

Feature Article

# Facing Up to the Challenge of Typhoon Yolanda: The Philippine Nurses Association Experience



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## Introduction

Considered as one of the deadliest tropical cyclones to have hit the country and the strongest typhoon recorded at landfall, Typhoon Yolanda (internationally known as Haiyan) swept across the Visayan region, leaving behind a devastation that mobilized national and international humanitarian efforts on a grand scale.

In response to the growing global awareness for the need for disaster preparedness, the Philippine Nurses Association (PNA), through its Disaster Preparedness Committee, has been training members from different local chapters on emergency and disaster management for the past four years<sup>1</sup>. The training seminar aimed to capacitate the participants and, eventually through them, their respective chapter members in preparing for and managing disaster events in coordination with government agencies and international humanitarian relief efforts. The PNA Board of Governors has also approved its Emergency Response Plan and Policy outlining the communication and coordination

mechanism in times of emergency and disaster. Networking and linkage with the Department of Health - Health Emergency and Management Staff has also been formalized through a Memorandum of Understanding making PNA a member of the Health cluster, Mental Health and Psychological Support Services (MHPSS) cluster and Water and Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) cluster.

When super typhoon Yolanda made its landfall and left devastation behind its path across the country, the capacity for response of the local and national government has been truly tested. PNA for its small part has also been challenged to review its preparedness efforts in terms of capacity building, policy and advocacy, as well as networking and coordination.

## Initial response

Immediately after news from national media about the devastation of super typhoon Yolanda started pouring in, the Emergency Response Plan of PNA was activated

<sup>1</sup> Fischetti, Mark (November 27, 2013)...



jumpstarting the communication and coordination between the PNA National Office and the Disaster Preparedness Committee to establish contact with the PNA local chapters of the affected areas. The use of social media was maximized, PNA website, facebook, twitter and email to ask for situational reports<sup>2</sup>. These reports became essential in determining the kind and extent of assistance to be provided.

A call for donations as well as for services to disaster survivors was issued, to which a good number responded. Early responses included those from Gov. Lolita Oracion (CAR Region), Gov. Fred Ruiz (NCR Zone 2), and former Gov. Ruth Tingda (PNA Baguio) for collection of donations at designated places. PNA officers and members who have participated in the national training seminars also started mobilizing their respective chapters to provide assistance to the typhoon survivors. These included among others coordination between PNA Region X through Gov. Neil Martin, Plan Philippines and UNICEF; response efforts to Tacloban City through PNA Davao City Gov. Roger Tong An in cooperation with the Office of the Mayor of Davao City; and PNA Cebu Chapter former President Jessie Empaces in participation with DOH Region 7<sup>3</sup>. Reports of their activities were regularly sent to the Disaster Preparedness Committee and the PNA National Office. The Disaster Preparedness Committee Chair Sheila Bonito with then PNA National President Noel Cadete and Vice President for Programs and Development Mila Llanes decided on priority actions for the response efforts of PNA. Priority actions included provision of calamity funds to local chapters severely affected,

organizing and mobilization of nurse volunteers to help in medical missions and relief operations, participation in the meetings with national agencies, particularly with DOH - HEMS, Philippine Medical Association, Department of Social Welfare, and several agencies.

#### **Provision of calamity funds to affected areas**

The PNA National Office through Executive Director Leonardo Nuestro initiated an active search and offering for calamity fund to PNA local chapters in affected areas.

#### **Organizing PNA nurse volunteers**

Anticipating the need for nurse volunteers for possible deployment to any of the affected areas and/or evacuation areas, the Disaster Preparedness Committee conducted a series of orientation seminars for nurse volunteers. The orientation briefed them on the current situation in the affected areas and the PNA response efforts and provided a review of psychological first aid, and prepared the nurse volunteers on what to expect during response activities<sup>4</sup>. A total of 42 nurse volunteers attended the orientations. These nurses, eventually, were deployed to assist in the "OPLAN Salubong for Yolanda Survivors" at Camp Aguinaldo last November 21 and in Villamor Air Base in Pasay City last November 26, 2013.

To put a system to the increasing number of nurses wanting to volunteer, PNA Disaster Preparedness Committee set up a database to screen the volunteers and for a more efficient communication and coordination. All volunteers were asked to register in this database to indicate their current affiliation, previous training and skills related to disaster management, and their availability for volunteer work. The enthusiasm and optimism among the nurse volunteers were very encouraging which reflected the spirit of caring and humanitarian heart of Filipino nurses.

#### **Oplan Salubong for Typhoon Yolanda survivors**

The rise in the number of survivors being flown in to Manila by Philippine and American C130s, being mostly from Leyte and Samar, prompted a decision from the national government to transfer the processing area from Villamor Air Base to Camp Aguinaldo in Quezon City.

<sup>2</sup> PNA Emergency and Disaster Management Committee Reports (2010-2013)

<sup>3</sup> PNA Situational Report on Typhoon Yolanda, November 13, 2013

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Sheila Bonito and Bettina Evio of the Disaster Preparedness Committee participated in the planning meetings conducted by the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC) together with DOH-HEMS and DSWD and other different agencies both from the local and private sectors in Camp Aguinaldo.

For this particular activity, PNA was tasked to handle triage and initial assessment of all survivors requiring medical attention, the "under 5" children, pregnant women, and senior citizens requiring vaccination, and assist in providing emergency treatment as needed. A total of 20 nurses took part in this during the day<sup>5</sup>, and an addition of six more nurse volunteers showed up for the evening shift.

When "Oplan Salubong" went back to Villamor Air Base, another group of PNA nurse volunteers were mobilized on November 26 to render health service, psychological first aid, and other forms of assistance as needed<sup>6</sup>. Participation was made possible through invitation from Ms. Navie Veloria from NV Life Coach, Inc., who has been providing counseling and psychosocial support services to survivors of Typhoon Yolanda since operations started in Villamor Air Base. To formalize PNAs volunteer work under the health sector coordination was made with DOH-HEMS. Since the activity lasted for several days, a schedule for shift work was organized.

#### **Mobilization of PNA Local Chapters<sup>7</sup>**

PNA local chapters have been very active in mobilizing their members in supporting response efforts in the affected areas.

PNA local chapters mobilized nurses from different sectors - academe, hospitals, community - to help in repacking supplies and goods in coordination with DSWD and PNRC for distribution to typhoon survivors in the different evacuation areas.

PNA Cebu Chapter, led by Chapter President Edith Santos coordinated with "Ang Nars Visayas", and DOH-Region VII in the relief efforts for Bantayan Island in northern Cebu. Forty nurses and 20 students were given orientation on MHPSS, WASH, Nutrition, and SPEED and deployed to Bantayan Island on Nov 14-17, 2013.

PNA Region X Gov Neil Martin and PNA Misamis Oriental Chapter President Mary Joy Neri coordinated with Balay Mindanaw for possible sending of nurse volunteers to join the medical team from Germany on medical mission to Panay: Capiz and Iloilo.

#### **Coordination with national agencies and NGOs**

The local chapters in the Visayan region continued their direct provision of relief efforts, services and assistance to the survivors of Typhoon Yolanda. The PNA National Office, on the other hand, continued coordination with national agencies and private organizations: DOH-HEMS, DSWD, PMA, PNRC, Project HOPE and PNAA, so that PNA can further determine the type and extent of assistance it could provide through its nurse volunteers.

#### **Conclusion**

By mid-April 2014, super typhoon Yolanda affected a total of 3,424,593 families (16,078,181 individuals) in Regions IV-A, IV-B, V, VI, VII, VIII, X, XI, and CARAGA, of which, 890,895 families (4,095,280 individuals) were reportedly displaced. Total number of dead individuals has increased to 6,300, while the number of injured and missing still remains at 28,689 and 1,061 persons, respectively<sup>8</sup>.

Humanitarian relief efforts will continue for quite a while as people move towards recovery and rehabilitation, and PNA nurses, within their respective local chapters, will continue giving their full support. Nurses are always at the forefront in any emergency and disaster event. The services they render are invaluable. But they can only maximize their full potential in facing up to the challenge of responding to disaster events at the level of their preparedness.

The experience that super typhoon Yolanda gave the country will not be forgotten for a long time, not only by those who suffered loss of family members and property, but also by those who stood to face the challenge of helping the survivors discover *Hope* at the end of the tragedy.

<sup>5</sup> PNA Situational Report on Typhoon Yolanda, December 13, 2013

<sup>6</sup> PNA Report, "Oplan Salubong for Typhoon Yolanda Survivors," November 21, 2013, Camp Aguinaldo (Submitted "Operation Salubong": Yolanda Survivors, Villamor Air Base, Pasay City, November 26, 2013

<sup>7</sup> PNA Situational Report on Typhoon Yolanda, December 13, 2013

<sup>8</sup> NDRRMC Update, "Effects of Typhoon Yolanda (Haiyan)," April 17, 2014