

AMERICAN RED CROSS
VOLUNTEER ADMINISTRATION INSTITUTE (VAI)
Excerpt From Speech By Kate Forbes, National Chair For Volunteers

Thank you for the ways you've risen to meet these challenges.

[PAUSE FOR AUDIENCE RESPONSE]

When we do our work, we're on the spot. Especially in the field.

Our adrenaline is pumping. It's chaotic and loud and sometimes messy and always stressful.

So it's good—really good—to step back once in a while to remember why we do all of this.¹ To think about what we accomplish every single day.

Let's step back a little in time.

The year 2006 is in its final days. In Alabama, emergency crews are dispatched to the scene of a gas leak north of Detroit. The Southeast Service Area, along with the West Alabama Chapter, dispatches Red

¹ meaning the VAI and all the internal work – perhaps indicate the room?

Cross Emergency Response Vehicles to serve snacks and meals to workers.

In Ohio, another major gas leak shuts down the main heating source for the entire town of Luckey, just south of Toledo. The Great Lakes Service Area, along with the Greater Toledo Area Chapter, opens a shelter at the local high school to protect residents from the night's 30-degree temperatures.

We've just about made it to the New Year. But first, in New Mexico, a slow-moving winter storm blankets most of the state, causing airport delays, stranding motorists and closing highways. The Southwest Service Area and chapters in Albuquerque, Colorado Springs, and Fort Collins open nine centers to serve more than 570 clients.

At the same time, a fierce storm spawns tornadoes throughout Texas. The Southwest Service Area and the Red Cross chapter in Waco spring into action, conducting disaster assessments.

On January 4, a windstorm destroys homes on a Blackfeet Native American Indian reservation in Montana. West Service Area chapters in Las Vegas, Nevada and in Great Falls, Montana are asked to conduct client casework for reservation residents whose homes were destroyed.

Reports like this are posted just about every 48 hours on Crossnet.

Every time I read them I'm amazed by the kind of work you do ... how you organize and put plans into action.

I look forward to seeing how that work evolves as we use the strategies we learned here at V-A-I.

Strategies for ensuring ethical volunteer work and interactions.

Strategies for building successful collaborations and service delivery through new sectors of the community.

Strategies for ensuring that we tap into and cultivate the natural empathy ... the natural empathetic instincts ... of Red Cross volunteers.

That word, "empathy," reminds me of something I just read.

I'm sure you've heard of Barak Obama. He's the junior senator from Illinois and also a best-selling author.

In his latest book², Senator Obama writes about his friend, the late Senator Paul Simon.

² The Audacity of Hope

And I quote:

“...people sensed that he lived out his values; that he was honest; that he stood up for what he believed in; and perhaps most of all that he cared about them and what they were going through. That last aspect of Paul’s character—a sense of empathy—is one that I find myself appreciating more and more as I get older.”

Senator Obama goes on to say he feels our country is suffering from an empathy deficit. That we don’t ask this question often enough: ‘How would that make me feel?’

Empathy must be a key characteristic of today’s leaders. Any leader.

Empathy is the ability to serve someone because you can imagine how they feel, what they need, how they can best move forward.

And because you’re willing to stand up for what you believe in.

Empathy is a wonderful, wonderful quality; one that saves.

I know you’ve seen it.

I know you've felt it, experienced it.

So have the people you've served.

Like Vivian Waddell in North Carolina.

She was leaving her home one morning last fall when a tornado struck. In a Red Cross report, she recalls: "We continued to have tornado warnings after the first one struck, and I couldn't believe it when I saw the Red Cross vehicles in the neighborhood, even though we were afraid another tornado was coming."

More than 60 Red Cross volunteers from across the country responded to that disaster, including Anne Evanco.

Another tornado survivor told us about Anne.

"Now, let me tell you something about Anne," she said. "After it happened, everyone was out in their yards, just trying to process it. The adults were very busy, trying to find survivors, and there was a 6-year old boy standing there crying. We were all worrying about grown-up things, and Anne saw that this little boy needed someone. She came up to him and gave him cookies, a smile, and a hug. She was priceless."

Empathy in action!

Another successful volunteer management story comes from the city of St. Louis, left powerless from an ice storm last year.

The American Red Cross St. Louis Area Chapter worked through the first night of the outage to set up five emergency disaster shelters. By the next night, nearly 300 men, women and children had arrived.

One shelter visitor, who is the caretaker of 94-year-old Erlene Hampton, said “We were welcomed with open arms. Two Red Cross volunteers helped get Erlene situated and another person found her a wheelchair. ... we have been treated royally and I don’t know what we would have done without this shelter.”

Finally, there is the story I read just after Christmas. It's the story of two young Marines—one from Maryland, the other from New York City—who met at boot camp and became fast friends. Their mothers became friends, too, staying in touch by phone after their sons were deployed to Iraq last summer.

Last fall, one of the young men was killed. The surviving Marine couldn't attend his funeral back in the States, and he begged his mother to go in his place to represent their friendship. But his mother was unemployed and didn't have the money to get from New York to Arlington National Cemetery.

Enter Kevin Burr, emergency services director for the Central Maryland chapter. He'd read about the young Marine's death in the local newspaper.

Kevin is a member of the chapter's Armed Forces Emergency Services staff. He and other members often reach out to the next of kin of fallen service members to tell them about the availability of certain Red Cross programs.

Well, after a few phone calls, Kevin heard about the mother's dilemma. Even though there isn't a Red Cross program that covers requests like this for non-family members, Kevin felt there had to be a way.

There was. His chapter found the funds. And Kevin attended the ceremony to personally deliver official Red Cross condolences.

He recalls: "As I went through the funeral home doors, I was immediately grabbed by family and friends and thanked over and over for our Red Cross help – it was a very emotional and humbling experience."

The mother of the fallen Marine later said: "The Red Cross, it was so kind of them to even call. They handled everything so professionally and [with such] caring...I can't say enough good things."

[PAUSE]

So you see I have no doubt that American Red Cross volunteers and the leaders who guide them have empathy.

You use empathy as a catalyst for action.

As you work in challenging conditions, strive for that empathetic connection.

As you recruit and lead and put to practice the knowledge you've gained here, strive to cultivate that quality in those around you.

Ask often: "How would that make me feel?"

[PAUSE]

And now, I am at the end.

After these past few days of travel and meeting and greeting and listening and learning, I'm choosing to end with a quiet celebration.

I believe that, for us to do the work we've chosen to do, it helps to tap into that still, small voice deep inside.

We've each got one.

That still, small voice that always tells the truth.

I suspect that many of you already find strength, purpose, and an endless source of energy, by listening in.

As this V-A-I draws to a close—as we prepare to step back into the world as empathetic, ethical and experienced leaders—I invite you to listen in.

So would please close your eyes for just a moment?

Close your eyes, and then picture in your mind a place that brings you peace.

And then listen.

We're going to be silent for a moment. Don't worry about what you're listening for, just listen.

[PAUSE FOR MINUTE]

Now it's time to leave that peaceful place. But remember that you can go back any time you want!

Now, open your eyes.

[BRIEF PAUSE]

That was a quiet celebration.

I celebrate you.

Your empathy, your dedication, your vision, your intelligence, your passion.

Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Viva V-A-I and I hope to see many of you again.