



RESILIENT AMERICAN COMMUNITIES: PROGRESS IN PRACTICE AND POLICY

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Center for Biosecurity of UPMC

CONFERENCE BRIEF

Prepared by Monica Schoch-Spana, PhD, Center for Biosecurity of UPMC

BACKGROUND

On December 10, 2009, the Center for Biosecurity of UPMC convened an invitational conference in Washington, DC, to apply state-of-the-art knowledge of resilience to the design of federal policies that will strengthen local communities and their environments to withstand disasters, epidemics, and terrorism. The event was hosted in collaboration with the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) and the Natural Hazards Center of the University of Colorado at Boulder. Among the 140 participants were U.S. government officials, congressional staff, policy analysts, scholars, public health and emergency management practitioners, heads of private and nonprofit initiatives to reduce disaster risk, and members of the media.

MAJOR THEMES AND CONCLUSIONS

A resilient community has the capacity to anticipate, withstand, and rebound from an extreme event with minimal damage and disruption.

Community resilience to disasters cannot be reduced to issues of individual preparedness or mental fortitude. Instead, collective resilience is built upon a broad foundation comprising vital, interconnected public health, public safety and medical institutions; problem solving partnerships among government, the private sector, nonprofits and the general public; a built environment subject to robust safety standards and informed land use decisions; and a strong, diversified economic base with broadly distributed opportunity.

The nation needs a rational approach to collecting information on disaster-related losses and gauging the value of investments in resilience.

Incomplete, scattered, non-standardized, and oftentimes inaccessible data—on when and where losses occur, from which hazard, and with what effects (eg, human fatalities and injuries, property and crop damages, business interruption and job loss)—keep people from realizing the true cost of extreme events and from knowing whether specific interventions to avoid or reduce losses are actually working.

The federal government should invest more money in pre-event hazard mitigation.

The federal government spends the vast majority of disaster assistance to states and localities in the form of after-the-fact responses, rather than proactive, preventive measures that reduce risk. Yet, a 2005

Congressionally-mandated, independent study concluded that each dollar spent in FEMA hazard mitigation programs saved society an average of \$4 in losses that were avoided in the future.¹ This cost saving potential should prompt a reprioritization of disaster funding in the federal budget, with annual funding for pre-event hazard mitigation increased from \$100 million to \$1 billion.

A resilience certification program could inspire more communities to adopt creative disaster mitigation approaches.

Such a certification, or “seal of approval,” could be tied to better insurance rates or increased bond ratings, thus creating an immediate incentive for communities to enhance their resilience even in the absence of a disaster. Moreover, a rating system built upon a private-public partnership could help insulate community resilience efforts from the vicissitudes of changing political administrations and also contribute to the program’s overall sustainability.

Partnerships beyond the bounds of the traditional disaster establishment strengthen resilience.

Mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery are responsibilities that must be shared among all sectors of society, including government, private industry, nonprofits, community-based groups, and the larger public. Integration of diverse stakeholders in a locality’s disaster management system raises the quotient for creative problem-solving. Relationship building is labor- and time-intensive, and federal recognition of its importance to community resilience must be accompanied by reasonable levels of financial and technical assistance as well as grant-making flexibility.

Public engagement in key policy decisions improves emergency planning and empowers community members.

The brainpower of the American public is a principal asset in building community resilience. Members of the general public can understand the complex issues involved in disaster planning, and they can improve the feasibility and acceptability of plans by adding their local knowledge and judgments. Additional financial and technical support can help states and localities develop the skills and staff necessary for incorporating citizen input into emergency management policies.

Disadvantaged populations require enhanced protections from the disproportionate impact of extreme events.

Vulnerability should be treated as a mainstream disaster planning issue, rather than an afterthought. Social service agencies and community- and faith-based organizations that routinely interact with marginalized groups are important partners with government in creating a disaster safety net for vulnerable population. Such nonprofits can benefit now from more technical guidance and financial assistance to help them plan for the continuity of operations during and after an emergency.

¹ *Natural Hazard Mitigation Saves: An Independent Study to Assess the Future Savings from Mitigation Activities.* Multi-Hazard Mitigation Council (MMC). 2005. Washington, DC: National Institute of Building Sciences.