

Partnering for Disaster Relief

BY RHODA WEISS

After the tragedies of September 11, the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) asked its 20,000 members how public relations professionals could best help the country. Thousands responded, and their top recommendation was to help the Red Cross help Americans.

"Because the Red Cross is always at the center of disaster-relief efforts and public relations professionals often play essential roles in communications during a crisis, we realized that we could have a significant impact by working together," said Kathleen Lewton, past president of PRSA and a well-known expert in health care communications.

As a result, in October 2001, PRSA and the American Red Cross announced a joint partnership: "The Power of Two." This program recruits and trains public relations and public affairs professionals to support Red Cross communications and public information initiatives during local and national disasters.

"The immense need for trained public relations support was apparent even before the events of September 11," said Darren Irby, disaster communication officer, American Red Cross, who noted that PRSA chapters and members, as well as health care communicators, have long worked informally with local Red Cross chapters.

"However, the scope of the current crises has taxed our staff and volunteers; going forward we will need the support of public relations professionals year round," he added.

The partnership has a unique "power of two" approach to involve communications professionals on the local and national level:

- *2-Hour Volunteers* assist with writing public service announcements or training videos
- *2-Day Volunteers* serve as media spokespersons during local or national disasters
- *2-Week Volunteers* travel to a disaster site to provide public relations support for a large-scale disaster relief operation
- *2 Times A Year Volunteers* provide expertise as a member of the Red Cross Public Relations



Ms. Weiss is a Santa Monica, CA-based health care consultant and speaker.

Planning Committees

The first group of volunteers has already undergone a special three-hour training session last October during the PRSA International Conference in Atlanta. This "fast-track" training replaced a longer process that was usually conducted at the local level and gave the Red Cross immediate and much-needed influx of public relations support. Since then, more than 200 public relations professionals—in addition to large teams from local PRSA chapters—have signed up to receive on-the-job crisis communications training and experience. "By becoming a registered member of a national disaster database of communications professionals ready to serve, public relations practitioners can translate their compassion and skills into immediate action for the American Red Cross disaster relief efforts," stated Joann Killeen, 2002 PRSA president.

Expanding on the partnership, students who are members of the PRSA collegiate chapters (Public Relations Student Society of America, or PRSSA) are joining their professional colleagues and educators in signing up for "Spend the Summer With the Red Cross" to help manage disaster relief efforts.

Additionally, the Red Cross and PRSA have established honorary summer disaster communications internship positions at Red Cross chapters across the country. The goal of these internships is to provide extensive on-the-job public relations training, with an emphasis in disaster communications.

The beauty of the "Power of Two" program is that it can extend beyond the Red Cross and be adopted by Catholic hospitals across the country to assist them not only in times of crises, but as a way to access voluntary communications assistance throughout the year. □

To learn more about the Red Cross/PRSA partnership online, go to www.prsa.org. For further information, contact Rhoda Weiss at 310-393-5183 or at RWeiss@memnet.org.