

# Communities Communicating with Formal and Informal Systems: Being More Resilient in Times of Need

by Gaston Armour

Crisis Informatics

**M**y intention in writing this article is to highlight the need for using traditional and non-traditional methods in communicating vital information within the community day-to-day as well in times of an emergency.

For many of us life has changed in many ways since we were teenagers. Going to and from work, family errands, church, school and other daily routines are so very different. Today we must be aware of our surroundings and the constant threat of natural and man-made incidents that could happen at any time. Extended families no longer live in the same block or neighborhood today as they once did. Many family members live in different parts of the country or other parts of the world. Family and community existence is very different and challenging when it comes to virtually every aspect of life's daily activities.

The events of 9/11, the Virginia Tech shootings and Hurricane Katrina have changed our worldview. We must constantly be prepared to meet life's challenges for ourselves and for those close to us. Family members, friends, neighbors and colleagues – many of them may have to depend on us to help out in times of an emergency or disaster. Such incidents can include, for example, fires, floods, tornados or man-made threats. As Heartland Alliance disaster expert Charna Epstein recently remarked to the author, "Your true first responder is not going to be the police or fire department; it most likely will be the person sitting next to you on the bus, the person who shares your work cubicle or your next door neighbor."

Since 9/11 the federal government through the Federal Emergency

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Management Agency (FEMA) has required states to develop additional protocols as well as special teams to work directly with faith and community-based organizations (FBOs and CBOs) to communicate more directly with government entities when incidents occur. Today businesses, local governments and citizens are more aware of the impact that natural and man-made disasters can have on our daily lives and activities within a few hours or even a few minutes.

Over the last five to seven years Illinois agencies have developed special units to coordinate, collaborate and work with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and other government agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in times of a disaster. In 2008 the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) created the Office of Security and Emergency Preparedness (OSEP). IDHS normally serves hundreds of thousands of individuals each year in a state with a population of over 13 million people. The agency understands the impact on millions of individual lives through the services they provide to their customers at 95 offices around the state.

Before IDHS created OSEP, the agency was part of the Hurricane Katrina relief effort. The agency housed and provided services such as food stamps and mental health services that helped over 9,000 Katrina victims get their lives back to normal over a three-year period. The individuals and families served during this relief effort were not IDHS's regular customers. On the basis of this experience the agency realized the importance of having a unit specifically assigned the task of coordinating emergency preparedness activities intrastate and interstate, along with FEMA, the other units of the Department of Homeland Security and other federal agencies. IDHS, led by this new unit for preparedness (OSEP), understands the need for individuals

and communities to take on more responsibility regarding their own personal safety and well-being, instead of “waiting” for the government or first responders to “help them” [1, 47-48].

Because of the many individuals and families that IDHS serves, the agency wants to be more proactive since expending resources in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and to be more inclusive in their mission of self-sufficiency. IDHS set out to communicate a message that individuals and families should be prepared by developing a community engagement effort based on the DHS and FEMA policy called Partners 4 Preparedness (P4P), a community resilience initiative. All of this effort is geared for today’s realities of climate change and man-made threats and to encourage, as President Obama stated, people to take “individual responsibility and participate through community service” as a personal commitment in the 21st century. With that kind of direction from the President and the understanding of our “new reality,” one must take action at the local level. IDHS considered the P4P initiative to be a way forward.

The initiative was set up to conduct internal and external classes for individuals to create a Family Disaster Preparedness Plan, while engaging and enabling the public to take on more responsibility for understanding how to manage the affairs of their health and well-being during the first 72 hours of a disaster. This one-hour class was developed for the agency’s 13,000 employees and its many customers. The focus is on helping people to become more aware of being prepared in times of a crisis, disaster or catastrophe. It is well documented that with an ever-increasing number of disasters, first responders will not be able to handle the surge and overload during the first phase of an incident [2, 12-16].

In order for communities to be more adaptable, they must become skilled at communicating with each other and establishing relationships or networks prior to a disaster or major incident [3, p.1]. This need is especially true today because of the way community life has evolved over the last 25 or 30 years. Communities must establish formal and informal networks within and outside of their respective boundaries. As Ryan Rockabrand, a Chicago area catastrophic planner recently commented, “We know from experience that institutions do not relate or communicate well with each

other; however, relationships do.” Hulbert and her associates also strongly support the need to establish networks: “One key aspect of that task is to understand how individuals’ social networks will affect the dynamics of recovery and rebuilding.” [3, p.1] These social networks can be traditional person-to-person communication or can incorporate technology such as Twitter or Facebook. The new communication media can help formal systems – institutions and organizations – connect through informal systems – faith and community based organizations – with individuals and neighborhoods.

Such is the aim of DHS’s policy on preparedness. The community preparedness and participation capability provides that everyone in America be fully aware, trained and practiced on how to prevent, protect/mitigate, prepare for and respond to all threats and hazards. This goal requires a role for citizens in personal preparedness, exercises, ongoing volunteer programs and surge capacity response [4].

To be able to communicate in times of a disaster the community must be trained in various ways of communicating in order to be resilient. Stating DHS’ policy another way, we should have a certain level of readiness for any type of an incident at any time, that is, be prepared to engage in an all-hazard environment. IDHS has collaborated with the American Red Cross (ARC) which has a very simple and easy way to develop a preparedness plan – for you, your family, workplace, kids’ school and so forth. This approach [5] is called “Be Red Cross Ready!” The main theme is their tag line: “Get a Kit–Make a Plan–Be Informed.” IDHS has added, “If you can Get a Kit, Make a Plan, Be Informed, know your neighbor, you may save a life.” Because the ARC is proficient in the preparedness training and services they provide, IDHS has coordinated much of the one-hour training for IDHS staff and customers with their readiness program and activities.

With a deeper level and intentional understanding that we are not separate and that we are all part of the community, people can better serve themselves and others through collaboration. To achieve this type of group effort, individuals must be willing to partner for the greater good. Community and faith-based organizations, businesses and local governments must work at managing differently today. Business and city administrators

will have to start working more actively outside of their silos in order to manage more effectively for the community at-large. “For the greater part of the twentieth century, the processes of hierarchical management occupied practical and academic attention. But today such a focus captures too few of the challenges faced by today’s managers.” [6, p. 2-3] Community preparedness should be poised to engage communities through volunteering. We must engage these communities before emergencies and times of need. The formal and informal systems must work to collaborate, to give of themselves in the spirit of community, as we once did.

Discussions are being conducted with the Regional Catastrophic Planning Team (RCPT), a FEMA grant project that includes Indiana University Center on Philanthropy, along with the states of Indiana, Illinois and Wisconsin and non-governmental organizations to broaden the conversation for citizens to be engaged in a process of collaboration for responding adequately in times of danger. IDHS is part of the RCPT and working diligently to provide a model for citizens to be trained in disaster preparedness for emergencies through formal and informal systems. Using this collaborative model for the good of all people and entities is essential. IDHS understands that the public must first be trained to be flexible and knowledgeable about taking care of themselves and their families in order to bounce back when and if an incident does happen. Individuals and families are experiencing more distress today than ever before in their communities due to the contracting American economy as well as the prevailing natural and man-made threats. With these and other factors, this situation emphasizes the importance of having a strong community engagement effort focused on coordinating community assets and interests with those formal and informal entities by communicating across systems. In order to achieve this collaboration we must coordinate and leverage resources during the normal course of conducting business. This approach can afford us the opportunity to be more organized before a disaster happens, which can result in a more hardwearing populace.

This coordinating and communicating across neighborhoods and institutional networks is a must in order to maintain our sense of community and enables us to better respond in times of an emergency in the 21st

century. Coexisting as a whole community affords stakeholders an opportunity to be prepared by communicating through their connected networks beforehand and to be ready to aid and assist as the need arises. With this understanding, IDHS is seeking to collaborate with foundations and others by coordinating, leveraging and directing existing resources and program dollars to communities we mutually serve. To do this work there must be a concerted effort to synchronize the agency’s providers of program services with foundations and other entities on a day-to-day basis. This interconnectedness involves a true understanding of community spirit. This neighbor-helping-neighbor attitude must be communicated through relationships and with a systems-thinking approach.

“Just as the bureaucratic organization was the signature organizational form during the industrial age, the emerging information or knowledge age gives rise to the less rigid, more permeable structures, where persons are able to link across internal functions, organization boundaries, and even geographic boundaries.” [6, 23-34.] If we can build up a sense of community before a crisis, disaster or catastrophe, we can become more interconnected, interorganizational and intergovernmental, all the while, responding as one community.

Information and communication technology (ICT) is one means to connect the formal and informal systems, that is, institutions tied to social networks through the community. Greater interconnectedness would mean greater peer-to-peer interaction as opposed to top down communication. We should consider the diversity and equality of the entire community. The 20th century worked with silos; the 21st must operate in collaboration. This level of communication and commitment will enable the individual, family and community to respond more effectively in times of a crisis, emergency or disaster.

For the 21st century we must have interconnectedness as opposed to separateness to increase a community’s resilience, both day-to-day and as needed in times of an incident. Training community folk to be integrated into the processes before emergencies is the key. “Familiarizing volunteer corps or newly integrated volunteers with existing response systems is extremely important if we expect to succeed.” [7, pp. 15-16] To achieve this

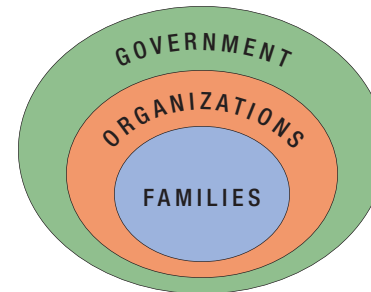
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goal, we must seek to make everyone aware through the coordination of all our collective efforts.

Yvette Maxie, director, capacity building for the American Red Cross of Greater Chicago, the second largest chapter in the country and one of IDHS's collaborating partners, outlined this coordinated effort in a white paper: "There are five connections for this project: 1) Academia, 2) Regional Catastrophic Planning Team (RCPT), 3) Humanitarian Response, 4) Grass roots organizations and 5) Foundations." [8, p. 2] Those five types of entities are focused on interconnecting specific preparedness principles and on communicating with humanitarian organizations to support communities through and across existing systems. The list singles out academia for research, RCPT for engaging the public in preparedness planning, humanitarian response for integrating human services to meet the mental, emotional, physical and financial needs, grassroots organizations (CBOs and FBOs) to assist in the engagement and education processes for problem solving, and foundations for providing "strategic direction, hands on assistance and the primary funding support of community and faith based organizations." [8, p.2]

Russell Dynes states in his seminal work [9] that the "military model" is based on top-down vs. community collaboration. "The latent capacity for problem solving exists in every form of social organization – families, organizations, communities and a nation . . . the problem solving model" for

engaging communities [pp. 6-7. 16-17]. In short, the following stakeholders must take an active part in this collaborative and coordinated work:



- Individuals and families
- Community-based
- Faith-based
- Foundations
- Organizations
- Schools – academia
- Businesses
- Local and state governments
- Federal government

During the National Philanthropy Summit convened by the Center of Philanthropy at Indiana University and the McCormick Foundation in October 2009 [10], one discussion centered on "communication; coordination; strategic versus heart-felt charitable giving; opportunities and roles for funders, (for example, capacity building); and the potential challenges and roles of nonprofits and other constituencies." IDHS and others are extending this conversation for our respective communities. The group of collaborators IDHS is working with believes that this dialogue must have a sense of urgency due to the times that we are living in. As noted earlier, we must consider how communities should communicate not only for a successful relief effort, but also importantly to function in our day-to-day lives. ■

### Resources Mentioned in the Article

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- [9] Dynes, R. R. (1991). *Disaster reduction: The importance of adequate assumptions about social organizations*. (Preliminary Paper #172). Newark, DE: University of Delaware Disaster Research Center. Retrieved April 19, 2010, from <http://dspace.udel.edu:8080/dspace/bitstream/19716/547/3/PP172.pdf>.
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