

# Mark Sloan: “The Voice Of Calm,” Coordinating Volunteers

At the time of Katrina, Mark Sloan worked for Harris County Judge Robert Eckels in Homeland Security Special Projects. Eckels spearheaded the Citizens Corps Initiative, which included the thirty-four jurisdictions within Harris County, all local law enforcement agencies, fire departments, EMS, as well as members of nonprofit agencies, faith-based community, and business partners, to ensure better planning, preparation, and response to disasters. As a result of this working relationship, Mark Sloan assumed responsibility for coordinating the mass of volunteers who made the Katrina relief effort possible. Ernesto Valdés interviewed Sloan on August 14, 2006.



*A volunteer helps distribute supplies for babies.*

All photos courtesy of Mark Sloan.

**MARK SLOAN (MS):** I don't think that a plan existed to utilize 60,000 volunteers, to build a mega-shelter the size of Katrina Relief—as we called it, Reliant City—and do that in a very short period of time. . . .

We found out during Katrina that, with over 100 agencies, there wasn't one nonprofit agency that could coordinate the size and the scope of that disaster. . . . That is when the judge tapped the Harris County Citizen Corps to take over the volunteer coordination for the entire operation at the Astrodome. . . .

**ERNESTO VALDÉS (EV):** When you realized that you had this obligation, what was your priority?

**MS:** Looking for help. . . . I actually received a phone call after being at the Dome for about thirty hours . . . and found out that the entire volunteer coordinating effort was going to be transferred over to the Citizen Corps. . . . When we put the request out for volunteers [through an email] to find out how many could help, in the first twenty-four hours, over 8,000 volunteers showed up. . . . I put a command structure in place with specific tasks and obligations . . . so that we could run it like a business,



*Two volunteers work together to set up cots in anticipation of receiving thousands of Katrina evacuees.*



*A Red Cross worker spends time on the Dome floor. The volunteers helped with basic necessities, but most importantly, created an atmosphere of hope.*

take orders, and distribute our supplies and our resources, which were the volunteers. . . . After [about] the first six hours, we were able to have a process in place and work pretty efficiently. . . .

I was able to tap into our pre-trained community emergency response team members to fill specific roles, and volunteers that came in from other parts of the country filled specific needs and roles within our organization. We had Volunteer Houston coordinating all company business and group volunteers. For instance, Shell Oil called and said, “We would like to send over fifty volunteers every three hours.”. . .

We had six to eight individuals, volunteers that coordinated the volunteer check-in location [and] . . . monitored the elevators, escalators, . . . [and] parking lot [to direct other volunteers]. We had volunteer coordinators at the faith-based table so, if they were sent to the Salvation Army, they could be processed . . . to get access to the floor. . . .

We tried to establish a schedule so that everybody could have eight hours to go and decompress, relax. We had on-site facilities to sleep at Reliant—a dark room with probably thirty to forty cots—so you could go in there and sleep if you needed to . . . For a lot of us, the daily activities didn’t change. We still went to work, we still went to school, and our community still functioned . . .

[We] let everyone that was working with us, either as a volunteer or as an employee of an agency or jurisdiction, know that failure wasn’t an option; success was what we were going to do. . . .

One message I got from the judge’s office, and I don’t know if it came from the judge directly: “Just be the voice of calm.” . . . The perception that we gave off to the volunteers was that everything is running smoothly and fine. What we wanted to do was to change the image of the negativity that was actually out in the public about Katrina, [to] let them know what was going on, and that we can make a difference.

That is something that the judge has stressed all along. This is not about one group, one agency: it is a partnership. . . .

In retrospect, when you sit back and actually watch what occurred in twenty-four hours, it is mind boggling—the coordina-

tion, the building of a city with all of the things that needed to be in place, and have those resources and people available, is amazing . . .

**EV:** What was your typical day like?

**MS:** I would usually be there at 4:00 a.m., park, and it could be a variety of different things.

During the day, we would have three incident command briefings—8:00 a.m., 1:00 p.m., and 8:00 p.m.

After those meetings, I would go down to the volunteer unit, find out the current status, follow up on current volunteer needs. I would be able to talk to the different agencies on what they anticipated in volunteers. It might be ARAMARK, our food service provider, where on the first few days, they needed 500 volunteers to man the food distribution areas. . . . We would work with the JIC [Joint Information Center] in terms of any celebrities that might be coming . . . So, the days would change.

**EV:** Did you keep your own personal diary?

**MS:** I wrote down notes of things that I want to remember to do and change if we ever did this again. . . . I’d jot a note: remember that if you send an email and ask for something, that you need to make sure that you are prepared to get what you ask for. . . . We decided [to] ask the Citizen Corps how many volunteers would be available because, again, everybody was still . . . doing their thing. I sent out an email, “Can you help? . . .” I received 1,000 emails an hour saying, “Yes, we will”; and it was . . . forwarded to thousands more. It took out my email system . . . So, the first lesson learned—you get what you ask for. Be more specific in things you want. . . .

The most significant thing—what made this different or greater than any aspect of our response—was [being] a prepared community. When I was at a briefing on Capitol Hill, . . . one of the individuals in the Department of Homeland Security, who happened to be in Europe during the event, couldn’t believe the negative response that he was seeing globally to New Orleans and the things that were going on [there]. He basically came back and said that the activities that took place in Houston changed the view of America globally. ♡