Social Resiliency and Superstorm Sandy

Lessons from New York City Community Organizations

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Executive Summary

Superstorm Sandy presented New York City neighborhoods and the entire region with an unprecedented emergency, revealing strengths and challenges affecting each community's vulnerable populations. In the aftermath of the storm, active community networks in the city stepped up to play crucial stabilizing and supporting roles in impacted areas. In New York City neighborhoods, many organizations that function as cornerstones of the existing social fabric worked to coordinate local response efforts during and after Superstorm Sandy. These organizations had not expected to be involved in disaster response, but affected residents turned to them because of their deeply rooted trust in the organizations' proven commitment to serving the needs of the local community. These local groups and networks were able to identify and coordinate aid, distribute supplies to high needs areas, and assist more vulnerable populations like elderly, disabled, limited English proficient, low income, and geographically isolated residents. Communities where residents had stronger and more active social ties were better able to utilize these social networks to adapt, respond, and recover from Sandy.

The value of those social networks is social capital: the trust, respect, and reliability established and accumulated within a community. This is strengthened by habits and activities that routinely bring people into contact with one another, like attending community meetings, group activism, or participating in a local sports league. In the context of emergencies and disasters, social capital helps determine a community's resilience. At the most basic level, for example, building residents know their elderly neighbors well enough that in a heat wave they would check on them to make sure they were OK and that their air conditioning was working correctly. In fact, this scenario was the subject of research done by Eric Klinenberg which focused on the Chicago heat wave in 1995 that killed 739 people, about seven times more people than died in Superstorm Sandy.[i] This research indicated that in demographically similar neighborhoods in Chicago, living in an area with a vibrant streetscape, thriving civic involvement, and strong community organizations that naturally bring people into contact with one another drastically reduced the mortality rate during the deadly heat wave.

Social networks are a key factor in a community's ability to be resilient in the face of environmental, social, and economic shocks. Looking at resilience more broadly across a community, those pre-existing habits of communication and interaction allow greater transmission of information, coordination, and distribution of resources during an emergency, which we saw in many communities following Superstorm Sandy. Relationships established long before any emergency occurred are much more useful and expeditious than trying to find the right person, who you may not know, during an emergency. This has been an increasingly important concept for civic leaders, policy makers, and funders in the wake of Superstorm Sandy because government and disaster response organizations have a limited ability to respond during such a large-scale emergency, leaving many neighborhoods with less urgent needs to rely on their own communities in the immediate aftermath.

How this played out in New York City was particularly apparent following Superstorm Sandy, where community networks and support structures activated to respond to the needs of local neighborhoods. Local groups spend years serving and engaging their community and building strong networks. It is not strictly about providing services, it is about building the strength of organizations and their capacity to advocate for their local residents. We can see in impacted neighborhoods across the city how residents stepped up to check on their neighbors, donate supplies, and aided in getting resources out to people in need. These networks sprang up

around neighborhood facilities that had functionally survived Sandy and could serve as hubs for relief and coordination with the residents they work with on a normal basis. Given the positive benefits of strong neighborhoods based social capital, policy recommendations, research, and resources should seek to strengthen the bonds across demographic groups, promote civic involvement, and continue to build social efficacy within ongoing anchor organizations that will be on the front lines when another emergency strikes.

There are several key lessons about why community groups in New York City neighborhoods were able to utilize their social capital to respond effectively following Superstorm Sandy.

Networks of Relationships – Pre-existing relationships, built from years of contact, are critical for communicating needs, sharing resources, and passing along critical information before, during, and after an emergency. Groups and individuals with strong networks across their community can help connect resources and identify those in need. For example, Project Hospitality helped connect disparate service providers and community leaders in Staten Island following Superstorm Sandy, enabling them to work together towards recovery.

Community Based Staff – Local staff, plugged into community life in the neighborhood, enabled quick action following Superstorm Sandy for many impacted groups. When transportation and communication systems went down, some staff members were already in the neighborhood, communicating needs, and taking action to help nearby residents. The Good Old Lower East Side (GOLES) was able to quickly assess the situation, coordinate with local residents, and start distributing supplies quickly after the storm passed.

Communications Networks – Organizations routinely use a variety of methods to communicate and engage their local population on the services and programs that they provide. The flow of information through a community can be tapped into during an emergency for communicating needs, promoting recovery resources, & coordinating relief efforts. The Red Hook Initiative was part of a neighborhood-wide coordinated relief effort utilizing local runners, word of mouth, and social media to request supplies and communicate available resources.

Community Hubs – Local gathering places are crucial to recovery and relief efforts for neighborhood residents. Following Superstorm Sandy, local residents in need gravitated towards those community organizations that had been serving the community for years as a trusted service provider. Neighborhood based organizations are in a unique and accessible position in the community to be able to coordinate and distribute aid. Following Superstorm Sandy, Families United for Racial and Economic Equality (FUREE) was able to help activate an unused but accessible community center space in Gowanus to manage and distribute supplies to nearby residents.

Structural and Functional Integrity – Many organizations involved in response and recovery following Sandy were the ones whose facilities and operations survived the storm. More severely impacted groups had to dedicate more time to getting their systems or buildings repaired, which meant less time available to help their community. For example, the Shorefront YM-YWHA is located along Brighton Beach but was able to weather the storm due to how the building was designed and how it was prepared beforehand. They were able to open their doors only days after the storm to begin assessing the needs within their community.

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Introduction

Building resilience in our communities has been widely discussed in the wake of destruction caused by Superstorm Sandy. The topic of resilience commonly refers to building physical barriers and infrastructure improvements such as walls, flood barriers, dunes, and more. Through programs like Rebuild by Design, New York Rising, government infrastructure projects, and others, physical protection measures are in the works for many coastal areas in the region. These resiliency measures protect infrastructure and buildings, but what about protecting members of New York City's communities beyond the initial physical impact and threat to structures?

The capacity of a community residents' ability to adapt, respond, and communicate in the face of environmental shocks is substantially based on their level of social connectedness. Building social cohesion in vulnerable communities is an essential strategy in maintaining the stability, health, resilience of communities before an emergency happens. Following Superstorm Sandy, we saw an outburst of coordination and action from community organizations embedded within impacted communities. In the immediate aftermath of the storm, many local residents did not have a premade emergency preparedness plan in place, but acted on intuition and information acquired through their network about where assistance was available and who could help with much needed resources. As communities leveraged their social networks, many response and recovery activities coalesced around anchor organizations like local nonprofit groups and service providers that connect these neighborhood networks together.

Many organizations across New York City have been serving resident needs and building strong communities over many years, earning them a trusted status within the neighborhood. For some groups this may involve direct services such as senior care, shelter facilities, job training, and more. For others, this includes running a community center with a variety of recreational and care programs. Still others focus on social engagement, volunteerism, cultural background, religion, or recreation. Because of Superstorm Sandy, many of these groups shifted their day-to-day functions to include extensive recovery work, as recovery became the overriding concern of local residents. In many cases, the vulnerable populations that these groups focused on as part of their ongoing mission became even more at risk as the storm exacerbated problems that had already put pressure on these communities.

The link between community-based recovery and the social networks of those neighborhoods cannot be understated. "Not as visible, but arguably just as tangible, are social resources that can be critical to response and recovery efforts," argues prominent social capital researcher Robert Sampson. "Indeed, extant literature suggests that factors such as social network connectedness, social cohesion, trust, and community bonds facilitate social interaction and information exchange. This reservoir of social resources can then be drawn upon in the event of a disaster."[ii] In our communities, we can measure the social capital as the accumulated value and usefulness of a social network. Robert Putnam, another leading thinker on the subject, uses high levels of social capital as a predictor of a wide variety of secondary social benefits including people's health and happiness, levels of economic development, well-working schools, safe neighborhoods, and responsive government.[iii]

Programming and services that neighborhood groups provide on a routine basis and as part of their ongoing mission help build the civic infrastructure and social efficacy that make a community more resilient. To intentionally build a more resilient community, preparedness and information channels should be built into the ongoing habits and ecosystem of community involvement. While you can teach disaster preparedness skills one year, the ultimate goal is to have those same residents act in a way that enable them to be safe, secure, and help others when an event occurs five, ten, or twenty years later. Through a strong and vibrant community network, people will turn to trusted people or institutions for help in an emergency, like community centers, churches, or social services providers. This white paper will explore how and why response and recovery efforts sprang up around community hubs, and how government agencies, funders, and neighborhood organizations can move forward with an understanding of how they can best support critical resiliency activities in our communities while preparing for future crises.

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Understanding the Challenges of Social Resilience in New York City

The strength of civic and social networks in New York City neighborhoods directly relates to the ability of those neighborhoods to survive and thrive. Communities that lack strong social cohesion are more vulnerable to low-level stresses as well as larger social, economic, and environmental emergencies. In an emergency, disconnected communities are not as quick to respond in the immediate aftermath and have a more limited ability to recover in the long term. According to Eric Klinenberg, elements of strong community infrastructure include vibrant street and storefront culture, feeling of safety in the neighborhood, connection and engagement with neighbors, a density of different types of community groups, and strong resident participation in community groups. In those neighborhoods with greater connectedness and cohesion, the social environment creates a positive feedback of increased resident participation and neighbors watching out for each other.

For neighborhoods hit by Sandy, social networks were critical to the response effort. The nature and form of those relationships, and how they related to other networks are broken into two primary kinds of social capital: bonding and bridging. Bonding social capital accumulates between people with shared interests, socioeconomic status, background, occupation, or other traits that make them similar.[xvi] According to Robert Putnam, author of *Bowling Alone*, bonding social capital reinforces the willingness of people to help others who they feel are part of their group. He explains, "Dense networks in ethnic enclaves, for example, provide crucial social and psychological support for less fortunate members of their community, while furnishing start-up financing, markets, and reliable labor for local entrepreneurs."[iii] The bridging type of social capital exists within relationships that cut across different race, class, or ethnic backgrounds. To Putnam, the bridging networks are better at linking together assets, information, and providing avenues for communication among different sets of people and groups in the community.[iii] Both serve unique functions and both are important for creating a vibrant and durable social fabric in the community.

Unfortunately, civic involvement in the United States is not as strong as it used to be. In *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam argues that there has been a decline in civic engagement over the last several decades[iii]. In the past, communities would come together to support one another out of necessity, perhaps collectively sleeping in a local park during a heat wave, but our society is

About ANHD and our work on Social Resiliency

The Association for Neighborhood and Housing Development (ANHD) was founded in 1974 with the mission of strengthening New York City's community development movement. Today, ANHD has a membership of 95 of the City's leading community development organizations, including non-profit housing developers who have built over 100,000 affordable units in the past 25 years and community organizers who have won campaigns for policy change that in the past ten years alone have directly preserved tens of thousands of affordable units and leveraged over $1.3 billion in new funding for affordable housing. ANHD focuses on affordable housing development, tenants' rights, and bank-accountability, supporting member groups with training, capacity-building resources, strategic research, and high-impact public policy advocacy campaigns. Member organizations in coastal communities have been engaged in rebuilding and recovery efforts following Superstorm Sandy, integrating resiliency and recovery into their ongoing programs and the needs of their communities.

Since 2013, we have been funded by the NYC Housing and Neighborhood Recovery Donors Collaborative, a consortium of 16 foundations and financial institutions, to provide support and coordination for 10 community groups that are developing resiliency programs focused on building social capital. These groups are implementing new and innovative neighborhood specific programs to build social capital and prepare vulnerable populations impacted by Superstorm Sandy. Each group has a unique program focus and works with populations such as immigrant and limited-English proficient communities, public housing residents, low-income groups, senior citizens, and disabled residents. In addition, the scope of their programs ranges from coordinating volunteer programs, creating local information hubs, establishing communications networks, and the creation of family and community disaster preparedness plans.

increasingly isolated and less comfortable in communal settings. The lack of critical social support systems greatly increases the risk to families and individuals in an emergency. Drastic changes to the identity of neighborhoods over the last several decades can cause them to experience lower levels of social cohesion. Many of these communities have experienced change due to loss of major employers, shifting demographic profiles, and abandonment of critical infrastructure. These factors can lead to dissolution of the neighborhood's social capital, which can contribute to increased crime, population decline, and further degradation of the local infrastructure. In *Heat Wave*, Eric Klinenberg explains that "busy streets, heavy commercial activity, residential concentration, and relatively low crime promote social contact, collective life, and public engagement in general and provide particular benefits for the elderly, who are more likely to leave home when they are drawn out by nearby amenities." [iv] These types of environmental and social impacts can overcome negative factors that contribute to lower levels of social capital among vulnerable and elderly populations.

Sandy's Impact and the Future Challenges of New York City

In New York City, Superstorm Sandy demonstrated the strength and dedication of millions of New Yorkers to their neighborhoods and exposed the vulnerabilities present in coastal communities unprepared for a major storm. According to NYC Office of Emergency Management and the Office of City Planning, inundation from Superstorm Sandy affected over 239,992 residential units of housing and 574,322 residents across in Brooklyn, Queens, and Staten Island.[v] The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is in the process of updating the flood risk maps representing current risk in the 100-year flood plain, the area that has a 1% chance of flooding in a given year, and will include 398,100 New York City residents.[vi] New York City includes the largest number of people in a flood zone of any city in the United States, with almost twice as many residents at risk and six times the density of New Orleans. In addition, according to a report by the New York City Mayor's Office Special Initiative for Rebuilding and Resiliency (SIRR), climate change projections indicate that the risk of flooding in the current 100-year flood zone will likely more than double by the 2050s.[vi]

According to the same SIRR report the number of days where the temperature exceeds 90 degrees, designated as high heat days, will increase from 18 to 28 by 2050. High heat days "strain the City's power grid and cause deaths from heat stroke and exacerbate chronic conditions, particularly for vulnerable populations such as the elderly." [vi] Heat waves are traditionally more deadly than all other natural disasters, including tornadoes, hurricanes, and earthquakes combined. A heat wave in New York City in July 2006 caused 140 deaths.[vii] The 1995 Chicago heat wave resulted in over 700 deaths, largely in neighborhoods with "pockets of concentrated poverty and violent crime, places where old people were at risk of hunkering down at home and dying alone during the heat wave." [i] In fact, Eric Klinenberg explains that the people of Englewood, one of the economically disadvantaged neighborhoods hit hardest by the Chicago heat wave, was more vulnerable because their community had been abandoned: "Between 1960 and 1990, Englewood lost fifty percent of its residents and most of its commercial outlets, as well as its social cohesion." [iv]

We face a similar threat in New York City following Superstorm Sandy. A study of residents in impacted communities across the New York and New Jersey region conducted by the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research indicated that neighborhoods lacking in social cohesion and trust are having a more difficult time recovering from Sandy.[viii] The data shows that in slowly recovering neighborhoods, residents are less likely to believe that people can be trusted or that the storm brought out the best in people, and are more likely to report greater levels of hoarding food and water, looting and stealing, and vandalism in their neighborhoods during or immediately after the storm. The lack of social cohesion can be an indicator of the lack of capacity or lack of connection to a network that can effectively respond and recover in an emergency.

Vulnerable Populations in New York City

New York City faces many unique problems compared to other disaster prone cities. Given New York City residents' reliance on public transit, geographically isolated communities like Red Hook and the Rockaway peninsula are especially vulnerable to emergencies. Isolated communities have greater difficulty evacuating, especially when public transit shuts down as it did before and after Superstorm Sandy. Without access to a vehicle or to public transit, many residents are unable to evacuate easily, if at all, and attempting to evacuate children, disabled, or elderly family members further complicates the situation. Once the immediate risk passes, response and relief agencies also have trouble getting to these impacted communities, especially if the event damaged or destroyed critical transportation infrastructure like tunnels, bridges, or roads. Community organizations and residents may have to rely on local resources for a longer time before outside help arrives.

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Linguistic and cultural differences make communication before, during, and after an emergency difficult. Almost half of the city's population speaks a language other than English at home, with non-English proficient residents making up nearly half of that group.[ix] Experts say there are almost 800 different languages spoken in New York City[x], which creates challenges to connect and communicate with impacted residents. Many immigrant and cultural groups seek to verify outside information within their own network before taking action. Language and cultural barriers limit the ability of certain residents to understand evacuation procedures and directions. In other cases, a lack of cultural understanding may hinder the work of response and recovery personal and volunteers. On top of that, the City's undocumented immigrant populations are especially vulnerable because many may be unwilling to seek public assistance for fear of government action or deportation.[xi]

The City's elderly and disabled populations are at risk during emergencies from a number of different sources. A recent report by the New York Academy of Medicine explains that while older adults may be more psychologically resilient, evidence also suggests that "older adults may be more vulnerable in disasters due to a predisposition to one or more of the following factors: mobility and cognitive impairment, chronic health conditions, diminished sensory awareness, social isolation, and financial limitations." [xii] This makes them particularly at risk due to loss of power affecting medical equipment, and transit disruptions challenging their ability to evacuate or get care safely. Similarly, elderly or disabled residents may not be able to stock up on critical medication in order to have a backup supply in the event that their local pharmacy and doctor are inoperable following a disaster. During Superstorm Sandy, many elderly and disabled residents became stuck in their apartments in high-rise and mid-rise buildings as a result of non-functioning elevators or phones—46% of the deaths associated with Sandy were seniors over age 65.[xiii]

Lastly, low income and public housing residents face unique difficulties including limited access to backup supplies and food, non-functioning food assistance programs, and risks due to damaged building systems that they have little control over repairing. In a disaster, these vulnerabilities can be complicating factor that limits the families' ability to prepare, evacuate, and recover. With emergency preparedness, low-income families may not have the flexibility to maintain three days of non-perishable food in the home, let alone the recommended 7-10 days recommended by many preparedness resources.[xiv] Low-income communities can be concentrated in more risk prone environments such as low-lying flood plains or neighborhoods adjacent to industrial facilities, thereby increasing the threat of exposure to significant environmental risks. There may be a lower level of car ownership as well, adding an additional limitation on how a family can evacuate and recover from an emergency.

New York City contains a wide array of vibrant, thriving neighborhoods, as well as many more underserved and "abandoned" neighborhoods where the social fabric is at risk of degrading. Rapid and recent demographic changes can destabilize long-term social relationships in neighborhoods and expose greater vulnerability among the residents who remain.[iv] In some cases, recent immigrant groups provide a needed social safety net, but when the changes have happened quickly, the extent of the social networks for both the old and new residents may be limited. For other communities, building local leadership can be a challenge due to isolation and a lack of nearby organizations to help. Still other communities identify with a habit of disconnectedness and are wary of outsiders. These challenges present communities with lower levels of social infrastructure, and while there is an influx of support and attention after an emergency, the institutional capacity of these neighborhoods can remain low.

New York City's Capacity to Respond

Many people expect that government will respond and help them immediately following an emergency. A recent FEMA survey indicated that 61% of US residents surveyed expect emergency responders to be in their community in the first 72 hours following a disaster.[xv] In a large-scale emergency like Superstorm Sandy, response agencies focused their resources and personnel on the most pressing and dangerous situations first. Many communities did not see relief workers or government officials for almost a week following the storm and this left homeowners and community groups on their own to respond in the immediate aftermath. Many individuals did not prepare their homes or families for such an event, and were left scrambling for emergency supplies. Even community groups had little understanding about what to expect from government and relief services, but stepped up to coordinate relief efforts in the absence of direction and advisement.

Within New York City and around the country relief agencies like the Red Cross, Salvation Army, and others form a coalition of voluntary organizations active in disaster (VOAD). These groups connect to the City's Office of Emergency Management during emergencies to communicate and address issues from the humanitarian and relief side. While these groups sprang into action in their designated capacity following Sandy, there were difficulties connecting with the array of community groups, service providers, or community centers that filled the gaps in response on the ground. Many community-based organizations did not anticipate being involved in relief and recovery work if an emergency were to happen, so they were not plugged into the existing communications networks on the borough and citywide level. This disconnect in the communications network left community groups unsure about citywide protocols and actions being taken, but also left the NYC VOAD without having many eyes on the ground in impacted zones.

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The Need for Social Resilience in New York City

Despite the number of environmental risks and challenges that New York City communities must grapple with, there are many innovative and significant solutions that will help build more resilient neighborhoods. Communities with stronger social ties, vibrant civic life, and a habit of interconnectedness are better able to adapt, respond, and recover from economic, social, and environmental shocks like Superstorm Sandy. Resilient communities include strong sets of networks that cut through and across demographic, cultural, and economic groups. Superstorm Sandy showed us that across the city, communities with stronger civic networks were able to jump into action to begin to respond to the catastrophe, while others with limited social ties have had a much more difficult and disorganized recovery. For example, Tony Schloss from the Red Hook Initiative described this phenomenon by saying "after working through the last year and a half of Sandy recovery we've come to realize that our network and relationships are a big reason why community groups like ours worked effectively together, received support from government agencies and NGOs, and became a focal point for relief and recovery for community members in need."

Remember the example given earlier about the high-risk community, Englewood, in the Chicago heat wave in 1995? Klinenberg compared two adjacent and demographically similar neighborhoods on Chicago's South Side: Englewood, mentioned earlier, and Auburn Gresham, both predominantly African American, with similar proportions of elderly residents, high rates of poverty, unemployment, and violent crime. What he found was that in Englewood there were thirty-three deaths per hundred thousand residents. In Auburn Gresham the rate was three per hundred thousand residents making it safer than many affluent communities on Chicago's North Side. Klinenberg explains that the "key difference between neighborhoods like Auburn Gresham and others that are demographically similar turned out to be the sidewalks, stores, restaurants, and the community organizations that bring people into contact with friends and neighbors."[iv] Similarly, in New York City, community organizations fit in to the protective ecosystem that Klinenberg describes by facilitating the growth of these neighbor-to-neighbor connections and the support system of the neighborhood.

THE NEW YORK CITY SOLUTION, EXPLAINED

Prepared or not, community groups have found themselves situated on the front lines of disaster response and recovery. Many community organizations involved in immediate response to Sandy are, nearly two years later, not only still spearheading support for local recovery, but also advancing the preparedness of the community for future events and facilitating collaboration with government agencies. Few of these groups had expected to fill this role as part of their ongoing work, but helping their neighborhood recover and prepare for future emergencies has become central to their primary mission of helping to strengthen their neighborhood. Just as a social or economic crisis in a local neighborhood will affect how a local organization responds to its communities' needs, so too will an environmental disaster or emergency nearby

Many factors influence how communities are able to respond in a crisis. However, a primary thread runs through the narratives and interviews of community groups thrust into response and recovery: you must build the communications, response, and coordination into the ongoing habits, interactions, and institutional practices within the community and within the community groups. Emergency planning is critical, but these plans only serve as part of the solution in an emergency, as was seen in countless catastrophic events, from 9/11 to Katrina. The existing social fabric and interactions supported by neighborhood hubs like community centers, social service agencies, community based organizations, and neighborhood institutions will serve as a groundwork for local response in New York City. We will discuss some of the core elements of community resilience and how these elements influenced the immediate response to Superstorm Sandy. We have included examples from community organizations that we have worked with over the last year and a half around community resilience. Many groups, even those not listed here, are excellent examples of many of the comprehensive strategies in building community resilience, even though we only discuss one group as an example of each.

Networks of Relationships

Community networks are a critical gauge of how well those neighborhoods are able to react and respond because they facilitate the communication of needs, sharing of resources, and passing along of critical information. If neighbors already have a well-established relationship, they are more familiar with the one another's situations, and will be more prepared to help. Similarly, community groups that have an ongoing and established relationship with their community long before a disaster are in a better position to communicate and understand the immediate needs of that impacted residents. The ability to anticipate and meet these needs is the direct result of years of service and support within the community that extends to issues outside of disaster response and recovery.

According to the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research study on Superstorm Sandy, 47% of residents of extremely affected communities turned to family and friends for assistance, 17% reached out to state government, 43% to federal agencies like FEMA, 21% to church or religious organizations, and 16% to relief organizations.[viii] Many of these statistics indicate the value of an individual and family's personal connection to the organizations they turned to for help. These are groups with which they have already established a significant level of trust, and community members know that they can be a source of information and support in an emergency.

Every community group has different kinds of networks based on their function and role in the neighborhood. A religious institution, for example, will have regular contact and a strong relationship with its congregation, and those members may be local to the area. A local Community Board has a unique network, which connects to local government and emergency response efforts through formalized government structures. An informal social group can connect relationships with other community members through shared interests or with others that may not connect to formal organizations. All of these different types of groups are critical in communicating and responding before, during, and after an emergency.

Example: Project Hospitality is a Staten Island based organization with a mission to serve community members who are hungry, homeless, or in need to help them become self-sufficient though a continuum of social services. As part of its ongoing mission, Project Hospitality collaborates with and operates food pantries, clothing distribution, shelters, intake facilities, housing, mental health services, and legal services. These prior relationships, combined with deep roots in the community, allowed Project Hospitality to be able to help link a variety of local services to people and organizations in need in the immediate aftermath of Sandy. They have been actively helping to connect and organize many groups engaged in response and recovery in since Superstorm Sandy hit. In Staten Island, churches formed a critical element of support in the days and weeks following Sandy, and were some of the first groups to come together to discuss and coordinate the services and resources available around the borough, ultimately forming the Staten Island Interfaith and Community Long Term Recovery Organization with many community based organizations.

Community Based Staff

Many of the organizations whose staff live and work in impacted neighborhoods were able to respond quickly after Sandy hit. Local staff plugs into community life, have their own local networks, and may have lived in impacted buildings. For community development organizations that operate housing facilities, these local staff became a critical communication point between disparate buildings and allowed organizations to identify and assess needs on the ground more quickly. If transportation infrastructure is down, as it was after Sandy, it also allows these groups to have eyes on the ground and staff in the area to help respond in the immediate aftermath of an emergency.

Example: Locally based staff allowed the Good Old Lower East Side (GOLES), a housing and direct service organization, to respond after Sandy because they were able to access the office and start working with community members, volunteers, and supplies quickly. Local GOLES staff were able to take stock of the situation, coordinate with government staff on where people could get help, and begin distributing information by canvassing the neighborhood. The local members and staff leveraged their networks and relationships to engage volunteers to help find vulnerable residents stuck in high-rise buildings, identify those in need of food or medication, and people in need of assistance by knocking on over 15,000 doors. Even though many methods of transportation and communication were not functioning, local staff members were able to spring into action and help their neighbors after Sandy.

Communications Networks

Both before and after Sandy, community groups used whatever communications platforms they had to reach out to local residents about the evacuation and about locations for relief services in the aftermath. These methods range from posting fliers in buildings to sending out an email blast to doing automated calls. These tactics were the same ones organizations used on a routine basis before the storm; the community expected to receive messages that way. Staff continually updates contact lists and communications channels that are part of the normal business of the group. Keeping a separate list and separate practices for engaging vulnerable populations in an emergency means it may not be updated on a regular basis. As with other practices listed above, they are most effective when integrated into the ongoing habits and protocols of community groups.

Example: Following the flooding and infrastructure damage that resulted of Sandy, many buildings in Red Hook lost power, utilities, and communications. The Red Hook Initiative (RHI), a youth empowerment and support organization, sprung to action in service of the neighborhood after Sandy hit, utilizing its many relationships in the community to identify needs and coordinate with other organizations. Occupy Sandy began biking around the area to local hubs like RHI to relay information about different needs. They were able to use their twitter account to request supplies and make announcements about available resources. Their local initiative to bring WiFi to the neighborhood, which included a splash page showing local news and events, was useful for communicating critical recovery information with local residents and drawing them to central relief service locations.

Community Hubs

Once government agencies were able to deploy their support services and staff, they focused on finding key locations and facilities that were operational in the impacted zones that could serve as relief centers. Government agencies also factored in where community networks seemed to flow through to identify the best locations for relief efforts. Many of these centers were at organizations that had accumulated social capital over many years of serving the community in other ways. Supplies and donations tend to flow through known and trusted entities within impacted communities, a role that neighborhood based organizations are uniquely suited to fill by helping identify needs within their community and distributing those supplies.

Example: Following Superstorm Sandy, Families United for Racial and Economic Equality (FUREE) set up relief efforts based out of a local community center in Gowanus that was closed years earlier. In the days that followed, the Gowanus Community Center, situated in an ideal and accessible location for many impacted residents of the community and the nearby public housing complex, became a relief and distribution center, handling donations from many local and city organizations like food, baby supplies, flashlights, and more. While not having experience in disaster recovery, the organization adapted to managing supply distribution, as well as identifying and assessing community needs. After the immediate Sandy response, the center was once again closed. This local community site had the potential to not only help build a stronger community but also serve as a potential cooling center for seniors or a disaster relief hub in future emergencies, so the Fifth Avenue Committee and FUREE successfully petitioned to reopen the Gowanus Community Center.

Structural and Functional Integrity

Community groups that were in physically resilient buildings were better able to respond and help their community. Severely impacted organizations must focus on getting their facilities and programs functional again and are not in a position to be able to provide as much community assistance during and after an emergency. We saw similar parallels with the community members who were hit hardest and needed to focus on dealing with their own homes and families first before helping others. Throughout several interviews, this theme of physical resiliency became a key aspect of a community's ability to respond and recover quickly.

Example: The Shorefront YM & YWHA, which is located in Brighton Beach on the shoreline, was up and running within days of Sandy's landfall despite extensive flooding throughout the neighborhood. Sue Fox, the Executive Director of the Shorefront Y, credited the lack of damage to the building's construction without a basement and the elevated entrance doors, as well as their last minute sand bagging efforts. Other organizations and centers in the area did not fare as well. Two days after Sandy hit, power returned to the Shorefront Y, although phone and internet were still not functional, and allowed them to open their doors and begin to assess the needs and damage in the community. Their unique position of being operational led them to becoming a focal point within the neighborhood through word of mouth, as community members who had gone there for the community center services for years needed help or supplies in the aftermath of the storm.

Investment in programs that help build strong civic and

HOW SOCIAL RESILIENCE BENEFITS THE COMMUNITY

social infrastructure can help mitigate the mental, physical, and financial risks that accompany a major environmental, social, or economic emergency. The speed and success of getting a community back on its feet reduces long term mental and financial strain, which means less people will fall into foreclosure, lose their jobs, or succumb to other secondary effects of a devastating event.

Building resilient communities will show its value as it helps communities develop new long-term habits that promote the ongoing connection and communication between its members. The Social Capital Toolkit, a guide to assessing community social capital developed by Harvard University's Saguaro Seminar, says that "communities with more extensive social networks are more likely to have individuals behaving in a trustworthy manner, since the reputation of untrustworthy members travels fast in a well-connected communities." [xvi] This focus on trust and relationship can begin immediately, but takes time to grow into a routine that will benefit the neighborhood in the end.

The speed and success of getting a community back on its feet reduces long term mental and financial strain, which means less people will fall into foreclosure, lose their jobs, or succumb to other secondary effects of a devastating event.

There are significant health and life saving effects of strong social capital as well. Harvard University sociologist Robert J. Sampson has been studying the effect of social ties, mutual assistance, and the relationships nonprofit organizations have to communities. Over the course of his research, he has uncovered the benefits of living in neighborhoods with a strong social and civic ecology. For example, during a heat wave, living in a neighborhood with stronger social capital can save nearly as many lives as having an air conditioner at home.[i] These positive social and physical results include contributing to a life expectancy almost five years higher than nearby neighborhoods with low levels of social capital.

Hurricane Sandy and other disasters highlight inequality and vulnerability in New York City. Community groups who work to change this inequality are in a unique position to support vulnerable populations in recovering from disasters. In the report, From the Edge of Disaster, Lisa Cowan argues, "while some structural solutions will help […] the deeper need is to reframe the disaster response and recovery conversation in terms of economic inequality." [xvi] Addressing inequities in housing, health, education, and economic status are avenues towards building greater resilience as well as community benefits that will grow stronger through greater social cohesion.

New York City has a unique social, physical, and

NEXT STEPS: HOW TO BUILD COMMUNITY RESILIENCY

Build the capacity of community based organizations in environmentally vulnerable neighborhoods to:

⇒ Foster local leadership and networks that connect marginalized and vulnerable residents to local groups, government officials, neighborhood institutions, and service providers

⇒ Develop mission driven community oriented programs that build the social fabric throughout non-emergency times around local issues

⇒ Invest in physical resiliency efforts, back-up communications systems, continuity of operations plans that enable organizations to survive and continue to serve residents in times of emergency

⇒ Develop social capital and preparedness programs in neighborhoods with vulnerable populations exposed to a variety of environmental risks

Prepare communities to be ready for an emergency:

⇒ Identify local social and environmental vulnerabilities of the neighborhood

⇒ Enable residents to be equipped with the knowledge to be future responders to emergencies

⇒ Engage foundations and charitable groups around resiliency and preparedness needs so they are ready and connected when an emergency arises

⇒ Build disaster preparedness programming into the habits of interaction and engagement already going on in the community

Social Resiliency and Superstorm Sandy

Lessons from New York City Community Organizations

Summary

demographic topography that necessitates a nuanced approach to building strong and resilient communities. Hurricane Sandy demonstrated how many communities responded, and it is important to learn from the past and adapt our future priorities and needs of our neighborhoods. The right approach for building resilient neighborhoods in New York City includes building the capacity of community civic groups to foster local leadership and cooperation within the community, enhancing the habits of interconnectedness and trust between community members, and weaving preparedness practices into ongoing community activities. This approach builds on practical experience, interviews, and research done in New York and elsewhere in the country.

The right approach for building resilient neighborhoods in New York City includes building the capacity of community civic groups to foster local leadership and cooperation within the community, enhancing the habits of interconnectedness and trust between community members, and weaving preparedness practices into ongoing community activities.

Studies following disasters in New York City and around the country demonstrate the importance of social resilience. These studies show the relationship of vibrant street life, active civic engagement, and the strength of relationships that enable residents to connect to one another. The most indicative study in Chicago after a heat wave killed over 700 residents demonstrated how, when they feel isolated from their neighbors due to demographic, economic, or physical changes that disturbed the social order, there is a significantly higher risk of their dying alone in their homes.

Following Sandy, community members leveraged their existing relationships to coordinate relief efforts, distribute supplies, and help others. Because of this network of knowledge and connections, residents knew where to go and who to talk with to get help to themselves, their families, and others. Many neighborhoods existed on a range of social resilience; some with stronger social networks responded faster and more strongly, while other neighborhoods struggled more or relied on additional outside assistance. In many cases, relationships grew out of the response and recovery efforts and have led to stronger social networks in those neighborhoods

Moving forward it is imperative to recognize the importance of community based response and preparedness as we plan for a next disaster, big or small. We must integrate resilience and preparedness habits into the ongoing fabric of community life so that residents can utilize their network of relationships again when facing an emergency. Community organizations are perfectly placed to serve a role of bringing different facets of the community together around ongoing needs, concerns, or interests. The strength of the social fabric of New York's communities is a critical element of preparedness for our neighborhoods.

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