

Common Ground

Volunteer Summer Orientation Outline - 2006

Make sure you have:

- Waivers
- Volunteer Handbooks
- Maps
- House gutting manual
- SMA volunteer cards
- Index Card to put on beds
- Remember to ask all new volunteers to sign up for three shifts a week of: grounds, kitchen and security

Orientation Outline

- 1) Welcome and Intro
- 2) Overview: Common Ground, Politics/History
 - a) What happened
 - b) Story of CG – creation myth
CG Programs
 - c) Contextualizing CG
 - i) History of New Orleans and racism
 - ii) Story of Katrina – racism during storm
 - iii) After effects
 - d) Solidarity not charity – respect
- 3) Logistics of Living at CG
 - a) Living communally
 - b) Volunteer Agreements: Sexism and Sexual Harrassment, Alcohol
 - c) Health and Safety
 - d) Security
 - e) Daily schedule
 - f) Deal with media
 - g) Legal/NOPD stuff
- 4) How We Organize the Work...

Orientation Notes

1) WELCOME & INTRODUCTION

- Get everyone to intro themselves and say one word they are feeling – in a big group, ask for a few people to throw out their words, popcorn style
- Intro yourself, thanks for coming, you are part of history in the making
- review what will be covered: history, analysis, communal living, health and safety, work, media, police etc....

2) OVERVIEW

- Over 80% of city flooded, can go for miles and miles in every direction and things were wreaked...still are
- Over 250,000 homes destroyed, over 300,000 people displaced to 50 states
- The hurricane didn't do the damage; the breaking of the levees did.
- Literally the whole social infrastructure went down and the first response was a militarization of the city.

COMMON GROUND STORY

- Malik Rahim— long time community organizer and activist, member of the Black Panther Party, Green Party candidate for City Council – put out a call for help because white vigilantes from Jefferson Parish formed in the days after the storm, literally shooting young black men down in the street.
- Friends from Austin answered the call and came to sit on his porch to protect him and his family.
- Malik and others saw the govt was not coming through – the govt didn't send relief workers, it sent the military. They put out a call for help and within days some street medics arrived. The first emergency clinic was set up and continues to this day and has served over 15,000 people for free
- Soon after our first distribution center right out of Malik's back yard, and efforts to aid people in their homes, cleaning up the streets, removing dead animals and in one case a body was underway. We started mobile distribution to over 25 small communities and out to the Houma area that was hardest hit by Hurricane Rita. We were literally driving trucks through the flood waters to get to these predominately Native American Communities. We also provided resources and worked in solidarity with the Vietnamese Communities, predominately out in New Orleans East.
- In those days we had no idea how Common Ground would evolve. With the level of militarization and harassment we weren't sure we'd last beyond a month. But we have survived and grown.
- But we have and as the needs of the community have become clearer our efforts have evolved! In many ways it has become holistic approach – everything that people might need is now available. We have literally been building a parallel social structure for some of the most neglected communities.

CG PROGRAMS - all of these programs offer opportunities for volunteering (Could go at end)

- Operated or initiated **6 Distribution Centers** – in 4 Parishes: New Orleans, Terrebonne, Plaquemine's and St. Bernard. We have served close to 70,000 people and provided millions and millions of dollars in aid.
- **Emergency Home Repair** - Debris removal, house gutting, mold abatement. We have cleaned hundreds of homes and community spaces like churches, day care centers and a school and in some cases restoring them completely
- **Free Health Care** – now operating a primary care clinic, a health center and a Latino Healthcare Outreach Project, we have also offered mobile clinics

- **Legal team** – began by documenting police abuse, have tracked unjust arrest, offer a free legal clinic weekly and done a lot of anti-eviction work
- **Communications Work** - Media Center: In the early day people needed to find loved ones, fill out forms etc. This has evolved into ongoing media Centers with free internet and phones. We also now produce a newspaper..
- **Women’s Center** – with resources and emergency housing
- **Kids and Community project** – there are still a limited number of schools open, so we have started an after-school programs with plans to build child care cooperative
- **Meg Perry Healthy Soil Project and Food Security Program** - Need clean environment so started bioremediation project and cleaned numerous community gardens.
 - o We did independent sampling early on and then downloaded and analyzed about 75,000 samples of EPA data. In all of that there is only one site that does not exceed Louisiana Health Care standards. Example Petroleum Hydrocarbons – safe levels is 65. There are over 240 sites that exceed it with the maximum being around 246,000! No short term risk, but certainly long term consequences for the community.
- We’ve put over **700 bikes** into the community and offer a repair shop.

RACISM AT WORK

In all of this work, Common Ground has made strategic choices on where we put our resources. We know that many of the problems existed long before the Hurricanes. We understand that Hurricanes Katrina and Rita did not discriminate, but the Government did!

This traces back to the fact that:

- o New Orleans was the country’s largest port for slaves – over half of the country’s slaves came through it.
- o This led to a culture of racism in this city that is still persistent today
- o This same history is what has also led to an extremely rich culture: food, music, culture of city is very much based on African-American culture
 - Treme, once a plantation became the oldest free black community in the US; the lower 9th had the most black homeowners of any neighborhood in the country.
 - St. Augustines Church – founded by free black and slave could worship.
 - Family networks are very strong - People live in the same neighborhoods as their extended families, in the same houses that their grandparents built.
 - Congo Square – in Louis Armstrong Park one area that slaves could gather, drum and build network
- o Post-Katrina, this network was shattered – families scattered across the country, in 50 states including Alaska and are NOT encouraged to return – the health care system is stretched, schools are still limited, housing is limited, utilities are still down – how could people return?

- People's Institute trainer told us that if we do not understand how Racism Works, you will just be confused because it does not make sense in any other way!
- Post-Katrina plan could be called the largest gentrification project in US history– If the white ruling elite could have their way, the Black Community would not return and we'd see a huge land grab for what some call plans for a giant Disney Land – with more casinos and expensive housing.
- Katrina was natural disaster but the Government response during and after the storm made it a national tragedy. Example: lower 9th.
 - Residents were left without ways to get out
 - Neighborhood was closed till December 1 by military and no residents allowed inside, then a curfew continued for months. Nothing was offered – trailers, electricity etc.
 - St Bernard's, a mostly white parish next door is 2 feet lower in sea level and they were allowed back in and got debris removal, electricity, trailers, etc. much quicker
 - Clean up is finally underway and some restoration is beginning.
 - Current - Entergy has been working (slowly) on restoring the electricity north of Claiborne – which has been a fight – the Blue house now has juice as do streetlights. The area south of Clairborne has both trailers and electricity - Holy Cross is in somewhat comparable condition to the Upper 9th.
 - The lower 9th seems to be top on the list when it comes to cutting the city's footprint, even though that wouldn't be the first choice if just going on geographical considerations. A thought: something, to me, that drives home the racism point regarding the L9 is to contrast the recovery effort with that of Sept. 11 - the lengths they went through in NYC to identify every piece of bone fragment as compared to bodies being found in plain sight down here months after the storm.
 - Common Ground is organizing with the people to get back into their homes if that is what they want. We know that unless people can come home and organize, they will be left out of the recovery process.

ASK GROUP – what are other examples of how racism permeates what is happening on the ground...

- Prisoners were left in cells flooded waist deep in water
- Captain of 5th Districts lead people over bridge to dry ground finding themselves stopped and shot at by Jefferson Police. He was called all kinds of names and accused of stealing the uniform.
- African Americans were criminalized and called looters and shot at.

At Common Ground we began with two main missions:

- Short term relief and long term support for community stabilization in just and sustainable ways.
- We quickly realized we have another responsibility as well. We have been bringing in lots of volunteers – most but not all are white, most but not all are young, most but not all are middle class, and educated
- We are using race and class privilege to re-distribute resource to those who have the least, poor, black, native American, Vietnamese, elderly, disabled, single moms and those who are ready to come back home.
 - We ask people to come with some humility and respect.
 - To Listen and learn

- To keep open and realize there are gift here for you
- To consider beginning a life commitment to anti-racists work
- To go home and perhaps see that Katrina has happening in own community – not through flood waters but government action

Solidarity not Charity

- strive to listen to the community – what they need, not what we think they should want
- we're not a charitable organization, we don't give and leave
- majority of our volunteers are young, white, well educated, etc. we also have a responsibility towards the volunteers so we have anti-racist trainings, etc.
- we try to remember this quote: "If you've come to help, we don't need your help. But if you've come because you recognize that your liberation is wrapped up in mine, then let's work together"

3) LOGISTICS OF LIVING AT CG

St. Mary's – Important community institution. During the hurricane over 200 residents made their way there and were stranded for days before being airlifted off the roof. At least one person died in the process. See writing on chalk board on the third floor.

You can't expect the same level of comfort you have at home, the resources are limited and good will and cooperation will go a long way to making this work....

Communal Living

- difficult to live well with hundreds of other people – you have to have a lot of respect for your own and other people's boundaries. Examples:
 - o communal bathrooms, respect other people. Don't leave your toothbrush there for example
 - o Keep all your stuff together on or under your bed – don't leave stuff around
 - o Keep important things labeled with name and use security closets or lockers for valuables
 - o Don't walk around in towels or believe it or not – Naked!

Waiver

- Review what is on the back of what you signed...
- No drugs or alcohol on any CG sites
 - o if you're going to drink, and don't come back drunk and if you do, please go straight to bed
 - o Have a designated driver or take a cab
 - o only problems we've have had can all be linked to intoxicated
 - o comes back to respecting this community – residents are allowing us to stay in their community centers – Baptist church and catholic school – they've asked us not to have any drinking or drugs on premises.
- No stealing shit – that sucks
- No tolerance for racist, sexist, homophobic remarks or action.

Sexism, Sexual Harassment and Assault have been re-occurring issues here. This is something we all need to pay attention to and be vigilant against. We have set up a men's group as well as gender caucuses for spaces to talk about these issues. Most important if for people to understand issues of CONSENT....

If you have some expertise and want to offer trainings or facilitate discussion that would be great.

But in this moment – we want to say that sexual harassment and abuse can be against women, men or transgendered people. The majority of the time however it is men who are abusing their power so...

To those who identify as MALE - We need you to be really conscious about your behavior. If you see a guy, that is acting inappropriately – please talk to them instead of hoping that someone else will do it. If you can't please let someone else know.....

To those who identify as FEMALE ...if you have been treated inappropriately, please let one of the site coordinators or someone from the conflict mediation team know. If you can't please ask a friend to let us know.

We are serious about dealing with these issues, but we cannot do anything if we do not know.

Health and Safety

Go to Safety training to learn about protective gear. Every morning.

CG has been on the ground longest and we work hard to make sure you have the information and gear you need to do the job in as safe a way possible.

Physical:

- wash your hands a lot
 - o wash them well – plus anti-bacterial
- drink lots of water
 - o not tap water
 - o don't put your bottle on the tube from the filter
 - o water keeps you hydrated and flushes toxins from the body
- keep cuts really clean
 - o especially before and after going to moldy houses
 - o good way to prevent Staph infection – bacteria carried on skin, some strands are endemic in NOLA.

Mental:

- living here can be intense emotionally – listening to residents, living communally, hard work, etc.
- do whatever keeps you sane in the real world – keep doing yoga, journaling, etc.
- talk to your friends – check in before going to bed
- write and document what you're experiencing and feeling

Security

This is a huge issue, as the make-up of the community changes, with summer heat here, things are becoming more pressurized. The drug wars and violence are coming home. Residents in the areas we are working have asked us repeatedly to keep volunteers from walking around at night. We've had volunteers held up and robbed. This is not a game. When shit happens the police come around, often making matters worse.

- don't walk alone go with buddies
- don't walk around at night – period. Get a ride
- take a flashlight when you go out and it's going to get dark soon
- watch out for huge potholes

- use security rooms at sites

Stealing has also been a big problem. Keep things in security closet or in your car..

Everyone needs to help with security shifts

Daily Schedule

- 6:00 – wake up and breakfast
- 6:15 – work place safety training at St Mary’s
- 6:30 - Work crews get necessary gear – safety gear and tools
 - you won’t always go gutting – we need people to keep this organization functioning on grounds and in the kitchen, etc.
- 12 ish pm – lunch is served – bring snacks and water with you in the AM because lunch can be late
- 2:00 – 3 ish – go back and decontaminate
 - don’t go into any housing site without decontaminating fully
 - don’t walk through in boots
 - don’t bring anything inside – wood, cool scrap metal, found treasure – leave everything there – but if you have to have it decontaminate it – keep our homes healthy.

Trying to put together some afternoon trainings and educational activities
Or Lighter work at site or in neighborhoods

- 6:00 ish – dinner
- 7:30 Evening Meeting – Work Crew Assignments
evening programs

Often activities in the evenings – talks and trainings – look at calendars.

Media

- we want you to tell your story – get the word out
- people are forgetting about Katrina and you are most knowledgeable person around
- talk to media who come up to you here, contact media when you go home
- please only speak as to your own experience as an individual – don’t speak for Common Ground
- If they ask you questions about CG – its founding, goals, principles, etc., please refer them to the people listed in the back of your handbook.

Legal

Some quick things to be mindful of during while volunteering with Common Ground:

- Police are a tool of the state used to preserve existing classist and racist political and legal structures.
- The New Orleans Police Department is one of the most corrupt in the United States.
- The “criminal justice” system in New Orleans is not “just” at all. Persons are routinely harassed, assaulted and locked up by police in absence of probable cause or in absence of any wrongdoing whatsoever.
- Prisoners are routinely subjected to abusive conditions while incarcerated in Orleans Parish Prison (OPP) and receive woefully inadequate legal defense before the Court.
- Although there may be some genuinely honest and friendly police officers, generally, police are not your friends. It is best to stay as far away from police as possible.
- NOLA police will not hesitate to lock you up if you challenge their authority. If you have an encounter with NOLA police and decide to assert your constitutional rights, you will probably go to jail. To avoid jail, be as deferential and as conciliatory as possible to police. If you do choose to

assert your rights in confrontation with the NOPD realize that our resources are minimal, and avoidable issues are a drain of time, money and energy that could be more effectively utilized in other ways.

- Although we encourage you to have a good time in NOLA, please be aware of your surroundings. If you are pissing in the street, smashing bottles, acting stupid, etc., the police will not hesitate to lock you up. NOLA has laws against public intoxication and open containers. The only legal container is a plastic cup. You will spend at a minimum of twelve hours in jail and will probably have to pay a \$300 fine for each offense. Jail and fines are not fun.
 - If you do decide to go out to have a good time, please let someone know where you are going. Also remember, you can't call cell phones from prison, because all calls must be made collect.
 - If you are arrested, it is advisable to give the police your name and address. Contact someone as soon as possible to let him or her know you are in jail. You will go before a judge within 48 hours for a bond hearing. You may be released on your own recognizance or bond may be set as high as \$5000. Once bond is set, you may be released if you are able to post bond.
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- NOPD have bad reputation and have arrested people for stupid things – e.g. double-parking, peeing in public, cop-watching, outside bars.
 - History of abuse
 - CG has had mixed relationship with local police – in 9th Ward has been more positive
 - If you are stopped by the cops you can ask if being detained. If not go on your way
 - If you are getting arrested, tell somebody that you're getting arrested, your full legal name, your nickname and to call Common Ground. We have a great legal team that will work to get you out.
 - If you have no experience in “monitoring or cop watching” please do not try to intervene in a police action – it will likely get you in jail.

THE WORK WE ARE DOING

Lower 9th Ward Project: Was started in January, when we cleaned out and set up as a community meeting space and a space for people to sleep in order to challenge the curfew and prevent the bulldozing of homes. Today it hosts a computer center, temporary resident housing, a community kitchen, organizes with residents to clean up and rebuild including a health clinic opening July 2006.

Algiers – Woodland Apartments/CGC - Our vision of building a sustainable community has expanded in the Woodland Apartments where we have secured management rights to a 361-unit apartment complex on 13 acres. With a strong Tenant Association setting the plan, the residents are building a safe community--rents have been reduced, clean up and repairs begun, the community center, kids program, community garden and computer lab being planned.

Dulac Project: Provides a children's free breakfast program, a community center and distribution and gutting work. It is based south of Houma, in a town called Dulac. We have been working there since the fall – when we were literally driving trucks with supplies through flood waters to get to the people there. It is a predominately Native American area with five tribes of the Houma Nation being spread throughout the area. It is a little over an hour drive out to the bayou area southwest of New Orleans

Mid City: Is based out of the Iberville Warehouse, at 2323 Iberville St. near Canal and Galvez, where people can stay. The project is helping to clean schools and is working on getting a large city recreational center operational!

How Our Work is Organized

We have a good number of volunteers who are committed to certain projects for the summer:

- Kids and Community
- Bioremediation
- Wetlands
- Emergency Preparedness
- Legal
- L9th Ward

All areas we are working in – please let us know if you have a particular area of interest.

These groups may work on a different schedule based upon their project – everyone else is expected to participate fully in the relief effort by joining a work crew and volunteering for shifts of support work like kitchen, grounds and security.

- New volunteers will be asked to join crews or sign up for a shift at the evening meeting...
- Anyone with health or physical qualities that prevent them from gutting should make that clear. Also anyone with specialty skills: lawyers, doctors, nurses, educators, skilled workers: carpenters, plumbers, electricians, etc., check in with same person and we'll give you someone to contact to plug into those projects.
- Work crews need to fill out a form with a team name, the crew leader, the point person's name, cell number, if they have transportation and names of all the members of the team.
- Crew and Team leaders communicate daily to the work crew coordinators on the progress of work
- Teams may shift and flow with turnover
- Monday is a day off

P.S.

Call your parents or loved ones! They may be worried about you, so it's great to keep them updated – because if you don't call them, they call us and then we have to find you!

Last words

- Thank you for taking this time and making a sacrifice in your life to help challenge racism and greed and work to build a just and sustainable New Orleans! – you all are awesome and are making history

Some facts....

Percent of those displaced by Katrina who were from New Orleans: 50

* Estimated loss of New Orleans' black population if people are unable to return to flood-damaged neighborhoods: 80

* Number of FEMA trailer homes requested by New Orleans residents: 21,000

* Estimated number of those homes installed as of early February 2006: 3,000

* Percent of New Orleans small businesses destroyed by Katrina: 60

* Out of 200 samples taken in Orleans Parish, percent that exceeded the Louisiana state cleanup level for pollution in residential neighborhoods: 37

* Number of public school employees Orleans Parish is planning to lay off: 7,500

- * Percent of no-bid contracts that FEMA promised to re-bid in October that have been re-bid: 0
 - * Number of Orleans Parish prisoners who have not seen an attorney, some since before Katrina hit: 4,500
 - * Number of days until the 2006 hurricane season starts: 93
 - * Square miles of Louisiana wetlands lost from Katrina and Rita, which experts believe are critical to reducing storm surges: 118
 - * Amount of federal dollars that have been committed to date for wetland restoration in Louisiana beyond existing programs: 0
 - * Category of storm for which the Army Corps is currently authorized by Congress to rebuild the Louisiana levees: 2
 - * Category of Katrina when it hit New Orleans: 3
- Source: The Mardi Gras Index, February 28, 2006.

Facts About New Orleans as of December 2005 – January 2006

- Still finding bodies after 13 weeks. Death toll in LA is 1,053
- Suicides are up – double the national avg.
- Murders have dropped to almost none.
- 300,000 residents fled.
- 284,000 homes destroyed.
- 71,000 businesses shut down.
- Tens of thousands of trees toppled.
- Only 2000 or 6% of the 30,000 FEMA trailers requested have been delivered
- Only ¼ of the 3,400 restaurants are open.
- Only about 60,000 sleep in the city – out of ½ million.
- Of the city's 8 hospitals, only 2 are open, serving a population that swells to 150,000 during the day. Fewer than 15% of the doctors are back.
- Of 100 public schools only one was open, serving 500 students.
- Many areas are still without power, gas, phone and mail service.
- The national flood insurance program ran out of money and has temporarily stopped sending checks.
- New Orleans is bringing in about a ¼ of its usual income of \$450 million
- Losses in tourism are estimated to be \$1.5 million a day.
- Port is partially open – estimated \$100 million in damage, and port-dependant business lost close to another \$300 million.
- 30% of the port no longer exists.