

Effective Community Response to Disaster: Exploring the Role of Community Emergency Response Teams ¹

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This paper is part of a series of discussions on the impact of community action in response to natural and other disasters.

Introduction

Hurricanes are certainly not a new, nor the only, hazard facing the communities along the Gulf Coast of the United States. But the hurricanes and tropical storms in recent years brought into focus the reality that community residents are often the front line of disaster response. While both urban and rural communities found themselves grappling with inexplicable turmoil in the midst and wake of the hurricane disasters of 2004 and 2005, rural communities were often at the periphery of the focus of media attention and large-scale emergency response. This reality is linked to a larger trend. Rural communities increasingly find themselves shouldering responsibility for meeting the emergency needs of local residents.

Community Based Emergency Response Teams

A relatively new approach to local involvement in disaster response is emerging across counties and communities in the United States. The Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) program seeks to train and empower local community residents to shoulder the responsibility of being first responders to emergencies. CERTs, which are administered by Citizen Corps and FEMA within the Department of Homeland Security, blend a bottom-up appreciation for the role of local volunteers in emergency response with a top-down institutional framework to facilitate training and coordination.

There is much promise in the CERT program as a strategy for local empowerment and effective disaster response in rural communities. To be effective, however, the CERT program should be adaptable to different levels of local capacity and should broadly represent the citizenry it is intended to protect and serve. It is also possible that by developing local capacity for disaster response, CERT teams may be able to expand their

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applicability to non-disaster community development activities.

While CERTs have predominantly focused on disaster preparedness and recovery, this does not always need to be the case. CERTs provide a framework for pulling together localities to prepare for times of need. This process of building community and response structures has application beyond the context of disasters. In rural communities with high disaster response capacity, established networks, infrastructures, and alliances are likely to already exist to allow a community to plan for its needs and build on its strengths to achieve desired goals. Such capacity for providing these community services does not always exist, but can be cultivated and should be encouraged and empowered. Extension and other change agents can play a leading role in this process. Where capacity for community involvement in disaster response or broader development is lower, CERT programs provide a potential framework for both.

Including Everyone in Community Responses to Disaster

A critical aspect of CERT effectiveness and potential for expanding into community development or other roles is representation of the entire local population. Drawing together diverse racial, ethnic, religious, and other groups provides a host of resources and experiences, but more importantly provides transparency in the local decision making process. In all communities, a variety of groups exist with diverse skills and abilities combined with personal and professional experiences that are essential to successful preparation and response to disasters (Independent Sector, 2001). Included are residents 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); and long time residents who have witnessed previous responses to natural disasters.

Such groups and individuals are also directly suited to local empowerment and community development that serves to enhance rural well-being. Effective community response to disaster and other local needs connects diverse groups within the locality. Successfully linking local organizations, citizens, and leaders provides a network and method for local citizens and groups to become actively involved in local preparedness and response efforts and beyond. Individuals currently involved in CERTs are also likely to provide strong personal and professional connections which can link local interests to state/federal agencies and other outside entities. Such connections and partnerships can facilitate access to information, resources, training, and finances necessary to build local capacities.

In this way, CERTs can act as bridges between local and extra-local resources not only to prepare and respond to disaster, but also directly shape rural well-being as part of rural development efforts. Since rural communities are often situated in a unique interface between the physical environment and society, local residents are important to the management of natural resources. CERTs can provide the human resources, initiative, and framework for gathering and disseminating information important to environmental decision making. Such effort is not far removed from disaster preparedness efforts.

Linking local land use and natural resource management with risk mitigation and disaster preparedness weaves together an integrated approach to protecting ecological and human well-being. A model of expanding the traditional role of CERTs can be found in Alachua County, Florida where local CERT volunteers were involved in surveying local farmers about drought protection practices and other natural resource management efforts. Building relationships in quiet times creates a valuable network and sense of community to tap into in times of emergency or disaster.

Conclusion

CERTS can provide a variety of services and increase local capacities for responding to disaster. They can also conceivably do more. Part of this effort

will involve a reconsideration of what we see as disasters. Emergencies and disasters take many forms in different regions of the US. Hurricanes and flooding have been vivid experiences in the US Gulf States in recent years. The threat of terrorism is also a primary concern for local community preparedness and security efforts. However, disasters in the form of rapid economic decline (e.g., loss of farming, mining, forestry, manufacturing jobs) and environmental change (e.g., drought, forest disturbance) have equally detrimental impacts on rural quality of life and well-being. CERT programs present the potential to help communities respond to nontraditional disasters and to directly shape local capacity for rural development. The recent disasters in the southeast United States highlight what has been suspected by experts: that local residents will be first responders and likely to be on their own for days or weeks. In the event of nontraditional and economic disasters the process may last years or longer.

References and Suggested Reading

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Useful Web Sites

1. Florida CERT programs, http://www.floridadisaster.org/director_office/citizen_corps/CERT.htm
2. Alachua County, FL CERT program, <http://www.alachua-em.org/cert/main.htm>
3. US Citizen Corps, <http://www.citizencorps.gov/>
4. Community Emergency Response Team (CERT), <http://www.citizencorps.gov/programs/cert.shtm>
5. National Citizen Corps Council Partners, <http://www.citizencorps.gov/programs/partners.shtm>
6. Corporation for National and Community Service, <http://www.cns.gov/>
7. US Citizen Fire Corps, <http://www.firecorps.org/>
8. US On Watch Neighborhood Watch Program, <http://www.usaonwatch.org/>
9. Medical Reserves Corps, <http://www.citizencorps.gov/programs/medical.shtm>
10. Volunteers in Police Service, <http://www.policevolunteers.org/>
11. Citizen Corps Affiliate Programs and Organizations, <http://www.citizencorps.gov/programs/affiliate.shtm>