

Community Connector Networks

Building on staff connections helps department reach minority communities.

Latricia Tillman

Hurricane Katrina blew the lid off the simmering issues of racism and class in the United States. An ineffective response revealed the undeniable chasm between the people with power and resources and those without. This was a hard lesson to swallow, even for Portland, in Multnomah County, Oregon, which is a comfortable distance from the Gulf states. As Portland prepared to receive hurricane survivors, a more hopeful lesson emerged. Community members from African, Asian, and Hispanic American communities stepped forward to support Multnomah County efforts to make sure that evacuees received a culturally competent welcome and effective response. These community members, or “community connectors,” addressed the full range of needs caused or exacerbated by the hurricane. Having members of diverse communities in the command post during the Katrina response helped to link hurricane evacuees with culturally competent mental health providers, give timely information to diverse communities, and connect them with community-generated volunteer responses.

resources, project staff confined the scope of the initial inquiry to a small number of vulnerable communities. The goals of these discussions were to learn what employees thought about emergency preparedness, what roles they could play in an emergency, and what support they need to fulfill those roles.

The discussions revealed several important findings. First, numerous department employees already serve as community connectors, building bridges between the county and diverse communities. They either have relationships with community leaders or are themselves leaders in their community. Additionally, they have the skills and trust needed to serve as communicators in the event of an emergency or emerging disease.

The focus group discussions also showed that the department needed to build and sustain a formalized communication network with staff so that communication to specified communities can be well-coordinated in the event of an emergency or emerging disease.

Such a network of individuals could be mobilized for day-to-day health promotion activities as well as emergency events. By regularly activating community connectors for non-emergency issues, employees have the opportunity to practice collaborating with each other and their community, increasing the likelihood of successful communications in the event of an emergency or emerging disease.

In 2004, the department finalized a description of community connector roles and recruited, trained, and exercised the first group of connectors. After an initial training, community connectors assisted in the distribution of flu vaccine during the vaccine shortage in fall and winter 2004. They helped with planning to support hurricane survivors evacuated from the Gulf Coast in fall 2005. Community connectors also assist in translating and distributing pre-event materials at community events and identifying additional community outreach opportunities.

What Is a Community Connector?

Community connectors are the people the community turns to for help with health questions and social supports. Community connectors:

- Get stopped in the grocery store and asked about health services
- Know that in an emergency situation people will ask them for help
- Have a position of leadership in their community
- Are members of volunteer, faith, or civic organizations
- Are community organizers or event planners
- Interact with a lot of people and people trust their opinions
- Share the information they get on the job with a broad social network

Finding grassroots in agencies

The community connector concept emerged in summer 2003, when the health department began exploring communication strategies to reach communities who may not tune in to mainstream media or for whom English is a second language. The department had to look no further than its own employees who already had established relationships with immigrant or refugee communities and communities of color in Multnomah County, either through their work or personal lives. Project staff conducted focus groups with the employees. Because of limited

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Community connectors strengthen relationships between the health department and diverse communities. Their liaison role is crucial. Community connectors take the pulse of the community and serve as two-way communicators who provide important feedback about reactions,

Expectations of Staff

Staff who become a part of the Community Connector Network are expected to:

- Make a one year commitment
- Attend training and skill-building activities
- Develop “Go Kits”
- Develop community assets maps and community-specific communication strategies
- Compile fact sheets for potential emergencies and emerging diseases
- Brainstorm, practice, and prioritize effective outreach strategies
- Be willing to be activated in real emergencies, as necessary

rumors, comments, or questions. This helps improve future health department communication, policies, and emergency response. Community connectors review public information messages for cultural appropriateness and ensure that risk communication and planned responses reach underserved communities through acceptable channels. They also help mobilize and engage communities in appropriate responses to emergencies.

Community connectors reap benefits, along with the communities they serve. Trainings inform their current work, as well as potential emergency response. The Community Connector Network will expand the community connectors’ relationships across cultural communities and strengthen their leverage in the health department and their effect on the department’s emergency preparedness team.

The health department invites all staff to join the Community Connector Network if they are part of an underserved community. Although not a competitive application, participants must complete a Profile Questionnaire, including after-hours contact information, and obtain their supervisor’s approval. The questionnaire asks staff about personal or family emergency plans, membership or affiliation with business, school, civic, or faith groups, community leaders with whom staff have relationships, roles held in professional or community organizations, community communication methods, languages, disaster experiences, and special skills.

Next steps

Multnomah County Health Department plans to enhance training opportunities for community connectors to build skills to take on vital communication and community response roles in an emergency. Trainings will include first aid and CPR, community outreach and organizing, working effectively with local, culturally specific media, and community-based response planning in advance of an emergency.

Long-term plans focus on expanding the Community Connector Network beyond the health department to ensure that county staff with connections to other vulnerable communities are also trained and prepared to respond in emergency situations. County employees in other departments have relationships with aging and disabled populations, people with mental illness, homeless individuals, and a range of other vulnerable populations. Many have the outreach and communication skills needed to be community connectors and engage in community emergency preparedness planning.

Redefining Readiness: Terrorism Planning Through the Eyes of the Public, a national study funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and released in September 2004, suggests that when individuals are given the opportunity to offer feedback and insight into the development of emergency plans, they will follow the plans in an emergency. Including community representatives in the planning process will increase the level of community confidence and cooperation with emergency response systems. Community involvement adds valuable elements to emergency preparedness and facilitates the equitable sharing of power, resources, and benefits to all communities. Emergency response planners know it is important to develop relationships with diverse communities in advance of a crisis. The Community Connector Network offers one model for developing those relationships. ■

Author

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