

## Developing Community Resilience

For our purposes we will define Community Resilience as the ability of a community to cope with stress, disaster and/or catastrophe. Another way to look at it is the as the ability to bounce back from a disruption to our normal way of life or of being able to adapt to changes. When events, natural or man-made, disrupt our community, the goal of being resilient is to return to what we consider 'normal' as soon as possible.

In order for this to happen, we need to remember that while local government will take a leadership role in educating its staff, business owners, and residents in ways they and their families can be better prepared, it is impossible for government to do everything that is required to protect the lives and property of its citizens.

So what are some of the factors that contribute to a resilient people or community?

### 1. Importance of Personal and Social Relationships.

Out of the infamous 1848 Donner Party tragedy comes this interesting factoid. As a result of being snowbound by an early heavy snowstorm, following a host of other difficulties, this group of emigrants to California were trapped in the top of the Sierra Nevada Mountains for close to 4 months. Only 48 of the original 87 members of the party survived. When asked who survived, many suggest, "the men," when in fact 90% of the single men died, while nine members of one family, to include a 1 year-old girl survived.<sup>1</sup>

A study in Alameda, California in the 80's revealed that having social contacts allowed women to live an average of 2.8 years longer and men to live an average of 2.3 years longer. The researchers were able to show that this difference was NOT due to socio-economic status, health at the beginning of study, or health habits.<sup>2</sup>

In another study, in 1996 Dr. Don MacKenzie chose dragon boating as the vehicle to test his belief, that contrary to medical opinion at the time, exercise is beneficial to women after breast cancer treatment.<sup>3</sup> Some of the anecdotes from that study demonstrate even more the value of the relationships developed by the participants as their dragon boating experiences nurtured their ability to be resilient in the face of the trauma and loss associated with a breast cancer diagnosis:

"Is this really us competing and racing a dragon boat when so recently we thought we were at death's door? It felt very good feeling strong again; to laugh again and the exquisite joy of sharing these feelings with fellow paddlers who had been on that same long journey."<sup>4</sup>

The dragon boat team provides "a community of women who didn't focus on the hardships, but were joined by the bond of survival. It was amazing to see those women who had been diagnosed, who had just gotten out of the hospital, paddling strong and hard. They were out on the water, looking so alive. They were having so much fun."<sup>5</sup>

In a community these kinds of powerful interpersonal relationships are created and nurtured in activities related to schools, community cultural organizations, sports organizations, service groups, and in faith-based communities. These relationships are strengthened as the members of these groups overcome difficulties and challenges that can arise from lack of funding, inadequate facilities, public and/or governmental apathy, or simply planned activities known to be challenging, etc.

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The key is that the groups work together and in doing so they develop cohesive bonds that extend well beyond their initial participation in the group. Those bonds and the lessons learned along the way can then contribute to the community's overall resilience in responding to a community-wide event like a natural or man-made disaster.

In government, and in particular in the area of emergency management, relationships are critical when it comes to preparing for and responding to emergency situations. Emergency management experts repeatedly speak to the value of a collaborative approach to developing emergency plans, with input from various staff sections:

“Effective emergency management requires collaboration rather than a command-and-control approach. Collaboration is a matter of building relationships and building consensus. It is founded on trust and open communication, and has become essential in the networked world of emergency managers.<sup>6</sup> In fact, the ability to work collaboratively with public, private, and non-profit agencies, as well as with volunteers and emergent groups, has become the critical leadership skill for emergency managers.”<sup>7</sup>

Emergency responders like fire and police can also develop strong and supportive relationships as agencies from differing jurisdictions work together to support one another in exercises and planned community events that would otherwise over-tax a single agency's resources. By collaborating in the provision of mutual support oftentimes overtime and other costs associated with community support to planned events can be minimized while at the same time creating and nurturing relationships that will bear positive fruit during an emergency.

**2. Developing an Attitude of Resilience.** I would suggest that as we develop these interpersonal relationships we can at the same time develop attitudes that encourage a sense of resilience.

An issue of the Harvard Business Review summarized the three core qualities of resilience at work.<sup>8</sup> The **first** is a *reality focus*: resilience means having few illusions. It is having a current awareness of the world, acknowledging tough issues. A reality focus prepares people to deal with challenges when they occur. They develop the perspectives and life skills necessary to survive in tough situations. The **second** quality concerns *values*. Resilience includes a commitment to higher principles that give meaning to one's work. The **third** element is *strong problem solving abilities*. Resilience includes the capacity to devise innovative solutions to problems that arise in the course of one's work. Together, these elements of resilience describe a practical idealist with a bias to action.<sup>9</sup>

Focused activities in the workplace can help to encourage these qualities and at the same time create and nurture the relationships that reinforce them. It can be very symbiotic.

Community organizations like Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT) provide another avenue for developing and nurturing these qualities of resilience. This comes through a combination of the classroom training and the in-class and field activities CERT trainees receive. With each new activity CERT members are more self-confident and more confident in their fellow team members. They do not think they are ready to replace our normal first responders in dealing with an emergency situation, but they have a sense that they can better care for themselves and their families, that they will be better prepared when they need to be.

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This is very important, since history has shown repeatedly, that “when a disaster strikes, the first people on the scene are typically friends and neighbors, who begin search and rescue and provide medical assistance. Thus, neighborhood, family, and individual preparedness efforts can greatly increase the local capacity to respond to and recover from disasters.”<sup>10</sup>

The Map Your Neighborhood (MYN) program is another proven method for giving communities and their citizens a sense of resilience and confidence as neighbors come together to discuss how they can respond to a disaster. Interestingly, in the ‘9 Steps – Immediately Following a Disaster’ described in the MYN program, the first 6 steps take place within one’s own home and only after one is secure there, do they reach out to their neighbors. Taking care of those first six steps though will contribute a lot to the overall resilience of any neighborhood.

In conclusion, “Resilience does not come from rare and special qualities, but from the everyday magic of ordinary, normative resources in the minds, brains, and bodies” of us all, our families and relationships, and our communities. Resilience allows “each person to thrive and experience the power of ordinary magic”.<sup>11</sup>

The tools and opportunities are available to us to create a resilient community. The question for us now to answer, is are we **Ready, Willing, and Able** to do so? As we consider that question we also need to give thought to how we will answer this question, “**Who depends on YOU?**”

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### References

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