**How disaster recovery in North America can benefit from VAN social organizing software**

**The Problem:** *Recovery efforts need optimization and coordination for on-the-ground relief.*

Major disasters trigger *billions* of dollars in recovery spending, much of it going toward deploying thousands of personell to interact with affected residents and infrastructure. Federal agencies alone deployed over 17,000 field personell during Hurricane Sandy recovery[1]. This was before counting other levels of government, private and non-profit relief, faith based organizations, contractors, and other responders.

Despite the need to optimize and coordinate this field effort, there is a dearth of proven technology to target affected residents, manage field staff, and facilitate coordination throughout the recovery ecosystem. Early responders often start with very little knowledge about the people and infrastructure in an affected area. Residents report being surveyed again and again by staff from the same or similar organizations. Data is often lost or left in an unusable state when one organization leaves a disaster zone and takes their software with them.

Overall, with billions of dollars and millions of person hours spent, even small efficiency gains could drastically improve the outcomes that we get from aid efforts.

**The Opportunity:** *Extend field organizing solutions from campaigns to disaster recovery.*

NGP VAN has created the world’s leading field organizing product to allow loosely affiliated political campaigns and other aligned social organizing groups to cooperatively target, contact, and build individual histories over a period of months in a large universe of potential voters or activists.

Political campaigns face a problem very similar to disaster recovery. Starting with a large voter universe, they use the VAN to target key individuals based on geography, demographics, and other criteria. Through multiple channels of communication, the campaigns build knowledge on individuals which then drives future interaction with those voters. This interaction often includes educating people and helping them to complete voter registration, attend community events, and share transportation on election day.

The miniVAN mobile app and Turf Cutter system have brought huge gains in efficiency for door to door canvassing. MiniVAN allows volunteers with basic training to get a list of target voters, see data about them in the field, and record data with or without an internet connection. Turf Cutter saves thousands of hours for field organizers who can now manually or automatically segment a map of addresses into walkable sections, and export lists of the contained voters straight to field organizers.

Crucially, the VAN’s multi-tenant model has also allowed campaigns throughout the Democratic sphere to maintain key private data while working together to accumulate modelling data and knowledge about individual voters - a huge advantage up and down the ballot in 2012 elections.

Campaign field organizing technology has already proven effective in other realms. Several states and Enroll America have successfully used this technology to successfully coordinate healthcare exchange sign up efforts. These programs share much in common with recovery efforts to target qualified residents and walk them through the process of aid and insurance applications in the wake of Katrina, Sandy, and other disasters.

**Alternatives**

**Challenges**

Data Sources: The VAN product is most effective when there is a starting universe of person data. This is most often the voter file, although in some cases consumer data, union membership lists, or existing email lists will serve as the foundation. Using a voter file for disaster recovery may not be legally appropriate, and also leaves out large swaths of the population.

Political Perceptions: Although the technology is opinion free, there may be resistance to adopting software produced by a company strongly connected to progressive movements and the Democratic party. We should emphasize this as an extension of non-profit work.

Training and existing trained user base: The lack of experienced upper and mid level admins may make it hard for disaster response organizations to use the VAN effectively.

The system is designed with the expectation that skilled admins will oversee the setup of data access and user permissions. In the progressive organizing world, top level admins gain skills as they move from campaign to campaign, and lower level admins can go through training pipelines like Organizing For America and National Organizing Institute.

For a successful disaster recovery deployment, NGP VAN might need to provide more than usual support in terms of initial administration and setup.

Data and Administrative Ownership: While VAN makes it easy for loosely connected organizations to share and coordinate data, someone still needs to own the data and the site instance.

A large federal organization like FEMA might more easily acquire the funding and expertise to manage a site, but generally FEMA does not get involved until after response and recovery efforts are underway. Also, federal government contracting regulations are likely more onerous than state or local rules.

Alternatively, the VAN site and data could be managed at the local level. Medium and large cities usually have an Office of Emergency Management, and the types of disasters that get FEMA involvement always have a local incident commander to oversee all organizations involved in relief and recovery. The city government might also be in a better position to build a file of residents and buildings.

Customizations for Disaster Recovery: For a serious roll out, customizations may at least need to include language changes to reflect disaster recovery and not social organizing.

**Next Steps**

As a first step to validating this idea, we can partner with FEMA or a local government to use VAN in a disaster response training or simulation. Medium and large cities perform these types of simulations regularly.

We should seek approval to set up the training exercise site with regional data from the National Voter File Coop. This would allow us to get a site setup cheaply and easily, even if actual rollout would later use a different file.

To test the efficacy of the product, we can work with the MIT Humanitarian Response Lab to design a study assessing the impact of VAN software during the simulation compared to other alternatives.

[1] “Hurricane Sandy FEMA After-Action Report” <http://www.fema.gov/media-library-data/20130726-1923-25045-7442/sandy_fema_aar.pdf>