

Basic Safety Considerations for Flood Recovery Volunteers

As Vermonters pull together to evaluate, clean, dry and rebuild their communities, volunteers play a crucial role in helping towns and neighbors recover. These volunteers are most often organized by one or more coordinators who help assign daily tasks, offer safety guidance and provide personal protective equipment to help keep the volunteers safe. The coordinator can play a key educational and loss prevention role with the volunteers. It is for this reason that we offer the following guidance and recommendations to assist them with that process.

The CDC has a website with lots of flood recovery information including basic protective equipment considerations. That link is: <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/emres/flood.html>. For the sake of simplicity, key elements from that website are distilled below:

1. Consider the types of hazards that volunteers will be exposed to. For instance, there may be dust, mists, noise, contaminated surfaces, sharp surfaces, puncture risk to the feet, falling objects, etc. The specific hazard(s) that each person is exposed to will depend on their duty assignment.
2. As a general rule, volunteers should be assigned to relatively low hazard tasks. Tasks such as cleaning, moving non-hazardous objects and debris, basic landscaping tasks, etc. are appropriate.
3. The basic personal protective equipment (PPE) ensemble should include:
 - a. Impervious gloves or "work gloves" depending on whether moisture and contamination protection is needed. Work gloves are appropriate if handling rough and potentially sharp debris. In some cases, double gloving may be appropriate (work gloves over the impervious gloves).
 - b. Where impervious gloves are used, avoid latex gloves to the allergy risk. Nitrile gloves are the best.
 - c. Eye protection may be needed if there is exposure to flying fragments or particulate materials. Safety glasses would suffice in most situations.
 - d. Respiratory protection in the form of a NIOSH approved N-95 filtering facepiece would be appropriate where there is exposure to significant dust or contaminated "mists". Individuals issued respirators should be advised on how to properly fit and use the devices. Any person with significant facial hair should not be assigned to a task where a respirator should be used, as they would receive little protection from it.
 - e. Sturdy footwear is a must. Ankle high hiking boots can help prevent ankle sprains, and reduce slip/fall potential. In debris laden areas, volunteers should be encouraged to wear "steel toed boots" if they have them.
4. Volunteers should be reminded about personal safety elements and to avoid hazardous situations. Injuries most commonly experienced are muscle strains/sprains, slips/falls and cuts and bruises. Therefore, the procedure and location of basic first-aid should be discussed with all volunteers.
5. Despite of lack of clean water for washing volunteers should be provided with means to wash their hands and clean-up after working in flood stricken areas. This is especially important before eating, drinking or smoking.
6. All volunteers should be made aware of the need to remain hydrated, especially during periods of hot weather. Clean, cool water should be provided.

Do your best to track volunteer hours as they may be reimbursable by FEMA.

For more information, visit the CDC website, the OSHA website (below) or contact VLCT Loss Control at 802-229-9111. <http://www.osha.gov/SLTC/etools/hurricane/recommendations.html>