



Disaster Accountability Project

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The health of our democracy is contingent upon informed and engaged citizens asking questions and providing detailed oversight. In fact, nearly every federal agency receives regular feedback, testimony, comments, and expert information from well-established nonprofits that line K Street in Washington, DC. In contrast, when Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast, no such organization existed for FEMA, which was responsible for coordinating the 20+ agencies and organizations. As climate change increases the severity of storms and other natural hazards, there is a critical need for dedicated policy oversight in mitigation, preparedness, response, relief, and recovery responsibilities.

The recent earthquake in Haiti and the current BP oil spill have demonstrated that catastrophic disasters can and will keep occurring; however, they do not always have to have such devastating effects. It is no secret that better preparedness could reduce damage, suffering, and loss of life; that is why disasters are usually followed by calls for sweeping reforms and countless policy recommendations. But once the dust settles and the camera crews pack up and head home, we need someone to keep track of the implementation progress of these policy recommendations.

The Disaster Accountability Project was founded in 2007 and is the leading organization committed to providing long-term independent oversight of U.S. disaster management systems. DAP has demonstrated that dedicated, informed oversight can help ensure that agencies and organizations live up to their life-saving obligations before, during and after crises. With a volunteer staff, DAP has engaged a dedicated community to advance policy research and advocacy, promote transparency, and encourage the public to participate in meaningful oversight and community-based conversations.

High Impact

In one of our most successful public efforts, a team of 40 volunteers requested and reviewed local all-hazard emergency plans in 22 southern Louisiana parishes, compiling results into a report that was shared with community leaders and media. Follow-up by local governments was astonishing, despite initial resistance, as at least 20% took further action to improve community preparedness by updating plans, publishing plans online or continuing public conversations.

In a report we released six-months after the Haiti earthquake and first reported on by the New York Times, we exposed serious failures in transparency by organizations soliciting donations for relief. Aid organizations that have, in many ways, taken over the role of the disjointed Haitian government, are raising billions of dollars and sharing only sparse and infrequent information on their actual activities. Significant accountability concerns aside, limited details of where aid is being provided, how much, and to whom, frustrates coordination between organizations and leads to shortages in critical aid, shelter, and health care. Similar transparency work is also needed in disaster relief efforts on U.S. soil, where \$4.25 billion was donated to charities after Katrina.

Oversight

A strong Fourth Estate typically provides strong oversight after a disaster and often prompts action when gaps are identified. Major cuts to traditional media, however, necessitate additional “hands on deck,” as Anderson Cooper can’t be everywhere.

DAP operates a real-time listening device that enables members of the public to identify gaps in relief services after disasters. After Hurricane Ike, this situational awareness helped numerous callers and countless others as DAP directed information about needs to the responsible parties at responding agencies, organizations, and media. The Hotline enhances situational awareness in the immediate aftermath of disasters and gives those on the ground, especially the marginalized and voiceless, an opportunity to speak up about deficiencies in relief. Only after communities are empowered to speak up, will problems be addressed and suffering alleviated. Hotline calls have already been covered by ABC News and Bloomberg, among others. With funding, Hotline capabilities will be improved to amplify and facilitate information collection and sharing.

DAP is developing a “Disaster Policy Wiki” that will serve as an online clearinghouse, tracking post-disaster policy reports and recommendations in a user-friendly database to prevent “lessons learned” from being forgotten. The wiki’s precursors include 550 recommendations on core disaster topics and original reporting on our blog. With funding, these resources will be developed technically and substantively into a current, comprehensive public wiki database to serve as a resource to policy-makers, practitioners, and academics, as well as the general public.

Getting to Scale

DAP continues to make strides in carrying out its mission with a razor-thin staff and incredibly dedicated volunteers. In fact, since its 2007 founding, DAP has marshaled over a half-million dollars in in-kind service from hundreds of volunteers and interns. This summer, 40 interns focused on all aspects of the organization and its initiatives. A volunteer-based model, however, is not sustainable over the long-term. DAP needs funding for a full-time, expert staff to grow the capacity of the organizations and develop each initiative, expand tracking of policy recommendations, prepare more testimony for Congressional hearings, participate in more open comment periods, and engage fully with our nation’s most disaster-vulnerable communities, media, and policymakers.

DAP is committed to holding the government accountable for gaps in disaster relief services, pushing for policy change, and increasing citizen oversight through transparency programs, including our hotline and proposed Policy Wiki.

With your support and funding in the coming year, DAP will be able to expand its programs, add to a growing list of accomplishments, and most important, help mitigate the loss of life and suffering in the aftermath of disasters. Together we can realize DAP’s true potential to improve disaster management systems and mitigate the effects of disasters.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Ben Smilowitz
Executive Director