

**Oral Testimony - United States Senate**  
**Suzy DeFrancis, Chief Public Affairs Officer, American Red Cross**  
**Thursday, May 5, 2011**

Good morning Mr. Chairman, Members and staff of the Subcommittee.

The recent deadly storms across much of the South and Midwest – including, Mr. Chairman, flooding in your home state of Arkansas – underscore the timeliness of this hearing.

As you know, the mission of the American Red Cross is to help people prevent, prepare for and respond to disasters.

Today, I want to talk about how social media is enabling the public to play a much bigger role in helping us with that mission.

I want to draw your attention to a gap that exists today between the public's use of social media in a disaster and the ability of disaster response organizations and relief agencies to act on that information.

Finally, I want to offer some thoughts about how all of us can help close that gap.

The American Red Cross is a 130-year old organization, and the tools we use to respond to disasters have evolved over the years. But perhaps the most exciting innovations are social technologies because they allow us to listen to and engage with the public as never before.

We saw this with our fundraising efforts during Haiti. When we rolled out our mobile giving campaign, Text HAITI to 90999, it was the social media community who took it viral. In the first 48 hours, there were 2.3 million re-tweets of our Text number as people sent it to their networks of followers. Before long, we had raised \$32 million dollars via text - \$10 at a time. And 42 percent of our text donors were under the age of 34.

We saw the same phenomenon with Japan. The earthquake happened at 2:47 a.m. east coast time in the U.S., and before most of us got to the office, our Text number was trending on twitter. Social media communities were already way ahead of us.

But new technologies are not just helping us fundraise, they are becoming part of our operational DNA.

In Haiti, we sent out 4 million text messages to Haitians about the symptoms of cholera and how to prevent and treat it.

Here at home, we have built a dynamic shelter map using Google maps to update our open shelter information. We provide this information to the public on our website and have built an iPhone app so people can find a shelter on their mobile phone.

We are also helping families connect in those first hours after disaster strikes through our Safe and Well website, where people can post their whereabouts and update their Facebook and Twitter status.

We are training Red Cross volunteers who deploy to disasters to use their smart phones and social media to let people know where they can go to find shelter, food and other services.

And we are creating a new digital volunteer role where volunteers can help us monitor, authenticate and route incoming disaster requests without ever leaving their homes.

We know that in a crisis, people turn to the communications tools they are familiar with every day, and disaster response and relief agencies must do the same.

An American Red Cross survey last year found that more web users get emergency information from social media than from a NOAA weather radio, government website or emergency text message system. And not only are they seeking information, they are sharing it. One in 5 social media users report posting eyewitness accounts of emergency events. If someone else is in need, they are enlisting their social networks to help or using facebook and twitter to notify response agencies.

And, they expect us to be listening and responding.

- 69% said that emergency responders should be monitoring social media sites
- 74% expected help to come less than an hour after their tweet or facebook post.

These are very high expectations. But today, they don't match reality. Most disaster responders are still not staffed to monitor or respond to requests via social media during major events.

At the Red Cross, we experienced a heartbreaking situation after the earthquake in Haiti when we began receiving tweets from people trapped under collapsed buildings. We didn't have a good way to handle those pleas for help. We had to go through the messages manually and try to route them to the right places. In some cases, it was too late.

These are life or death situations. And we must find ways to respond more quickly to pleas for help coming in from social media.

While we won't solve these issues today, we are making progress in collaboration with our partners as was just demonstrated in Alabama. People affected by the tornado were posting urgent needs at an online gathering point. Working with an organization called Tweak the Tweet, as well as with FEMA and Crisis Commons, we were able to share this information with the Alabama state Emergency Operations Center. For the first time we were able to connect crisis social data with decision-makers who can act on it.

We believe you can help us continue to find ways to link up social data with response. We also believe there is a role for the federal government in developing the next generation 9-1-1. The first and best choice for anyone in an emergency situation is to call 9-1-1. However, 9-1-1 should be compatible with Text and social media in this digital age.

If I can leave you with one thought, it is this: Social media is enabling real citizens to play a role in helping their neighbors whether it's down the street, across the country or around the world. What we do to help that process, will literally save lives and help ensure that our country is as prepared as possible to handle any disaster.

Thank you again for your leadership. I am happy to address any questions you may have.