

Responding after disaster requires more than just tools: it takes motivation, coordination, and resources to rebuild a community. Across the different sites our team visited, these elements of service came to life in unique ways.

Exploring the different groups who respond to disaster by rebuilding or offering aid has been both inspiring and deeply moving. Each group offers its own unique character of service, shaped by their community, members' ages, and their personal goals. At the Church of St. Joseph the Worker in Marrero, Louisiana, volunteers are driven by their faith, a strong sense of local belonging, and helping their neighbors. In contrast, the young adults of the Los Angeles Conservation Corps, mostly in their early 20s, are motivated by personal growth, acquiring new skills, building their resumes, and making an environmental impact on the city in which they live. Their service is inspired by a yearning for growth that includes building their resumes, gaining hands-on skills, or getting involved in environmental work that speaks to their values. For many of them, their service work is also a first step toward long-term careers. These differences in motivations reflect the fact that they are a young group compared to the senior citizens we studied in Louisiana. Despite their differences, the common thread is clear: people step forward when they believe they can make a difference.

Communication during a disaster is a critical part of the response; it can reduce damage, speed up response, direct resources, and even save lives. According to surveys we administered at each site, phone calls and text messages were the most commonly used methods of communication during disasters. Very few respondents reported relying on social media to communicate with other volunteers, their program staff, or other community members following a disaster. This was the case even among younger members of the Los Angeles Conservation Corps, who might be assumed to prefer social media platforms given their age. Interestingly, members in Utah highlighted the use of ham radios as part of their emergency communication strategy, showcasing a more traditional but reliable method, especially when other networks fail. This range of communication practices reflects the adaptability of different programs and underlines the importance of equipping volunteers with multiple, resilient tools for staying connected during emergencies.

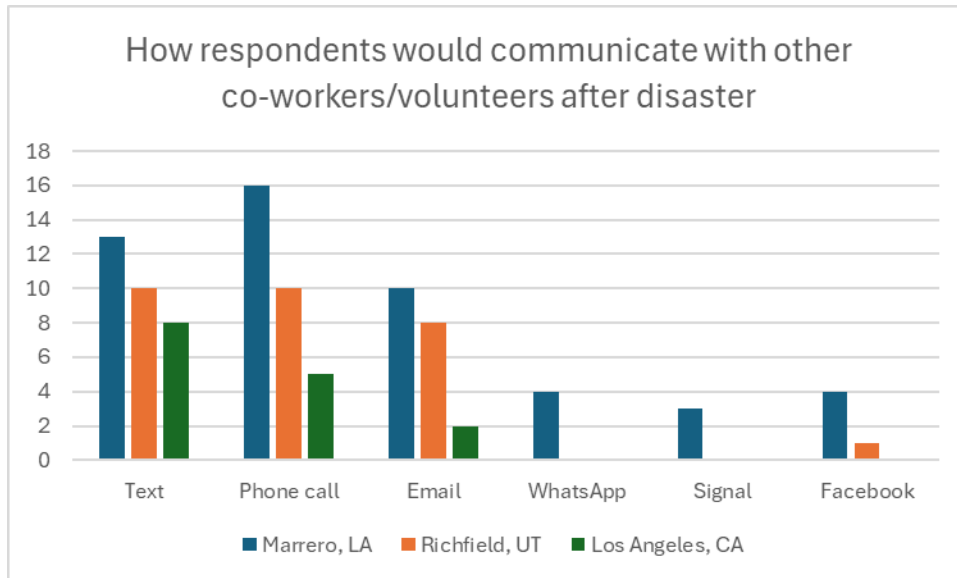


Figure developed by Arman Azedi.

An important part of disaster response is creativity with the resources available. One innovation that stood out for its simplicity and impact during our site visits was compost socks. These are long, mesh tubes filled with organic compost, designed to control erosion and filter toxic runoff. They're especially effective in areas where vegetation has been destroyed, such as in wildfire zones, leaving the soil exposed and highly vulnerable to heavy rainfall. In such environments, these socks trap sediment and absorb contaminants, stopping pollutants from washing into rivers and streams.

This solution holds great promise for places like Ghana, my home country, particularly in farming communities where erosion and the runoff of agrochemicals threaten land and water. Their use could support safer farming, cleaner water, and healthier ecosystems all while using natural, compostable materials. It's a low-tech, high-impact solution that could make a real difference in the environment.