

# Community Volunteers: The Front Line of Disaster Response

M.A. Brennan and Rosemary V. Barnett  
The University of Florida, Gainesville

Courtney G. Flint, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

## INTRODUCTION

The dramatic and tragic events of Hurricane Katrina have highlighted the need for coordinated community-based volunteer efforts to prepare for, and respond to, natural and other disasters. National attention was drawn to the potential for wide scale destruction during the 2004 Atlantic hurricane season with devastating storms resulting in 27 federal disaster declarations across 15 states. Florida was particularly hard hit in 2004 by one tropical storm and four hurricanes causing continuous and cumulative damage. Unfortunately, these events were only a grim foreshadowing of the lost lives, devastated communities, disrupted economies, and demolished infrastructure that would come less than a year later to Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Texas, and western Florida during Hurricanes Dennis, Rita, and Katrina.

The recent disasters in the Gulf States underscore the problems and shortcomings associated with coordinating outside logistics, and show a clear need for local volunteers to serve as the first line of response to such catastrophes. This was most obvious in the first weeks after Hurricane Katrina, when volunteers and active community residents were the

rescuers, caretakers and, in many cases, the final comforting companions to the dying. They were the first, and often the only, line of response that would exist for weeks. Highlighting the importance of the local level, government officials immediately called on local citizens to volunteer their time, money, and sweat equity in addressing this massive and unprecedented natural disaster in America. Such calls took place long before significant government resources were committed. Most vividly portrayed in New Orleans, such local level action set a trend that continued in many places, particularly rural locales, for some time.

Such disasters are likely to occur again. The routine threats from hurricanes, tornados, flooding, and other natural disasters to the southeastern United States and elsewhere are well documented and predicted. In particular, given the trend of increased storm intensity, the likelihood of impending threat of severe hurricanes (Category 4 or 5) requires careful crisis and emergency planning strategies. When disasters do occur, citizen groups and coordinated efforts of local volunteers can respond to lessen the impacts and "build back better" (the theme from the 2005

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*M. A. Brennan, PhD*, is Assistant Professor of Community Development in the Department of Family, Youth, and Community Sciences at the University of Florida. He received his BS in Sociology from Salisbury University (Maryland), and his MS and PhD in Rural Sociology from the Pennsylvania State University. His primary teaching, research, and extension work focuses on the role of community action and volunteerism in the community development and decision making processes. Much of his work is conducted in an international comparative context focusing on natural resource management and community responses to planned or unexpected threats.

*Courtney G. Flint, PhD*, is Assistant Professor in the Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She received a BS in Geography from Northern Arizona University, an MS in Geography from the University of Colorado, and a PhD in Rural Sociology from Pennsylvania State University. Her research focuses on community response to ecosystem disturbance and integrating risk perception and local capacities for action into natural resource and risk management. She incorporates frameworks from community theory, risk, and disaster research, and ecosystem management in teaching and addressing natural resource related problems.

*Rosemary V. Barnett, PhD*, is Assistant Professor of Youth Development & Public Policy in the Department of Family, Youth, and Community Sciences at the University of Florida. She received a BS in Business Administration & Economics from Shorter College, an MEd in Counselor Education from Florida Atlantic University and a PhD in Higher Education Administration from the University of Florida. Her primary teaching examines risk and protective factors for youth, and analysis of current policy issues. Her research focuses on examining safety issues for youth in schools and communities. Much of her work is conducted by examining prevention programs for points of impact.

Tsunami recovery effort). Local residents will be the first responders. However, the process of organizing local residents must take place before, during, and after such catastrophic events occur (Berke, Kartez, & Wenger, 1993). This article identifies and suggests methods for linking local organizations, recruiting volunteers, and implementing coordinated action plans prior to, and after, the impact of natural disasters.

### IMPORTANCE AND ROLE OF COMMUNITY IN DISASTER PREPARATION AND RECOVERY

Communities have long been seen as helpless victims in much of the disaster and emergency management literature, where outside help has been seen as vital to returning conditions "back to normal" or to reducing social vulnerability (Berke et al., 1993; Flint & Luloff, 2005; Hewitt, 1998). In recent years, however, considerably more emphasis has been placed on the role of community in disaster recovery and the importance of local knowledge, action, participation, and control in determining the nature of disaster response (Anderson & Woodrow, 1989; Berke et al., 1993; Enarson & Morrow, 1998; Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), 2000a, 2000b; Mitchell, 1996; Natural Hazards Research and Applications Information Center (NHRAIC), 2001; Schwab et al., 1998; Stehr, 2001). Berke et al. (1993) looked beyond immediate disaster events: "The community can assume the role of active participant, rather than helpless victim. Local people can define goals, control resources, and direct redevelopment initiatives with long-term economic and social benefits" (p.93).

The local community serves a variety of functions that directly contribute to social and economic well-being. It is logical that the community should be the first line of defense in preparing and responding in the event of disaster. Local residents and groups are in a position to best identify their immediate needs, coordinate preparations, supplement official response efforts, implement emergency response programs, and contribute to local decision making for future events. Simi-

larly, local communities can provide a sense of connection, and decrease the isolation and abandonment that is often felt among residents in times of disaster. Such capacity to provide these community services does not always exist, but can be cultivated and should be encouraged and local communities empowered.

Viewing community from an interactional perspective provides a particularly useful vantage point when considering local level disaster response. From this perspective, the community is a dynamic field of interaction rather than a rigid system (Brown & Swanson, 2003; Luloff & Bridger, 2003). This process reflects the building of relationships among diverse groups of residents in pursuit of common community interests (Luloff & Bridger, 2003; Wilkinson, 1991). Through voluntary efforts, individuals interact with one another, and begin to mutually understand common needs (Brennan, 2005; Luloff & Swanson, 1995). From this interaction, voluntary efforts to improve the social, cultural, and psychological needs of local people can emerge. A central part of a community's interactional capacity is the ability to collectively construct meanings, respond to environmental and societal change, and attend to shared needs (Brennan, 2005; Flint & Luloff, 2005).

In all communities, a variety of groups exists with diverse skills and abilities combined with personal and professional experiences, which are essential to successful preparation and response to disasters (Independent Sector, 2001). Included are resident groups with needed professional and trade skills for damage control and assessment (engineers, environmental scientists, architects, contractors, and skilled laborers), disaster preparedness and response training (VFW, retired military/national guard/police), medical, psychological and social service delivery experience (health practitioners, counselors, religious/civic groups), as well as long time residents who have witnessed previous responses to natural disasters.

Effective community responses connect these diverse groups and develop action plans to meet common needs. The next section dis-

cusses opportunities created by the Community Emergency Response Team Program to coordinate preparedness and response activities at the local level. Successfully linking local organizations, citizens, and leaders provides a strong network and a method for local citizens and groups to become actively involved in local preparedness and response efforts. To be most effective, this process of capacity building must take place before disasters occur, and continue during and after such catastrophic events.

### APPLICATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR MOBILIZING COMMUNITIES AND VOLUNTEERS

Disaster preparedness and response is often hampered by the coordination of conflicting interests and differing pressures (Stehr, 2001). One way to mobilize local participation and readiness, while maintaining coordination among multiple jurisdictions and interests, is to establish Community Emergency Response Teams or CERTs. The CERT program, administered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), is a direct attempt to put into practice what disaster researchers and practitioners have acknowledged for some time—that a trained team of local volunteers can help provide effective disaster preparedness and disaster recovery. The CERT Web site (Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT), 2005) affirms this mission: “Naturals for the training are neighborhood watch, community organizations, communities of faith, school staff, workplace employees, scouting organizations and other groups that come together regularly for a common purpose. CERT skills are useful in disaster and everyday life events.”

CERT training includes disaster preparedness, disaster fire suppression, basic medical operations, and light search and rescue operations. Resulting groups are linked into the network of emergency management. As of August 2005, there were 1,966 community or county level CERTs across the United States (CERT, 2005). Unfortunately, funding for Citizen Corps, the umbrella organization that administers CERT, was cut from \$40 million in 2004 to \$15 million in 2005 (Grant,

2005). This is a worrying shift in light of the current disaster recovery situation and widespread acknowledgement of the need for greater local level participation in disaster situations. Nonetheless, the CERT program is a model framework for mobilizing local volunteers as the front line of disaster response.

Similarly, more general grassroots mobilizations can plan for, respond to, and rebuild in the aftermath of disaster. Included would be active efforts to bring together diverse local groups, the formation of local groups for planning, establishment of formal long-term visioning and goal setting for disaster preparation and recovery, and recruitment of experienced local citizens to take direct action. Similarly, the establishment of alliances between local groups could set the stage for a more effective sharing of resources and responsibilities during times of crisis. Such alliances can include the identification of organizations or individuals to serve as liaisons between local grassroots efforts and more formal structures (state and federal response organizations, military and national guard, emergency response agencies).

To maximize their impact, local groups or citizen coalitions should identify their possible contributions and assess their unique resources. In this setting, asset mapping can be a valuable tool, which allows the diverse skills, resources, and expertise of organization members to be identified and most effectively utilized (Green & Haines, 2002). Asset mapping is a useful way to prepare for impending disasters and to facilitate effective post-disaster development based on the unique character and niches of the locality. Such preparation and responses can also be further enhanced by incorporating local culture into development efforts (Brennan, Flint, et al., 2005). The unique culture of a location can provide opportunities for alternative development and response strategies.

### CONCLUSION

Local volunteers and community level action are essential to effective natural disaster preparation and response. They are particularly important in that these citizens are, in many cases, the first responders and have the

greatest chance to save lives and provide support in the hours and days immediately after disaster occurrences. Certainly, an effective community response would have diminished some, no matter how small, of the suffering and loss that occurred during and after the recent hurricanes. From the bowels of the Louisiana Superdome to the ravaged rural areas of Gulfport, Mississippi, some betterment could have been achieved if communication and logistical planning had effectively maintained crisis support.

An organized community and volunteer response could have helped in a number of ways before, during, and immediately after the recent disasters. They may have been able to

- coordinate a more successful evacuation and transportation effort, where instead thousands were unable or chose not to evacuate;
- provide some structure and order in places like the Superdome and New Orleans Convention Center, where instead chaos reigned;
- aid in organizing resources for distribution before and after the hurricane, where instead basic needs were left unmet for days; and
- decrease some of the isolation and sense of abandonment that quickly engulfed victims in the affected areas.

Community and volunteer coordinators have an obligation to help facilitate community organization and preparation to aid fellow citizens in times of such great need. The only thing that is certain in these times is that local residents will be the first capable of responding. In these disaster settings, local volunteers and community organizations are presented with an unprecedented opportunity to make a measurable impact on the human condition. The quality and extent of this response may hold the key to minimizing disaster effects, maintaining order, increasing hope, and maximizing recovery efforts.

It is time to bring local groups together in a concerted and coordinated effort to prevent future incidents of crisis-related chaos. In the end, facilitating local involvement in disaster

preparedness and response is about far more than the provision of basic and logistical needs. It ensures that local voices are heard, local struggles are recognized, and the dignity of local people is respected. With this capacity established, local citizens can respond and recover in a manner that improves local life. The response and rebuilding process will belong to the front line of disaster responders—community volunteers—who will reinvest in their communities.

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