

## How VOAD streamlines disaster response with coordinated efforts

**Behind the scenes of the Eaton Fire, The Salvation Army and partner organizations demonstrated the power of strategic collaboration.**

After many major natural disasters, there's one name that's integral to the response efforts. It's not FEMA. It's not a relief agency at all.

The [Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster \(VOAD\)](#) doesn't distribute food, deliver blankets or rebuild homes directly. Instead, it makes sure all those things — and more — happen effectively, without duplication or chaos.



Born out of the confusion following Hurricane Camille in 1969, VOAD was created to bring order to well-meaning, but disorganized, relief efforts. After Camille — the second most intense hurricane to strike the continental U.S. at the time — dozens of nonprofits flooded the Gulf Coast with help, but without coordination, critical needs went unmet while others were overserved.

VOAD sought to change that, evolving into a national framework that orchestrates disaster relief across nonprofit, faith-based and community organizations. At national, state and local levels, VOAD brings together agencies that used to operate in silos and gives them a shared map. It defines roles, aligns communication and makes sure resources are directed exactly where they're needed most.

“You don't just show up for disaster response anymore,” said [John Berglund](#), Director of Emergency/Disaster Services (EDS) for The Salvation Army in the Western Territory. “In the 1900s, you could roll up with a big pot of chili. That's not how things work now. It's become very sophisticated.”

That sophistication came into sharp focus during the Eaton Fire.

### **VOAD in action: The Eaton Fire response**

Antagonized by Santa Ana wind gusts of up to 90 miles per hour, the blaze tore through Eaton Canyon in Pasadena, California, with terrifying speed, beginning the evening of Jan. 7. By the next morning, more than 15 square miles had burned. The fire would go on to destroy over 9,400

structures and claim 18 lives, making it the fifth-deadliest and second most destructive wildfire in California history.

As first responders battled flames, VOAD members sprang into action. Each organization carved out its lane within the broader relief effort. For The Salvation Army, that lane was [feeding survivors and first responders](#) in the early days.

In coordination with the American Red Cross and a feeding taskforce that included World Central Kitchen and Operation BBQ Relief, The Salvation Army helped serve nearly thousands of meals in shelters and at its Pasadena hub.



Photo by John Docter.

This is where the value of VOAD becomes clear: it eliminates confusion and facilitates collaboration in a highly competitive environment. When dozens of relief organizations converge on a disaster zone, there's often a rush to "own" services like food distribution, shelter operation or financial distribution.

As California VOAD Chair Kevin Cox said on a January call with national partners, FEMA and other agencies, "Each of you has your strengths." As demonstrated in the Eaton Fire, it's essential each partner agency lean into its strengths and allow others to lean into theirs.

Case in point: one of the most delicate and demanding tasks of wildfire response is ash and debris recovery. The State of California prohibits untrained volunteers from sifting through burn sites. And for good reason — ash can contain hazardous materials, and disturbing it improperly can pose serious health and environmental risks.

However, in the early days of the Eaton Fire response, only two VOAD partners were trained and approved to handle this kind of work: Samaritan's Purse and the Southern Baptist Disaster Relief. While the sheer scale of the Eaton Fire had stretched these seasoned teams to their limits, Cox stressed the importance of deploying only trained partners. Otherwise, they risked doing more harm than good.

"Having additional organizations [assist with sifting was] desperately needed," Cox said. "But they must be trained and coordinated in the response."

In this sense, VOAD ensures each organization's role is determined not based merely on willingness or presence, but rather on preparation, capacity and real-time need.

As the real-time needs shifted in the Eaton Fire, so too did the response. Several weeks after the fires broke out, the California VOAD and the Emergency Network of Los Angeles County (or the LA County VOAD) organized a six-day [Wildfire Resource Hub](#) to provide critical services, supplies and support to hundreds of displaced individuals and families, all free of charge. That included emotional, financial and logistical support, all coordinated under one roof.



Photo by John Docter.

From Jan. 27–Feb. 1, alongside its partner organizations, The Salvation Army distributed immediate financial assistance to thousands of households in the form of rent payments, utility coverage and more for thousands of people suddenly left with nothing. They also distributed Bibles, snacks, cleanup kits, air purifiers, clothes and other supplies.

“A lot of the immediate emergency needs were met in the first few weeks through different agencies coming together—providing shelter, food and meeting other needs,” said [Captain Nicholas Helms](#), Pasadena Tabernacle Corps Officer. “Now that people are getting a little more settled back into stable housing...we’re finding that people are still in need of financial assistance. It’s been heartbreaking all around and the heartbreak is still there for a lot of people who are just figuring out where to go and what to do next. But I think there’s been a positivity and a real sense of gratitude for the people in the community who are wanting to help and reach out.”The Salvation Army’s ability to fill a critical niche and pivot as needed is very much a feat of logistics. But it’s as much a product of listening to the community and following the “4 Cs”—the principles that guide VOAD partnerships: cooperation, communication, coordination and collaboration.

“We are so thankful and blessed that we have so many good partners across the country in our VOAD movement.” Cox said. “This isn’t just about meeting immediate needs. It’s about ensuring no one is left behind in their recovery. It’s about ensuring families recover fully and can rebuild their lives with dignity.”

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