

Disaster Preparedness and Recovery – Meeting the Challenge in Your Community

By Woody Widrow

“It’s been said that a disaster gives us a window into the inequalities just before a disaster. We need to be a voice that insists that the issues of equity are addressed in hazard and disaster planning,” says Mary Hennessey, vice president Citizens Housing in San Francisco. Mary notes that after disasters, there are never plans for replacing affordable housing and therefore affordable housing advocates and developers need to be part of the planning process. “The more organized and prepared we are, the better it will be for our residents,” she notes. Yet, Mary adds, it is obvious that the next disaster is not being adequately planned and resourced.

Community-based development organizations (CBDOs) serve the most vulnerable populations. Low-income renters, seniors on fixed income, public assistance families, minorities, and underserved populations are their client base. These residents are the most likely to be impacted by a disaster. Simply open the newspapers or witness television news coverage from Hurricane Katrina and other disasters to see the faces and the human tragedies that have been inflicted upon CBDOs’ target population. The breadth and severity of the impact of disasters on these vulnerable people is difficult to exaggerate.

CBDOs are uniquely positioned to provide direct assistance and supply essential information to the residents and communities they serve prior to, during, and after a disaster. But, for these nonprofit organizations to be effective, they must be prepared organizationally before the crisis occurs, and then be resilient and equipped to act quickly during and after the disaster.

On April 5, 2006, NeighborWorks America convened a national symposium in Dallas, Texas, bringing together 150 participants from the public, private, and nonprofit sectors to provide direction and information on how CBDOs can play a more active role in disaster preparedness and recovery.

Ken Wade, CEO of NeighborWorks noted in his introductory remarks that the number and severity of disasters have been increasing throughout the past two decades. He noted that just in the first three months of 2006, 17 major disaster declarations were made for tornadoes, wild fires, mudslides, and floods. He stressed that these disasters are occurring in all types of communities throughout the country. Both Ken Wade, and Tom Curry, Chairman of the Board of NeighborWorks and Director of the FDIC, described the critical leadership role that CBDOs need to play in organizational and community preparedness and in relationship building to make our communities safer places to live and work.

Disaster Denial

Unfortunately, most CBDOs are not prepared for a disaster. Most cite time, staff, or money considerations as obstacles to being prepared. This overall lack of preparedness is all too typical of most Americans. Rachel Jacky, Director, National CERT (Community Emergency Response Team), Department of Homeland Security, noted that most Americans are in denial about disasters. They start by thinking “it’s not going to happen here” or “it’s not going to affect me.” This is followed by the belief that “it’s not going to be that bad,” or even “there’s nothing I can do about it.” Ultimately, many justify their inaction with the thought that “if it does happen, the government will fix it.”

Moreover, prior disaster experience can either be a motivator or demotivator. According to Elizabeth DiGregorio, Acting Director Community Preparedness Office, Department of Homeland Security, “In a survey conducted after Katrina, 52% of the people they polled said that Katrina and Rita had no impact on their desire to be prepared for the next disaster.” In spite of this sense of denial, there are things people and CBDOs can do that are natural actions to help in their communities, she noted.

Rachel offered some data that clearly illustrate why preparedness and rapid action is so important. In dealing with an emergency situation with entrapped victims -- whether from wind, snow, water, or earth moving -- the survival rate is over 99 percent if rescued within 30 minutes and still up to 81 percent within the first 24 hours. Survival odds drop dramatically after that to 33.7 percent 1-2 days later and just 7.4 percent after 4-5 days. Programs such as the Citizen Corps prepare people to know what to do and how to do it.

Preparedness Lacking in Field

Throughout the symposium, stories were related by CBDOs lamenting their lack of preparedness before their disaster. Lauren Anderson, Director of NHS of New Orleans, said her organization did not have a disaster preparedness plan before Katrina. Lori Gay, Los Angeles NHS Director, noted they did not have an emergency plan before the 1994 Northridge Earthquake that caused \$44 billion in damage. Both women noted that their organization was not able to respond to the crisis effectively.

Lauren noted that conventional forms of communication such as land lines did not work. “I thought I was providing my staff with privacy by not providing cell phones for them. I had a hard time tracking down my staff and board. Even though cell phones did not work well, cell phones and non-proprietary email addresses were the only way to communicate with people,” she stated. Lauren added, “Thank goodness we had a payroll service. It was essential to our continued operation. I pulled out our computer server the day before and moved it to higher ground. (Unfortunately) I did not take our checkbook and the file drawer with our insurance information. If we can afford it, we will have a backup remote system next time. Now we have more electronic files than paper files. Some of our contracts and loan documents do not exist now since many are moldy. Make sure to review your insurance coverage once a year.”

Mary Hennessey, vice president of Citizens Housing in San Francisco, manages 1,000 units in the Bay Area and around California. She stated, "I'm pretty sure most of our residents are not prepared for a disaster. They do not have earthquake kits. I also know the likelihood is very high we will have a disaster. It's going to hit them the hardest. I'm a proponent of including disaster preparedness as part of an asset building program and as a leadership development program. If we can work with our clients to help with their vulnerability today, they'll be safer today and for the disaster."

Mary started with Citizens Housing in 1994 when the Northridge Earthquake hit. Santa Monica, where the organization has property, was hit hard. "Why weren't we prepared? You have other things to do than disaster preparedness. We deal with small disasters as property managers. We are used to handling emergencies. We have to make disaster preparedness a part of our routine daily business," Mary noted. She went on to say that when the Northridge Earthquake hit about half of the damage was to housing, which is typical for disasters. About half of the housing damaged was apartments. "On the day of the earthquake, we did not have a plan in place. We did not have a phone tree and suddenly we had lots of housing with red tags. One of the first things I had to do is find the residents and before that find the staff. Since we did not have a plan, we had to make one up on the spot. None of the maintenance staff showed up. Some could not get there. Other staff members that we hoped would show up wanted to wait for the tremors to stop and stay with their family. We did not have rent rolls and (tenant) information since our office was yellow tagged, so we had to remember the information."

Mary stated they should have had better organized building plans and physical inventories. They should have had up-to-date rent rolls with information about disabled or elderly tenants. The lack of personnel policies around disasters became a problem, too. Was the person who showed up and not asked to work, but who worked 100 hours, a volunteer or working overtime? "Do we give them overtime pay or comp time," Mary asked.

Symposium consultant, Susan Ude, developed a step by step handbook for CBDOs to use to develop Continuity of Operations Plans. It is available on the NeighborWorks website at:
<http://www.nw.org/network/training/disasterResources.asp>

Not in the Disaster Business

Walter Moreau, Director of Foundation Communities in Austin, Texas, acknowledged that we do community development activity not disaster work. But he noted that his perspective changed based on Hurricane Katrina. Austin had just received about 7,000 evacuees when Walter was having dinner with his family and explaining to them that he had just acquired a vacant extended-stay hotel to house homeless people. His youngest son who is seven said, "Dad, you do housing. Why don't you provide housing for these people?" Foundation Communities work focuses on providing permanent and supportive housing. But after thinking for a while, Walter knew his son was exactly right. They

quickly converted the building for the evacuees and wound up with 120 families housed at the hotel.

Other CBDO staff echoed that even though their organizations are not really in the disaster business, they also became involved in recovery. Gregg Warren, president DHIC, Inc, based in Raleigh, North Carolina, develops single and multi family housing in the Raleigh area. In September 1999, Hurricane Floyd caused severe flooding in rural Eastern North Carolina. It damaged 56,000 homes and destroyed 7,000 more, with 17,000 homes uninhabitable. DHIC was located one hour away from the area of greatest devastation. But since DHIC was familiar with the area and had been invited previously to participate in rental housing, they stepped forward. Ultimately DHIC built a 90 unit apartment specifically targeted for the flood victims.

In 1992 Hurricane Andrew struck the Homestead, Florida, area hitting the home base of Centro Campesino Farmworker Center, Inc. As a result of the disaster, Centro became a major nonprofit CDC engaged in the hurricane rebuilding. During a twelve-month period, they repaired or replaced fifty homes and raised and spent over a million dollars in the effort. They developed a tent city, which housed 500 people, and served a thousand meals a day in partnership with the U.S. Army.

From August 13 through September 23, 2004, Hurricanes Charley, Frances, and Jeanne struck rural south central Florida about 200 miles from Centro's main office. Based on their successful work with Hurricane Andrew, Executive Director Steve Mainster offered to help with the rebuilding effort since there were no CDCs in the impacted area. Centro developed a three phase process: -1) Healing and short-term emergency relief (months 1-3), 2) Rebuild, provide rebuilding counseling and construction services (months 4-24), and 3) Revitalize, neighborhood development (beyond month 24). Centro has accomplished much of its Hurricane Rebuilding program from phase 1 and 2 and expects by the end of 2006 to begin to concentrate on phase 3, neighborhood redevelopment and new affordable housing development.

Preparing for a Crisis is a Matter of Leadership

After a disaster strikes, the single most important need is reliable information, noted Julia Galdo, Director Communication and Social Marketing at American Institutes for Research. She added that preparing for a crisis is a matter of leadership. It is an opportunity for the CBDO to assert leadership of the organization and to help the community be ready. But to do that, Julia noted, you have to know what to do by planning ahead. She gave the example of Mayor Giuliani who played a disaster response leadership role after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York City. A lot of what Giuliani did and said during the days after the disaster had been planned and rehearsed, she noted. He was trained by a team of people on how to communicate effectively in a crisis. And they had planned for many contingencies including the collapse of the towers, even though they didn't expect it to collapse the way it did. "What he said seemed spontaneous and I'm sure spoken from the heart, but he had planned a lot of what happened. When he was asked how many people had died - - it was very early

on -- he answered, 'We don't know, but however many is, is too much to bear.' That was a line that had been scripted. He was smart enough to know how to use the right words and that he needed to be prepared."

Julia stressed the need for CBDOs to develop an emergency communication plan. She noted, "You are one of the key communicators for the people you normally serve. Therefore, if there is a flood, you need a communication plan. Who is your audience? What do you need to communicate to them? They also have questions they want answered. You can start preparing them to get a head start. Who will communicate it from your organization? How do you get it out there? The media is the obvious way. But the media might not be available, if you have no electricity for instance. You need to figure out what other options there are. You need to deal with all hazards even though some are more likely than others in your area."

She added that it's essential to remember that preparedness is a message that people find easy to ignore when it comes from traditional sources like government or mainstream organizations or media. However, people will pay more attention and find the message more credible if it comes from a trusted source like a CBDO with whom they have had a good relationship.

After a Disaster, Rebuild it Better

In April 1997, a devastating flood engulfed the small city of East Grand Forks, Minnesota, located on two rivers with a population of 9,000. The flooding was due to record snowfall and rain. In early 1998, a consortium of nonprofits, foundations, and the state joined together to offer planning assistance. The Greater Minnesota Housing Fund provided funds for the rebuilding and brought in Todd Rhoades, an architect and adjunct professor from University of Minnesota's Design Center for American Urban Landscape.

The goal from the start was to rebuild East Grand Forks better. An advisory group, of local residents was created and was asked to "Do more than replace what was lost, but create an even more vibrant East Grand Forks." After the flood, the Army Core of Engineers declared that a dike system would have to be created since there had been a number of floods in the town. The advisory group working with Todd developed a plan incorporating the dike with a widened floodplain, reconfigured neighborhoods, and new community corridors. Using a "pizza box" design scenario, the advisory group used an interactive process to help develop the land use, neighborhoods, and community design. Many of the advisory committee members had lost their homes and had no insurance, so this process gave people some much-needed assurance that something constructive was being done.

The committee created new areas and neighborhoods and gave them names related to the area. The advisory committee began thinking about the dike in additional, creative ways, adding amenities along the dike, including continuous pathways, greenway habitat rooms, and greenway views. They helped develop plans to change neighborhoods and improve quality of life, coming up with clear boundaries and edges to identify each area

of town with mixed-income housing, complementary land use mix, new infrastructure, and parks.

Community Recovery Does Happen

Susan Ude, the symposium consultant who authored the disaster preparedness handbook referenced above, offered these final words: “Things will never be as they were. The disaster will be a marker in time referred to in terms of ‘before or after the disaster.’ It becomes part of the community’s identity with life not returning to the pre-disaster time but eventually there will be a new normal.”

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