

When an emergency plan has not yet been developed

By Woody Widrow

When a Community-Based Development Organization (CBDO) has not yet developed a plan for preparedness and operational resiliency, there are interim measures that should be taken. While these steps may help serve as a contingency plan in case of a future emergency or disaster, this does not substitute for the development of organizational Continuity of Operations Plans (COOPs). COOPs are plans to ensure continuity of essential functions across a wide range of emergencies or disasters. To create your own COOPs, you can simply download a copy of the handbook, “Disaster Preparedness and Recovery for Community Development Organizations” with checklists and steps to follow at <http://www.nw.org/network/training/disasterResources.asp>. The web site also contains additional information to serve you at the community level.

Disaster Preparedness for Staff

Your staff will not be capable of assisting others if their own families are not prepared and safe. The handbook provides checklists for family preparedness. Have staff members identify a meeting place for family members outside their home for a sudden emergency and identify an out of area telephone number for people to contact (out of state friends or relatives) if evacuated or separated. Make sure each staff family has a disaster supply kit.

If there are people with special needs who work for your organization or who live in properties owned or managed by you, have an evacuation and sheltering plan for them. Also, plan to protect and seal their units before an evacuation.

Use a payroll service for continuity of payroll if evacuation is necessary. Have all staff create or include personal email addresses in addition to their organizational email for contact information. Have cell phone numbers for all staff. Set up a telephone call tree and/or email alert system to communicate with staff in an emergency.

Organizational Operational Plan

Make sure that copies of all key documents and records are kept in a waterproof, fireproof portable container. Store a second set off-site (preferably out of area) in a safe place such as a safety deposit box. Make sure your cyber security is up to date – back up all information to a distant location. Go to <http://www.ready.gov/business/st3-improvecyber.html> to read about business readiness.

Review all current insurance coverage; make certain that coverage is based on replacement cost. Update your insurance coverage based on identified hazards or organization changes. Call 1-888-FLOOD-29 to learn more about flood insurance. Consider whether you will be able to operate from a different location if necessary if your organization has to evacuate.

Community Preparedness

Find out about your disaster community preparedness plans. Learn about the Citizens Corps Program (www.citizencorps.gov), a partnership of five federal programs: Community Emergency Response Team (CERT), Neighborhood Watch, Medical Reserve Corps (MRA), Fire Corps, and Volunteer in Police Service (VIPS). See if there is a Citizens Corps Program in your community and, if there is, a local Citizens Corps Council. Invite them to your organization to learn how you can work together within your community to make it better prepared and safer.

After the Disaster: Crisis and Recovery

Once the disaster has occurred the immediate activity is crisis management followed by recovery. The initial response is local and includes firefighters, police, emergency medical personnel, emergency management, and Red Cross. If the disaster response is beyond local and state capacity, federal resources may be activated.

As a community leader, the CBDO can play a vital part in restoring the community fabric. Some key community activities can be developed as you work on your COOPs for recovery. Visit the local emergency management office, learn about the local Emergency Operations Plan (EOP), and become familiar with what they do. Know the location of the Emergency Operation Center (EOC). Learn about other community organizations, such as the Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD).

After the Disaster and into Recovery

Make sure you take care of your own staff first. Long-term disaster recovery is not a regular job for communities or CBDOs. Therefore, how you move forward is important. While it might seem noble to throw yourself into your work, staff may be victims and may need time to deal with their own situation. Avoid workplace martyrdom. As soon as possible, have a staff person assigned for attending daily briefings at the EOC or other designated locality. Start coordinating with other CBDOs, non-profits, social service agencies, VOAD, and faith-based organizations, to develop a plan of action for moving forward. Disaster recovery takes a collaborative effort.

Housing Recovery

As in all disasters, and as was painfully apparent in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the loss of a person's home is second only to the loss of a friend or family member and causes major traumatic upheaval. CBDOs need a housing plan for their staff, families in the facilities they own, and for the community. Communities who have successfully recovered from major disasters suggest not rushing into long-term housing recovery. The housing recovery strategy should be designed to help restore people's pre-disaster living situation as safely and economically as possible. Learn how to responsibly help people apply for insurance and emergency funds from public and private resources. *(Everyone is*

ultimately responsible for their own recovery.) Incorporate hazard mitigation principles, such as building materials and designs to make homes stronger and more flood and wind resistant, into housing recovery so that in the rebuilding process you're helping prevent future damage. Work with the local jurisdiction to rebuild the community to a safer standard.

Economic Recovery

When the business needs are clear and necessary for the economic recovery, support viable private, for-profit businesses to help them recover. This will help retain businesses that can provide essential services and employment. (See the Spring 2006 issue of Bright Ideas, "Rebuilding Communities, Restoring Families" which describes the economic recovery activities of Southern Mutual Help Association).

Community Recovery

Depending on the type and severity of the disaster, recovery may take a long time with its implications felt for many years. "A disaster is a sprint for the first 21 days and then it becomes a marathon after that," notes Todd Pratt, City Administrator in Saint Peter, Minnesota, a small town that was devastated by a tornado in 1998.

Telling people specifically where and how to get help is a valuable service. Rumors will spread rapidly – people want to know what is happening. Frequent, simple and repetitive communication of the facts is essential. Referral lists with service agencies are critical.

Don't make promises about full recovery – there is never enough money.
Do assure the residents that the community will recover.

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