

SMARTER LIVING

How to Prepare Your Community for a Disaster

By ALAN HENRY FEB. 15, 2018

Hurricanes, wildfires, earthquakes and floods strike communities every year, injuring and displacing thousands. A plan and an emergency kit are important, but they only go so far. Ideally, your whole community should be ready, and if you don't think it is, here's how you can help make sure.

Organizing your neighbors with a plan in case the worst happens is no simple feat. It's difficult enough for most of us to plan for our own families, much less a dozen in our building or on our block. So how do you do it?

We spoke to Mitch Stripling, the assistant commissioner of Agency Preparedness and Response for the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene and the co-host of “Dukes of Hazards: The Emergency Management Podcast,” about the best ways to get everyone in your area aware and prepared for the types of disasters that are most likely to impact your community.

Why you should bother

It may seem like an impossible task, but reaching out to strangers in your community and persuading them that you should help one another in case of an emergency really isn't as difficult as it might seem. After all, it's something we naturally do, Mr. Stripling explained.

“Neighbors don't panic and run (that's a movie myth), they adapt to the

situation, take the injured to hospitals and do anything they can to be helpful,” he said. “People are hard-wired to come together as a community after disasters. Rebecca Solnit writes about it movingly in her book, ‘A Paradise Built in Hell’; helping others is one thing that makes us human.”

You probably already know that you should keep supplies and an emergency kit on hand for the most common types of emergencies your community may face, but those kits are designed to be helpful only for the first hours or days — ideally just long enough for you to get help or for help to get to you. Even if you have a sizable stockpile of supplies, you’re going to need help from other people sooner rather than later. Mr. Stripling said that most search and rescue after a disaster is done by people in their communities, long before professionals arrive.

However, a lot of the support structures that foster the sense of community that led people to look out for one another have degraded, Mr. Stripling said, and it’s up to individuals to bring them back to life. “We have fewer stores and more social media addicts — and that’s tough from a preparedness standpoint since disasters are inherently geographical,” he said. “In a disaster, more people will survive if your neighborhood is resilient — tightly connected, with lots of knowledge about who lives there and lots of strong institutions.”

Before you go knocking on doors however, make a plan — not about how you’ll persuade your neighbors exactly, but what you’ll actually ask of them.

How to get started

Instead of going door-to-door to rally neighbors, you’ll find more success if you piggyback on existing institutions to organize people in times of need, Mr. Stripling said.

“Disaster research shows that tight-knit communities with strong, locally driven organizations respond better in disaster situations,” he said. “That means that any work you do to build community, from strengthening a P.T.A. to starting a local business that serves as a community hub, will naturally help your neighborhood be better prepared.

“That’s a key point to focus on. These civic institutions or schools or churches

not only enrich our lives day to day, they help to save our lives when disaster strikes. And many of them are not as strong as they used to be.”

In short, don't reinvent the wheel. There's little need to build something you'll then have to persuade people to come to when you could get involved with a local P.T.A., sports team, church, book club or neighborhood watch. Mr. Stripling even suggested getting involved with a local coffee shop, day care, or just a group of friends you get drinks with periodically if you can't find a community group to join.

Your next step is to put disaster prep on the agenda of the group you've connected with. That doesn't mean taking over or dragging out a stodgy set of doom-and-gloom talking points. Try to have fun, Mr. Stripling said. “You can schedule a disaster-focused P.T.A. meeting, or a bar trivia night about disasters. Honestly, people do that!” he said. “Your local coffee shop could host a Godzilla Awareness Party. Your small group can help bring people in using an ‘each one reach one’ approach around the neighborhood — and most localities have emergency management teams that would be thrilled to speak at an event like that.”

What to include in your community disaster plan

Once you have a group of interested people and a venue to get everyone talking, it's time to start thinking about what your community's plan will include. That said, don't get caught up in the specifics. The point is to get people aware of the possible disasters your community will face, and get them ready and willing to help and take care of one another in a crisis.

“The most important thing to understand is that planning for these sorts of things is about the process, not any final document,” Mr. Stripling explained. “Because disasters are chaotic, you're probably not going to have a lot of reading time, right? So, it's important to get your group ready to improvise. Building your group into a team that can react to different types of events is more important than being ready to run any one evacuation plan.”

He outlined three major components of a good community disaster prep plan:

- 1. Make sure everyone has more than one way to reach one another.**

Cellphone numbers are great, but remember that in an emergency, cellular networks will probably be overloaded. If you have a signal but can't place a mobile call, text messages and walkie-talkie apps use far less mobile data and are more likely to get through. In every case, however, old-fashioned landlines are ideal, since they can be used without power.

Mr. Stripling also suggested that getting into amateur or HAM radio is helpful, especially for times when traditional communication networks are down. Finally, don't forget old-fashioned rendezvous points. If you have no communications at all, it's critical to have a spot everyone knows to meet up just to make sure everyone is safe.

2. Learn about the hazards and most likely disasters in your area.

Not every region is prone to the same types of disasters. If you live on the coast, make sure you talk about plans for coastal storms and flooding. If you live in the Midwest, make sure you're all on the same page about tornadoes and catastrophic storms. Western state residents may want to talk about mudslides and wildfires. Everyone should probably discuss things like terrorism or other man-made disasters. In every case, people respond better in an emergency if they've talked about possible threats before they occur.

"It's also incredibly important to understand that disasters don't impact people equally — they tend to exacerbate existing vulnerabilities," Mr. Stripling said. "So you need to understand the vulnerabilities in your neighborhood — things like poverty, housing discrimination or unequal transportation access — since these elements often point to where the worst consequences will occur."

3. Understand your neighborhood and how your neighbors can help one another.

If everyone is going to rely on one another, think about what is convenient and makes sense for each person. "Maybe one neighbor runs a store and could help stock food supplies for the whole team, and another has a vacation home or relative's house that could serve as a rendezvous point," Mr. Stripling said. "The neighbor who lives within walking distance of the school could be in charge of kid pickup if transportation goes down. Or someone owns an S.U.V. or boat that could help evacuation procedures. Everyone brings something to the table — and the more diversity your team has, the more powerful it will be."

Ideally, everyone in your community will be willing to pitch in with their own unique skills, abilities and perspectives to help everyone stay safe and protected. Additionally, while everyone should pool resources in a way that makes sense, you should all be willing to back one another up, even if it doesn't seem like a particular role is your best fit. If the neighbor responsible for kid pickup is out of town when a blizzard hits, someone else should be ready to step in. Best of all, the closer and more tight knit you are before a disaster, the more you'll be willing to cover the gaps when one happens.

Be ready before help arrives

Most of us are taught that in an emergency, first responders like police officers, emergency medical personnel and firefighters will be the first ones to get there and help victims. In reality, bystanders and neighbors are usually first — and in the best position to help save lives — especially after a disaster significant enough that it may take time for those emergency workers to arrive.

Mr. Stripling suggested reading the Federal Emergency Management Agency's "Until Help Arrives" program and sharing it with your community group. Similarly, he pointed to the New York City Health Department's Bystander Training Course as another useful resource even for people who don't live in New York.

Keep in mind that most disasters are much worse for people who are already the most at risk. For example, elderly neighbors, people who live alone, or people with disabilities that make evacuation difficult. Make sure people in your group know who in the area may need a helping hand if disaster strikes, and check in on them or be ready to help them evacuate. Mr. Stripling also noted that this extends beyond storms, earthquakes or catastrophic events. Consider that extreme heat waves or cold snaps claim more lives every year than many other "traditional" disasters, and plan to take care of one another accordingly.

Additional Reading

- The Department of Homeland Security Community Emergency Response Team Program

- The D.H.S. Citizen Corps training program
- The Department of Health and Human Services' Medical Reserve Corps
- The FEMA Community Preparedness Toolkit
- The New York City Health Department's Emergency Threats FAQs

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