SAVANNAH, Ga. (AP) -- Less than a month after signing up as a Red Cross volunteer in Georgia, 67-year-old Al Lucas went to a Louisiana shelter filled with hundreds who lost their homes to Hurricane Katrina.

Nine months later, he's still on the roster as a disaster team captain for the group's Savannah chapter, one of thousands who remain active nationwide after first coming to the agency in Katrina's wake.

"The first thing that dawned on me was this was not going to be a unique situation," says Lucas, a retired Coast Guard air-rescue crewman. "These kinds of things could happen anytime, anywhere, to us."

His chapter and others have more than doubled the size of the volunteer units that the charity relies on in hurricanes or other disasters. Their experience matters as much as the numbers, said John Wright, emergency services director for the Savannah Red Cross on the Georgia coast.

"We've got people now that we had a chance to work with over the course of the last year, and we know they're good leaders and they work well under pressure," Wright said. "They had their trial by fire immediately."

The Red Cross recruited nearly 75,500 new volunteers -- bolstering an existing 160,000 -- after Katrina ravaged the Gulf Coast on Aug. 29, scattering Louisiana and Mississippi residents across the U.S. in need of food, clothing and shelter, said Renita Hosler, a spokeswoman for the national Red Cross.
The Red Cross won't know how many remain active until after the fiscal year ends June 30, but the number of volunteers trained to mobilize to disaster areas away from home has doubled in a year to 50,000.

"It's going to make a huge difference," Hosler said, because the group will have more volunteers closer to wherever they're needed.

Katrina boosted Red Cross recruitment across the U.S., not just in the hurricane-prone Atlantic and Gulf Coast regions.

More than 1,000 miles north of New Orleans, the Red Cross chapter in Grand Rapids, Mich., had 600 volunteers attending classes earlier this month for certification in first aid and other disaster-response skills.

Half were recruits who joined post-Katrina.

The turnout was double the normal amount, said Steve Chase of the Greater Grand Rapids chapter.

"People in the upper part of the country don't see the devastation nature can wreak. They're sort of disconnected. But not this time," Chase said.

The Red Cross played a big role in the Katrina crisis, raising $2 billion and mobilizing more than 200,000 volunteers. But it also faced criticism -- some from within its own ranks -- that it relied too heavily on inexperienced staff and was slow to reach some low-income minority areas.
Red Cross officials say having more volunteers with hurricane-response experience should help alleviate such problems this year.

It is also now offering introductory volunteer courses over the Internet, which could lessen the strain that some chapters felt last year as they were torn between aiding Katrina victims and training the flood of volunteers.

Metropolitan Atlanta, which has the South's largest Red Cross chapter, had 500 volunteers last year struggling to initiate 8,000 volunteers as more than 35,000 evacuee families arrived in the area seeking aid.

"So many groups of people said 'I want to help,' and we literally couldn't stop quickly enough to figure out how it would work," said Marilyn Self, disaster readiness manager for the Atlanta chapter. "It left some people frustrated and feeling like we didn't want them."

Of those 8,000 new volunteers, she estimates 250 remain active in her chapter. "That's a big number," she says, because it raised her total disaster volunteers to 750.

Days after Katrina struck, freelance computer technician Bill Smith drove 60 miles from his home in Waycross, Ga., for volunteer training with the Red Cross chapter in Brunswick. He arrived to find 120 other new volunteers seeking seats in a 35-seat classroom.

A church offered up its social hall, but still, "they had to keep bringing chairs into the room. There were people still coming in the door," said Smith, 33.

Two weeks later, Smith traveled to Gulfport, Miss., with Red Cross workers to help establish communication networks amid the wreckage. He returned twice more, over Christmas and in April.
Now he's getting ready to mobilize the next time a disaster strikes, spending the past week in Austin, Texas, at a training course for technical volunteers.

He's hoping his skills won't be needed. "But if I'm called, then I'll definitely be there to help," he said.