

Mayor's Office Links Agencies

By Gerald Panno

The Mayor's Voluntary Action Center's (MVAC) office is seven blocks from Ground Zero. On Sept. 11, we saw the World Trade Center towers burning from our office windows. There was little information when we were first instructed to evacuate the building.

After telling our staff and volunteers to go home for the day, Harriette Heller (executive director) and I went into our building. We made phone calls and listened to a radio. That is when we heard about the Pentagon.

We were told to evacuate the building again and to walk north. As we looked west we saw an incredible amount of what we "thought" was smoke moving north on Church Street. We walked about 40 blocks, stopping at a coffee shop. That is when we heard the World Trade Center towers had collapsed.

I was glued to the television for about 48 hours, desperate for information. During this time, Harriette attempted to contact our boss, the deputy mayor. She and I were in constant communication.

MVAC's office phones were down, the neighborhood was closed and our computers and e-mails were not working. On Wednesday, we agreed that I would send an e-mail from home to colleagues, informing them that staff and volunteers were safe and that we didn't have access to our office or normal communication systems.

Many city agencies were relocated, as was the MVAC staff. We were to report to our clothing bank warehouse in Brooklyn, which had two phone lines and no e-mail access. I tried to check out our office building

on Saturday as the news stations reported the neighborhood had been opened. It was still off limits.

Mobilizing

On Sunday we were instructed to have MVAC representatives report to Office of Emergency Management (OEM). OEM had been relocated to Pier 94 following the collapse of 7 World Trade Center. MVAC was reporting to OEM, FEMA and SEMO (State Emergency Management Organization).

We also participated in VOAD meetings (Volunteer Organizations Active in Disasters). We were assigned to the Human Resource section that included Red Cross and Salvation Army, New York Cares, City Harvest, Center for Animal Care Control, World Church Service and others.

MVAC initially identified our role as a communication link with our colleagues. Using membership directories from New York Association for Volunteer Administration (NY AVA) and Greater New York Association of Directors of Volunteer Services in Healthcare (GNYADVS), I compiled a group e-mail list. MVAC identified key leadership professionals and anyone we could think of. We asked them to share the disaster relief information that was being identified daily by OEM, FEMA, SEMO and VOAD. We also invited them to information sessions that were being convened by FEMA.

Readiness

MVAC provides volunteer referrals in all five city boroughs through its database. MVAC also administers the annual Mayor's Volunteer Service

Awards; provides training; works with alternative sentencing programs; and operates a clothing bank, which distributes new clothing contributed by apparel manufacturers to a network of community agencies serving the homeless throughout New York City.

I started work at MVAC only three weeks before the World Trade Center disaster. Therefore, this was a learning opportunity for me. Perhaps my experience will assist you as you review your emergency preparedness strategies. Here are some questions to consider:

- What is your local relationship with VOAD and state emergency management organizations?
- Do you have a partnership with your local Red Cross, Salvation Army, etc.?
- Do you have a plan if you can't get into your office or access to normal communication systems?
- Can you communicate with your staff and volunteers if you are not in your office? How will you communicate with your colleagues?
- What will you do to build partnerships *before* a disaster?

Finally, my personal mantra each day was the following: "Give me humility, intelligence balanced with compassion, patience and energy."

A friend asked why I didn't focus on energy first. I replied, "Energy without the others might lead to less effective actions as opposed to deliberate and thoughtful responses."♦

Gerald (Jerry) Panno, CVA, is assistant director of the The Mayor's Voluntary Action Center.