, and we all use all the tools and methods we can to help our neighbors in need.

Today, I’d like to make three points to the committee:

1. The public is increasingly turning to social media, mobile apps and other new technology to find information and get help during disasters, and all of us who provide emergency relief must be listening and responding.
2. The American Red Cross works to continually improve our services, and social media is an important tool in helping us share life-saving information, connect people to resources and literally save lives.
3. Social media is a powerful form of citizen engagement which can be harnessed to create more resilient communities and ensure our nation is as prepared as possible.

Emerging Social Media and New Technology Trends

The power of social media as a communications tool during disasters became clear to us in the aftermath of the earthquake that struck Haiti in 2010. The American Red Cross saw tweets from people trapped under collapsed buildings. We heard directly from members of the Haitian Diaspora who were communicating via text with loved ones in need of help. With cell service down in the early hours, people sought help however they could.

Like many other disaster relief organizations and emergency responders at the time, the American Red Cross did not have an efficient way to process and respond to this information. We had to manually intake the messages and try to route them to the right places. It was a sign to us that technology was rapidly changing traditional disaster response methods.

In August 2010, the American Red Cross convened an Emergency Social Data Summit to discuss the evolution occurring in disaster response with the use and reliance by the public on social media. We convened other emergency response and disaster relief agencies, as well as the social media entities that were part of this growing phenomenon. This was the first time that government, nonprofit, technology, and citizen sectors came together to discuss the opportunities and challenges we face in integrating social data with disaster response.

More than 150 people attended the all-day Summit and another 1,200 contributed virtually to the conference via Ustream and Twitter. It was quite a sight to see people live-blogging and tweeting in the same Red Cross headquarters building where citizens had once rolled bandages during World War I.

Surveys of Web Users

To inform the Summit discussion, the American Red Cross conducted a survey of web users. Our survey results showed that many web users would turn to social communities to seek help during disasters and other emergencies. And, even more importantly, they expected first responders to be listening.

The 2010 survey also found that Americans have high expectations about how first responders should be answering their requests, and it revealed a gap between public expectations and our ability to meet those expectations. For example, 69 percent said that emergency responders should be monitoring social media sites in order to quickly send help—and 74 percent expected help to come less than an hour after their tweet or Facebook post.

In 2011 and 2012, the Red Cross conducted follow-up surveys on use of social media in emergencies. Those surveys found that Americans are becoming increasingly reliant on mobile devices during emergencies to provide information, useful tools and a way to let loved ones know they are safe.

The Red Cross surveys found that mobile apps now tie social media as the fourth-most popular way to get information in an emergency, following TV, radio and online news. The Red Cross survey found that 20 percent of Americans said they have received some kind of emergency information from an app. These findings led to the development of a series of Red Cross apps that I will discuss later.

The survey identified a subsection of the population deemed “emergency social users,” people who are the most dedicated users of social media during emergencies and likely to take action based on information gathered through their social networks.

- Three out of four emergency social users say they have contacted friends and family to see if they were safe.
- More than a third say social information has motivated them to gather supplies or seek shelter.
- These users look for the hard facts—road closures, damage reports and weather conditions—and they share personal information about their safety and their emotions.
- Three out of four Americans (76 percent) expect help in less than three hours of posting a request on social media, up from 68 percent in the 2011 survey.
- Forty percent of those surveyed in 2012 said they would use social tools to tell others they are safe, up from 24 percent the year before.

Using Social Media to Advance the Red Cross Mission

For more than 130 years, the mission of the American Red Cross has been to help prevent and alleviate human suffering in the face of emergencies by mobilizing the power of volunteers and the generosity of donors.

We respond to nearly 70,000 disasters each year – ranging from a house fire to a hurricane. We supply about 40 percent of the nation’s blood to patients and hospitals. We teach skills such as First Aid and CPR that can save lives. We provide international humanitarian aid and support our military and their families through emergency communications and other programs.

It may seem incongruous to some for an institution as old as ours to be embracing social media. But our experience teaches us that during a crisis, people will communicate the same way they communicate every day. Today, people are depending upon social media to communicate with their family and friends on a daily basis. And, as our surveys show, they are increasingly using social media to communicate in a disaster.

To that end, the Red Cross has made social media and other forms of new technology a priority and our social presence continues to grow. We are present on all the major digital platforms. We have over half a million Facebook followers and we just celebrated our one millionth Twitter follower.

Digital Operations Center

The hub of our social media engagement is our Digital Operations Center at our Washington, D.C., headquarters, which opened on March 7, 2012. It is the first social media monitoring center specifically devoted to humanitarian relief efforts.

This center was made possible by our generous partner, DELL, which built the center for us and provided the equipment and its expertise. This revolutionary center enables the Red Cross to clearly see what is happening on the ground during an emergency. It helps us to better anticipate disaster needs and to dispense help more quickly—whether it is in the form of preparedness tips, first aid instructions and information about shelter, food or other services.

The center allows us to pull in data from social networks on topics we choose. It consists of an engagement console which allows us to categorize posts by topic, and read, reply to them or redirect inquiries to our disaster operations staff or other appropriate subject matter experts.

There are four screens which visually depict this information so we can easily monitor it:

The Heat Map tells us **WHERE** posts are coming from geographically
The Community Screen tells us **WHO** is posting
The Universe Screen tells us **WHAT** they are saying
The Conversation Dashboard tells us **HOW** we are doing in our response efforts

The American Red Cross is very proud of our Digital Operations Center. And, we love to show it off. I invite all Members of Congress and their staff to visit our cutting-edge communication center to learn more about its capabilities and witness it in action.

Putting Emergency Social Data to Work

Chairman Brooks, as you will recall, on March 2, 2012, an early season tornado outbreak devastated many communities in Kentucky and southern Indiana with more than 30 deaths and 300 injured. This disaster actually served as our first ever test of the Digital Operations Center. Our small team of social media experts watched the heat map go red as the Indiana storms struck. Based on the activity and content of social media in the area, the team was able to determine that the tornadoes were heading right toward Henryville and quickly distribute preparedness information to thousands of people by offering links to Redcross.org and safety tips in 140 characters. We also were able to make operational decisions based on feedback and connect those on the ground with the resources they needed.

Last October, when Superstorm Sandy struck, the American Red Cross launched the largest U.S. disaster response in more than five years. Our Digital Operations Center again played a crucial role.

Starting prior to landfall and continuing well after the storm passed, our teams in the Digital Operations Center analyzed more than 2.5 million pieces of social data searching for any actionable content from people affected by Sandy. They tagged 10,000 of these posts and interacted with them in some way, whether it was labeling a post as “situational awareness” or routing a need to our Mass Care operations.

The social team sent more than 300 individual pieces of information to our operations team to help inform their decision making. This level of engagement allowed us to immediately address the needs and concerns of a large number of people in a densely-populated region of the country.

We also were able to scale up our social media operations through the use of trained digital volunteers. They helped us monitor, authenticate and route incoming disaster requests and information to our operations people and partners. They worked remotely using hash tags such as #crisisdata or #redcross to collect, collate and respond to queries and concerns.

During Sandy, more than 50 American Red Cross digital volunteers - some working virtually from around the world - responded to thousands of Facebook messages and tweets. They addressed an array of service delivery needs from finding the nearest shelter to answering questions about fallen trees and downed power lines. One of our Digital Volunteers was Christoph Dennenmoser, who works for the German Red Cross and has helped us respond to social posts on operations such as Haiti and Hurricane Sandy...all from his home or office in Germany.

Our social engagement team, chapters and digital volunteers offered information on where to find our shelters and mobile feeding sites. For example, our New York City chapter would tweet out that a Red Cross Emergency Response Vehicle would be at 99th and 101st streets in Howard Beach with hot meals and water. Some even tweeted out the menu for the day: Salisbury steak.

The Red Cross found during Sandy that social media also helps us identify gaps in our service delivery. For example, residents of Sayreville, NJ had not received assistance five days after Sandy's landfall. Several people there used Facebook to let us know, and we were able to provide this information from our Digital Operations Center to the operation on the ground and get service delivery going in that hard-hit area we hadn't identified before.

We have found one major need remains consistent during all disasters – people are anxious and need emotional support. This gives us an opportunity to provide comfort and care using our “digital hugs,” delivered in 140 characters or less.

For example, we received a tweet saying: **OK #Sandy, you win. It's official. I'm scared.**

We replied back: **Sorry you are scared, pay attn to warnings and find shelter nearby just in case. Redcross.org (hugs) to you!**

The answer: **Thank you. Stay safe as well. Thanks for the hugs...I need it.**

The Red Cross continues to learn from all of our response efforts as social media evolves. There is a balance between acting on information shared through social media outlets and ensuring what has transpired is accurate and correct. By watching and tracking social media continually, we often can correct misinformation quickly as we authenticate and verify information.

Mobile Apps Playing Larger Role in Disasters and Saving Lives

As smart phones increasingly play a larger role in our lives, the American Red Cross is responding to this change with mobile solutions. Since June, 2012, we have released a series of five free apps for both iPhone and Android users.

People across the country have downloaded these new apps more than 3 million times, giving them vital weather alerts, preparedness information, shelter locations and the ability to let loved ones know they are safe.

The First Aid app, which was launched in June, 2012, is the most popular and has been downloaded more than 1.4 million times. A top executive at Apple told our CEO Gail McGovern that he never goes out for the evening without leaving the app open for the babysitter.

The First Aid App was followed by four more disaster apps: hurricane, earthquake, wildfire and tornado. Popular with users, they receive average ratings of 4.5 out of 5.0 stars and received the “Best in Show – Most Life Changing Product” award at the recent CTIA-The Wireless Association Conference.

CNN has called our Tornado App one of the “7 apps to survive a tornado.” It includes a siren that warns users when a tornado warning has been issued in their area. When the deadly tornadoes struck Oklahoma in May, our Tornado App was the number one free weather app

and had 167,000 new downloads, bringing the total to 594,000 downloads since its March launch.

The Red Cross hurricane app, which has been downloaded more than 824,000 times, became the number one free weather app during Sandy and received the “Outstanding Achievement” award at this year’s National Hurricane Conference.

But most gratifying is the feedback from users about how our apps helped save lives:

“I was in my friends car ... when suddenly a friend of mine started having a seizure. I immediately looked at this app for help while calling 911 on another phone. I told the police about it and they said that there's a good chance **the information in this app saved my friends life.**”

“I never have to stay up night again worried a tornado is coming when there’s a watch. I have a 9 month old. I’m terrified one will come and I won’t have enough time to get her room & downstairs. I’ve had apps before that don’t work every time. This 1 actually does.”

Online Tools are a Supplement, Not Substitute for Traditional Communications

Social media, apps and other digital tools are becoming an increasingly important part of 21st Century disaster response and services. But it would be a mistake to assume that these tools are a panacea. Social media should supplement but not replace traditional communications. Not everyone is on social media, especially in vulnerable communities. And those who do use social media tend to be younger, more urban and more affluent.

Moreover, when power is out and you can’t charge your smart phone, you will still need the Red Cross to drive through neighborhoods with bullhorns announcing that we are there with food, water and other supplies.

During Hurricane Sandy, the American Red Cross delivered help that cannot be delivered over the internet, as we:

- Mobilized more than **17,000** workers and volunteers
- Provided more than **81,000** overnight stays in shelters
- Served more than **17 million** meals and snacks
- Distributed more than **7** million relief items

Partnering to Extend Reach of Social Media/New Technology

Social media and mobile technologies are bringing everyone closer together, and when government, non-profits, internet and other private companies, work together we can reach even more people with life-saving information and help.

We can do this by sharing updates and information, and spreading the word through our own networks, while still preserving what is unique about our brands and the services we provide.

For example, in the first hours after a disaster strikes, it’s important to inform and connect with family and friends. What better place to do that than on social media. The Red Cross has made changes to its Safe and Well website that allows people to update their status on Facebook and

Twitter. We have also added an “I’m Safe” button to our apps that allows people to immediately send a text message, tweet or Facebook post to let loved ones know they are safe.

We have a very close working relationship with FEMA and state and local emergency management, often sharing information with each other through social media.

During major disasters, the Red Cross social engagement team has a daily check-in with the FEMA social engagement team. We frequently echo and/or share one another’s outgoing content - for example FEMA will often help us push out Safe and Well to the public.

We share situational awareness to be sure we’re coming to similar conclusions about client needs, and we are working to integrate our findings with the work of state emergency operations centers.

A New Form of Citizen Engagement

In catastrophic disasters, the Red Cross witnesses an abundance of care and concern from the unaffected – people eagerly wanting to help. They are often eyewitnesses to the events, and the first to help their neighbors.

FEMA Administrator Craig Fugate often speaks of his goal to have people see themselves as survivors and not victims of a disaster. He has pointed out that social media can empower the public to be a part of the response, not victims to be taken care of. We agree.

In just a few weeks, we are set to launch the new, dynamic Team Red Cross app. This new app allows people to sign up to help, get trained right on their mobile device and receive notifications about Red Cross volunteer opportunities in their community.

We are very excited about this next level of digital engagement with the American people.

With the help of technology, we are able to offer limitless opportunities, thereby, turning an abundance of care into more resilient communities, more effective disaster response, and a more prepared nation.

The Next Technological Horizon

Chairman Brooks, Ranking Member Payne and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you again for this opportunity to provide testimony today. We are delighted to be working with this Subcommittee and your colleagues as we further explore the opportunities presented by engaging social media in our disaster preparedness and response.

Social media is helping us improve our service delivery by giving us better situational awareness of the needs; helping us target help to specific locations; and getting more people engaged in giving and getting help. It is giving the public a seat at our Disaster Operations table.

We have learned on this recent journey that we must continue to embrace change, remain open to new ideas and new platforms, and look forward to the next technological horizon.

Thank you again for your engagement and leadership on this important topic. I am happy to address any questions you may have.