

# Collaborative Relationships are Key to Community Resilience and Emergency Preparedness

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## ABSTRACT

The United States of America experienced two major incidents that changed the country's perspective on emergency preparedness: September 11, 2001 World Trade Center attacks, and Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Since that time the United States Department of Homeland Security established 10 separate Regional Catastrophic Planning Teams (RCPT) around the country. These RCPTs were set-up to inform, train and determine the effectiveness of mutual-aid coordination and prepare individuals, families and communities for an "all-hazard" environment. As RCPT members representing one state agency providing human services, the authors proposed an initiative, based on a working model they had already deployed in their own agency, to enhance emergency preparedness activities to include individual and community resiliency along with disaster and catastrophic planning. That request to expand the RCPT role, opened-up a dialogue to develop an innovative approach to collaborative partnerships. This shift afforded additional opportunities in times of a crisis, disaster or catastrophe.

## Keywords

Collaboration, planning, community, individual, resilience, engagement, emergency preparedness and problem solving.

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to emphasize the importance for organizations, institutions and governments (national, regional and local) to view the need for community engagement before an incident differently. This engagement requires that for optimum outcomes, the entire community (all individuals) should be involved, before an event, at all levels of emergency preparedness from planning and mitigation to response and recovery activities. In the United States of America (USA) the main foundational doctrine for national emergency preparedness is the National Response Framework (NRF). This is the national strategy for the United States Department of Homeland Security, formed about a year after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The focus of the NRF and the related National Disaster Recovery Plan and Homeland Security Presidential Directives (HSPD) is for "Management of Domestic Incidents, establish clear objectives for a concerted national effort to prevent terrorist attacks within the United States: reduce America's vulnerability to terrorism, major disasters, and other emergencies; and minimize the damage and recovery from attacks, major disasters, and other emergencies that occur" (United States Department of Homeland Security, 2008).

This paper has two parallel objectives, 1.) To present examples of effective collaborative community engagement in emergency preparedness as developed by several US state agencies and institutions, and 2.) To describe some innovative methods, policies and procedures that may enable communities impacted by disaster, to more effectively respond and recover. "In order for communities to be more adaptable, they must become skilled at communicating with each other and establishing relationships or networks prior to a disaster to more effectively respond and recover" (Hubert, J. Biggs, J.J., & Haines, V. June, 2006). Embracing that paradigm,

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the authors and several colleagues established a project working group of individuals with first-hand knowledge of current, but limited, collaboration trends in state government, institutions, individuals and communities, for the express purpose of assisting communities to become more resilient. The working group's focus was the application and enhancement of the limited collaboration models already in place to larger and more diverse areas.

## UNDERSTANDING IMPACT OF COLLABORATION

In 2003 the Illinois governor implemented an initiative to support the six most underserved communities in the State of Illinois. This initiative was called Team Illinois (TI), and it tasked thirty-three (33) state agencies to work collaboratively in these six (6) communities to build capacity and social infrastructure for a better quality-of-life. No additional budget dollars were allocated for this initiative; instead agencies were challenged to rechannel existing resources more effectively. Some early challenges the TI initiative encountered included: economic distress, local politics, and mistrust of state government and lack of relationships among the multiple government agencies, local municipalities, institutions and community-based groups.

To facilitate the process, a liaison from the Illinois Department of Human Service (IDHS) was assigned to coordinate the activities of partners and stakeholders to accomplish initiatives that were identified by each community's stakeholder group and published in a Community Action Plan. Several Liaisons facilitated meetings and interagency, multi-jurisdictional issues and tracked status on TIPS, a Team Illinois Projects Tracking System. TIPS was developed by a volunteer team of DeVry University Information Systems students.

It took approximately a year for all stakeholders to work through turf, budget, political and local issues before any significant progress became evident. During the following four years, success was achieved in assisting each community with collaborative strategic planning, problem solving methods and capacity building. The successful outcomes are attributed to people learning to discuss agreed upon options, collaborating to leverage resources and working across all sectors of governments, institutions and community based groups to reach designated outcomes.

Following are specific successes that measure the collaborative interventions and community capacity building services or activities accomplished by the Team Illinois initiative:

**CASE #1:** The community of Pembroke did not have a grocery store, bank, gasoline station, adequate roads, separate Zip Code designation, etc. Working with private and public entities, the community opened a 12 pump gasoline station with a grocery section, received funding for road improvements and was awarded a designated Zip Code for the township that of 52 square miles, which in turn allowed it to collect previously unavailable tax dollars (IDHS, 2011). Additionally:

- The Women, Infants and Children Food Centers, a US Department of Agriculture supplementary food program administered by the Illinois Department of Human Services, implemented a pilot program to address obesity and healthy eating issues by providing fresh produce (not normally provided) to its clients. The produce was supplied by farmers in the Team Illinois community of Pembroke, under contract with the WIC Manager, Catholic Charities, a not-for-profit organization. This contributed to job growth, better health, better food security and increased preparedness capacity in that area. Inspired by the success of this pilot Illinois initiative, a United States Congressman incorporated language in the 2008 Farm Bill that required all WIC Food Centers throughout the United States to offer fresh produce in their healthy foods initiative (Armour, 2009).
- Organizations, institutions, governments and community partners worked collaboratively, across jurisdictions, to coordinate and leverage resources without a formal budget or state appropriations.
  - o Diverse organizations shared responsibilities for funding projects.
    - Example: A Credit Union was established in Pembroke that had no bank or Automatic Teller Machine (ATM). This was accomplished through the then Lieutenant Governor (now Governor) meeting with financial institutions to fulfill the needs of a community.
  - o The Illinois State Police provided a \$225,000 grant for three (3) police officers for enhancement of police infrastructure and services to the community.
- The Illinois Emergency Management Agency (IEMA) conducted Community Emergency Response Team Training (CERT) for residents.
- The State Fire Marshall and IEMA provided fire department service and infrastructure – assisted in securing grant funding for a new fire engine.

The above is a partial listing of the 92 TIPS projects tracked for just one TI community (IDHS, 2009) and is representative of similar accomplishments in all six (6) communities.

**CASE #2:** Another initiative that involved multi-jurisdictional and inter-organizational collaboration took place in September 2005 when Hurricane Katrina struck distant Louisiana and Mississippi. The Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) was the lead agency for an effort I-KARE (Illinois, Katrina Assistance Relief Effort) that served, helped house, provided medical care and general assistance for 8,000+ evacuees from New Orleans, Louisiana and surrounding states. Services related to this disaster lasted for three years.

Although the Team Illinois (TI) model had yielded much success, supporting Hurricane Katrina victims was much different in many respects. Yet, at the heart of the Katrina response was the need for communities, governments and organizations to work together. Grass-roots collaboration, coordination and working through existing relationships were understood by IDHS staff to be critical to success. The TI initiative had demonstrated the effectiveness of state and community partners to collaboratively listen and work in a peer-to-peer mode. This was much different than the top-down (military) mode of dispensing services or providing assistance only to those who filled in the proper paperwork, correctly, at the right time. The TI model was modified in nature to reflect the Katrina urgency, but other elements were left intact. Contacts, relationships and methodologies formed during Team Illinois implementation were used to quickly form the foundation for an effective evacuee assistance response.

IDHS, working together with the Illinois Emergency Management and several other agencies began the implementation of I-KARE by sponsoring a series of community resource fairs, at which community-based organizations; local, state and federal governments brought together resources to assist incoming Katrina evacuees. I-KARE developed a Guest Tracking System, modeled after TIPS, that contained critical evacuee information such as location, job status, housing, status, services provided etc. In conjunction with faith-based organizations, the American Red Cross (ARC), FEMA and others, IDHS was able to successfully:

- Service the temporary daily needs of 8,000+ evacuees
- Provide immediate temporary shelter for 400+ FEMA flight evacuees at IDHS facilities
- Assist in locating housing for those who wanted to stay
- Assist in temporary and permanent job searches for evacuees
- Serve as liaison to FEMA and other federal and state agencies, as well as the ARC
- Assist in the relocation/return of thousands of evacuees

The I-KARE initiative again demonstrated the effectiveness of the peer-to-peer mode of operation in that it allowed consensus to be reached quickly because all stakeholders are at the table from the beginning. This consensus led to immediate action as the most common barriers to implementation, lack of “buy-in,” and inadequate information had been preempted.

## **NEIGHBOR HELPING NEIGHBOR**

In 2007, a small group of committed individuals met formally to discuss how to work together on different issues in other communities using the learned experiences from the TI and Hurricane Katrina successes. This small group consisted of personnel from various national, state and local agencies such as: Department of Health and Human Services (HHS); the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA); University of Illinois Extension; Illinois Department of Public Health; Illinois Department of Human Services, Office of Security and Emergency Preparedness (OSEP); Illinois Department on Aging; Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity; the American Red Cross of Greater Chicago and several others. This small group of “influencers” agreed on the collective need to leverage resources by working collaboratively as they had with TI and Hurricane Katrina. In that initial 2007 meeting it was agreed that working *across silos*, i.e., individual agencies, organizations and community groups, proved to be effective. It was also, generally acknowledged “that with an ever-increasing number of disasters, the first responders will not be able to handle the surge and overload during the first phase of an incident” (Schoch-Spana, M., Franco, C., Nuzzo, B., & Usenza C., 2007).

With that in mind the work group often communicated with each other and community partners in the spirit of, “neighbor helping neighbor,” or “barn-raising” philosophy/ attitude. This “barn-raising” spirit has its roots in American history when in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Century most workers were farmers. Being in the rural areas of the country, most farmers knew their neighbors and looked-out for, or helped each other in times of need. When a neighboring farmer needed a barn built, other farmers would “self-organize” and come together on a Friday to work together so that by Sunday, the barn would be complete. Thus the term and concept of “barn-raising” and

subsequently the saying, “neighbor helping neighbor,” became inculcated in American society. How can we apply these principles of people helping each other in today’s emergency preparedness effort?

### **OPERATIONAL COMMUNITY SPIRIT: FROMAL AND INFORMAL SYSTEMS**

In 2009, IDHS was asked to participate with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the newly created Regional Catastrophic Planning Team (RCPT). The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is part of Department of Homeland Security and facilitated this RCPT initiative. There are a number of RCPT project teams throughout the United States. The RCPT in the Chicago area covers a three state area and is defined by specific Zip Codes (Census or data areas) which are referred to as the Combined Statistical Area (CSA). Within this three-state area there are 16 counties and the City of Chicago, Illinois that make up the RCPT. The RCPTs were developed to coordinate all types of services, men and material across local and state boundaries during an incident of major significance. FEMA and its strategic partners used Meta-Leadership principles to work across silos (organizations) to accomplish stated outcomes. These leadership principles incorporate thinking and acting in line with the peer to peer relationship model, allowing the connection of purpose, activity and work of the various organizations to accomplish agreed upon outcomes for the greater good of the community. “The initial work on meta-leadership emerged from crisis scenarios in which leaders were effectively or not effectively guiding preparation for or response to a major disaster” (Marcus, Leonard J., Ashkenazi, Isaac; Dorn, Barry, Henderson, Joseph, 2008). Meta-Leadership is a way for organizations to work more effectively together with all parties through influence *versus* command and control – which is called the “military model”. Although the term had not yet been coined, these Meta-Leadership principles were effectively used during the Team Illinois and I-KARE projects.

### **HARNESSING THE POWER OF COMMUNITY RESILIENCE**

There are nine subcommittees that comprise the Chicago area RCPT. One of these is the Community Preparedness Subcommittee, which is tasked to provide a communication plan for assisting a community before, during and after an incident. In working with the Community Preparedness Subcommittee, IDHS (OSEP) leadership recognized another opportunity to collaborate with major community stakeholders, families and individuals to improve resilience for the “whole of the community”, no matter where it is located.

In conjunction with the American Red Cross, Greater Chicago Chapter, the Office of Security and Emergency Preparedness (OSEP) of IDHS developed a one hour emergency preparedness training for staff and customers of IDHS. Every participant was instrumental in the development of their own, personalized Family Emergency Disaster Plan. The training is called *Partners 4 Preparedness*, to reflect the 4 partners crucial to the effort: IDHS, American Red Cross, IDHS customers and community partners. IDHS conducted train-the-trainer classes to train staff. The agency also recruited and trained customer and community volunteers, so customers would be training customers and community members. Preliminary research conducted by Hero Tameling and Gaston Armour of OSEP and confirmed by actual application in the Partners4Preparedness initiative, demonstrated peer-to-peer training to be the most impactful for community engagement. It is important to note that no additional budget resources were allocated for this initiative.

Using the Partners4Preparedness platform as a guide, IDHS started coordinating more of its current programs with other stakeholders to leverage and coordinate resources. At the same time, partners and members of the RCPT met with community and faith-based organizations and discussed the importance of being prepared during times of significant community or national emergencies. Expanding upon the early platforms of Team Illinois, I-KARE and Partners4Preparedness, IDHS is working with community stakeholders to construct a flexible, collaborative framework for combining day-to-day program operations for human services delivery (medical, food, housing, etc.) in times of emergencies. The RCPT and the project working group are aware that individuals and communities must be resilient *before* an incident in order to rebound after a crisis, disaster or catastrophe. According to FEMA, “Individuals’ high expectations of assistance from emergency responders may inhibit individual preparedness. Communicating more realistic expectations and personal responsibilities is critical” (Citizen Corps, 2009). This is why IDHS developed and implemented the Partners4Preparedness training - to empower a community’s citizens as they become partners in community preparedness. The project working group goal is to have individuals working towards a prepared community, while simultaneously encouraging them to accept their individual responsibility to be prepared for any emergency.

Meta-leadership principles are being seamlessly practiced by the project working group internally and externally in members’ organizations. The mission of the Illinois Department of Human Services is to assist people and communities to be self-sufficient that implies being able to take responsibility for one’s own life-needs as well

as that of their family and community. In his seminal work Dr. Russell Dynes states, “The latent capacity for problem solving exists in every form of social organization – family, organizations, community and a nation” (Dynes, 1991). He indicates that the “military model” is much different than being collaborative or working through problems together. Dr. Dynes’ research contrasts “top-down” vs. “peer-to-peer” community partners working together, and concludes that the latter is more effective. The accuracy of his conclusions continues to be validated by the work of IDHS, the project working group, RCPTs and the implementation of specific initiatives. Yes, getting to know, trust and work with community partners before an emergency incident will make a big difference during an event. Our partners agree that assisting others to take individual responsibility is an integral part of collaborative engagement with our communities.

## CONCLUSION

As practitioners, this on-going project has been challenging yet very rewarding, especially working with disparate (diverse) partners. This work is meant to serve the residents of Illinois, by modeling the “neighbor helping neighbor” paradigm. The main strategies documented in this paper demonstrate how *enlightened self-interest* can lead communities to become more resilient and self-determinant during emergencies as well as under more normal conditions. By “modeling” collaborative behavior IDHS and the project working group and its partners seek to encourage and empower all communities to grow as places where everyone, individuals, families, communities, organizations and governments can, contribute to the greater good.

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