

Ensuring the Delivery of Human Services in Disasters: A White Paper for Southeastern Pennsylvania

Executive Summary

Prepared for United Way of Greater Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey
By The Center for Public Health Readiness and Communication
Drexel University School of Public Health

June 2013



United Way
of Greater Philadelphia
and Southern New Jersey

OVERVIEW

Increasingly, preparedness efforts for large-scale emergencies and disasters focus on improving the outcomes for populations most vulnerable to experiencing severe consequences from those incidents. In many communities, non-profit human service agencies are relied upon in crisis situations to meet the needs of at-risk communities – persons at greater risk for severe outcomes following disasters. Engaging non-profit human service agencies (HSAs) in preparedness, response, and recovery activities has thus become a priority for mitigating the human consequences of disasters and public health emergencies.

Despite this recognition of HSAs as key partners in mitigating the human consequences of disasters, little is known about the readiness of these organizations to deliver human services during a major, community-wide emergency, particularly one that requires integrating efforts with public safety and government partners. United Way of Greater Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey (UWGPSNJ) engaged the Center for Public Health Readiness & Communication (CPHRC) at the Drexel University School of Public Health to explore these issues and produce a white paper that outlines existing capacity and challenges for HSAs in Southeastern Pennsylvania (SEPA), and proposes recommendations for future planning. This white paper builds upon existing research and uses a systems-based approach to offer specific guidance to both HSAs and government planners to promote coordinated responses to catastrophic events.

SEPA AT RISK FOR DISASTERS

The greater Philadelphia region faces a number of significant preparedness challenges from incidents that have the potential to disrupt infrastructure and business continuity and threaten human health. Blizzards in 1996 and 2010 resulted in significant power outages and transportation disruptions. In 2011,

Hurricane Irene and Tropical Storm Lee led to massive flooding, widespread utility disruption, significant structural damage, and five casualties in Southeastern Pennsylvania. Most recently, in 2012, Superstorm Sandy devastated the Mid-Atlantic region, resulting in the second costliest storm in US history. Sandy caused widespread power outages, leaving more than 750,000 households in Southeastern Pennsylvania without power for up to two weeks. The storm's immense impact in nearby New York and New Jersey provided a sobering reminder of how vulnerable the region is to major storms.

The region's historical, economic, and demographic importance also makes the Philadelphia metropolitan area a target for terrorism. In 2011, the Department of Homeland Security ranked Philadelphia as a top-10 highest risk urban area in the country as part of the Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI). Several nuclear power plants and the potential large scale population influx that might follow a disaster in nearby Washington DC or New York City represent other significant risks to this region.

A major population center of nearly four million people, the five county Southeastern Pennsylvania region (Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Montgomery, and Philadelphia Counties) is comprised of hundreds of thousands of individuals living in poverty, and others who are at risk for poor outcomes following disasters because of chronic medical conditions, functional needs, and/or limited access to necessary services.

602,485 people in the SEPA region live in poverty

475,215 live with a disability

601,150 live in food insecure environments

601,150 live in food insecure environments

The city of Philadelphia contains a particularly high number of vulnerable populations. At 28.4%, Philadelphia has the highest poverty rate of any major city in America. The city also has the highest rate of deep poverty among major cities. Roughly 200,000 people, 12.9% of the city’s population, currently live with incomes less than half of the poverty line. These individuals have few resources for daily living, and those resources will be strained further during a major disaster.

HUMAN SERVICE AGENCIES IN DISASTERS

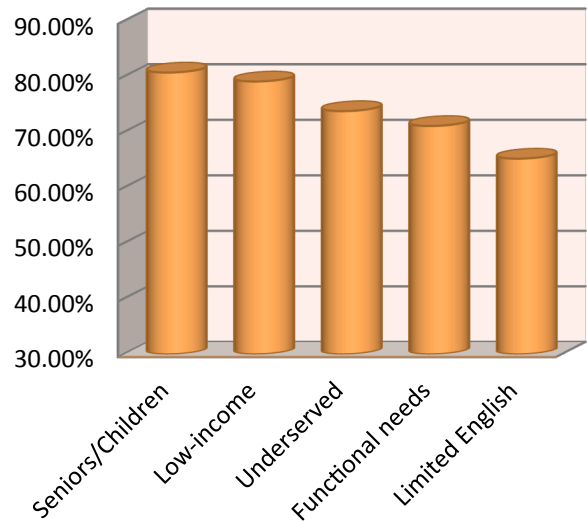
Most human service agencies work with vulnerable communities that are at high risk during disasters. These organizations are most familiar with the unique needs of the populations with whom they work, have earned their trust, are likely to be the first source of information and assistance during a disaster, and have played an important role assessing post-disaster needs and mobilizing community and local resources to help facilitate recovery. Following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, HSAs provided immediate relief services such as food, water, shelter, clothing, medical services, personal hygiene services, and transportation, and were instrumental contributors to human recovery, particularly for at-risk populations.

The results from the survey of agencies conducted for this white paper demonstrate that HSAs in Southeastern Pennsylvania do, in fact, serve the most at-risk populations during a disaster. A vast majority of the agencies also noted that they know who their most vulnerable clients are and where they are located.

71.8%

of the agencies surveyed indicated that they know who their most vulnerable clients are and where they are located

Populations Served by SEPA HSAs



SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Through a survey of agencies across Southeastern Pennsylvania and interviews and meetings with over 50 leaders in government and the social service sector, best practices as well as important challenges for ensuring the delivery of human services in disasters emerged in **five major areas**:

- I. Capacity – maintaining the human, financial, and supply resources that agencies require to provide services
- II. Coordination – providing services within an integrated system that matches resources with needs in optimal and efficient ways
- III. Communication – exchanging information between government partners, other non-profits, and the general public
- IV. Training – meeting the educational needs of the social service sector with respect to preparing for and responding to emergencies
- V. Leadership – providing direction and guidance to assure the coordination and availability of human services in disasters

The following sections summarize the major findings of this study and propose specific recommendations for government and social service agencies in Southeastern Pennsylvania.

I. CAPACITY

Human service agencies provide critical services during disasters. During Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, human service agencies were often the first sources of information and assistance, especially to at-risk populations. Both disaster-focused relief organizations and social service organizations without a specific disaster mission have important roles to play in response and recovery efforts. However, there are few efforts to engage traditional social service organizations in emergency planning and a lack of incentives for their involvement.

Despite their expert knowledge of the communities they serve and their social service needs, most non-profit agencies need additional resources to sustain operations during disasters. Capacity issues are also significant for long-term recovery planning, which requires not only resources but leadership, coordination, and the engagement of the private sector business community.

“We need to ensure that there are better resources for the disabled at our fingertips during emergencies.”

*~Executive Director,
Information & Referral System*

Recommendations

1. Government agencies should make a concerted effort to include a broad range of non-profit social service agencies in emergency preparedness planning. Priority outreach should begin with agencies that provide food, translation, home health, and mental health services, as well as agencies that serve extremely fragile or vulnerable individuals who depend on social services for daily living. These were the social service agencies that were most needed following Superstorm Sandy. Roles and expectations should be delineated and incentives provided to participate (e.g., access to resources, up-to-date information).
2. Human service agencies should have basic continuity of operations plans in place as a condition of funding.
3. Government and non-profit agencies can anticipate resource shortages and should participate in pre-event planning with organizations like United Way and philanthropic partners to identify possible solutions for these resource needs.
4. The Southeastern Pennsylvania region should take advantage of its political and emergency preparedness organizations and create a planning group within existing structures to develop a comprehensive, regional approach to long-term recovery. This will ensure that the abundant public and private sector resources in the region are available if and when they are needed.

II. COORDINATION

Southeastern Pennsylvania has great human service agency assets and an effective Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD) organization. Most county emergency management and public health agencies have dedicated staff to coordinate volunteers and the outreach to community-based organizations, which has been an extremely successful practice for planning and coordinating activities during emergencies. These positions link government agencies to both VOAD and to non-VOAD organizations that assist with disaster response, although the management of spontaneous, unaffiliated volunteers remains a major challenge for this region, as it is everywhere. In addition, many of the stakeholders expressed the need for a database that described the universe of human service agencies in the region to facilitate the formation of partnerships prior to disasters.

In Southeastern Pennsylvania, government and social service agency representatives conveyed overwhelming support for the recently launched “2-1-1 SEPA” to coordinate information and referrals (I&R) for human services, despite the existence of smaller systems located in municipalities or specific agencies. The absence of a regional 2-1-1 system has made service coordination a challenge in Southeastern Pennsylvania. In contrast, New Jersey 2-1-1 has been used many times for prior disasters in New Jersey, and is integrated into emergency management plans and operations. New Jersey 2-1-1 performed very effectively during Superstorm Sandy, supporting needs assessment activities, facilitating resource coordination and deployment, and disseminating accurate public information regarding human services in hurricane-affected areas.

“If we’re not asked, we cannot help, even though we have the capacity.”

~Representative from human service agency

Recommendations

1. Every county in the region should invest in a volunteer management coordinator position (or its equivalent), who should begin (or continue) the process of creating networks of county-based organizations that can be enlisted in emergency response and preparedness activities.
2. The recent launch of 2-1-1 SEPA by United Way of Greater Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey (UWGPSNJ) should be a major contribution to the region’s efforts to coordinate human services during disasters. Regional planners should consider formally including 2-1-1 SEPA into emergency response and public information plans at the local and state level.
3. UWGPSNJ will need to work to ensure that 2-1-1 SEPA is coordinated with the region’s existing I & R systems that have overlapping scope and geographic service areas (e.g., Philly311, and several web-and telephone-based networks operated by social service agencies). Training and communication efforts should increase buy-in from stakeholders and facilitate coordination with these related initiatives, to optimize the resources of all of the region’s call centers. An ad-hoc advisory group of regional stakeholders would be a useful investment to inform the launch and operation of 2-1-1 SEPA, integrate 2-1-1 SEPA into disaster plans, review progress throughout the first few years, and ensure that ongoing evaluation informs future activities.
4. The Southeastern Pennsylvania region would benefit from more detailed plans to manage spontaneous, unaffiliated volunteers. These plans should include activating volunteer reception centers; providing clear, unified public information during emergencies for potential volunteers; and ensuring the SEPA VOAD has a visible “face” both before and during disasters, for individuals and agencies who wish to affiliate before an incident. A number of states have plans that have been tested and can provide a good template for the Southeastern Pennsylvania region.

III. COMMUNICATION

The most critical needs of social service agencies in disasters relate to real-time information exchange: over 75% of agencies reported that they wanted real-time information during disasters. Situational awareness and the ability to request resources or coordinate with other agencies are critical capabilities during an emergency and depend on communication networks. SEPA VOAD holds conference calls during disasters that are very effective for agencies who participate. During Superstorm Sandy, County Volunteer Management Coordinators (VMC) located at county Emergency Operations Centers also supported information exchange with agencies and the regional VOAD.

Providing accurate and timely information to the general public, particularly at-risk populations remains a significant challenge. Despite their status as “trusted intermediaries” for messaging, most social service agencies have very limited capacity for proactive outreach and communication to clients, especially during disasters that compromise power. NJ 2-1-1 provided a clearinghouse for disaster-related information relative to human services that was useful for both agencies and the general public. Public information regarding available human services, volunteers, and donations should be coordinated across the region so that the message is unified even if multiple spokespersons appear before the media, as is likely to happen.

“The lack of 2-1-1 in Southeastern Pennsylvania was glaringly obvious, we really needed it. It was a major communication nightmare.”

~SEPA VOAD member

Recommendations

1. Access to current information and communication networks represents an important incentive for non-profit partners to participate in community-wide response efforts. The region should consider expanding the regional SEPA VOAD calls to include additional agencies, and/or create similar opportunities for information exchange with agencies at the county level.
2. The SEPA 2-1-1 call center and website can provide up to date, accurate information to stakeholders in the region. This capacity should be integrated into emergency plans and supported with resources.
3. Government agencies should have realistic expectations regarding the capacity of human service agencies to convey disaster-related information to clients. Agencies may be able to contact only a small portion of clients, especially if door-to-door outreach is required. The effective communication of more technical information (i.e. health-related) will require additional training.
4. Human service agency stakeholders in the region should develop a public information plan prior to disasters that addresses the availability of human services, as well as explicit directions for volunteers and donated material goods. This plan can incorporate ways to convey local needs that may be unique while ensuring coordination of overall messages across agencies. This plan should identify likely spokespersons, likely content (e.g., what types of donations are not needed, what types of volunteers may be needed, what to bring to a shelter, etc.) and mechanisms for communication that take into account the many channels that exist for this, such as websites, social media, and traditional media.

IV. TRAINING

The training priorities identified by social service agencies reflected a desire to understand government emergency response plans, specific disaster scenarios and, most importantly, an interest in collaborative planning for disasters. Nearly three-quarters of the agencies surveyed expressed interest in a forum to share best practices with government and other agencies. However, agencies stressed the overall lack of time to devote to training and education, and the difficulties taking any time away from work directly related to the agency's mission. Agencies preferred trainings that were provided on-site so that most staff could benefit.

Health departments in Southeastern Pennsylvania have spent several years providing agency-based trainings for staff in personal and client preparedness, an extremely effective way to build relationships and develop networks of agency partners. In other regions of the country, VOAD organizations have held one-day annual conferences that include trainings related to emergency preparedness that have been well received. In addition, public health departments in some communities have provided intensive training to staff in community-based organizations to become "lay" health promoters ("promotoras") who can convey health-related information to culturally diverse communities.

"Training needs to come to us, in our offices, so that everyone in the agency can benefit."

~Director, human service agency

Recommendations

1. SEPA VOAD, United Way agencies and government partners should sponsor a one-day event for human service agencies in the region that provides an update on regional preparedness plans and provides basic, accessible trainings and educational opportunities on priority topics such as Continuity of Operations Planning (COOP) planning, weather emergencies, and assisting with community needs assessment after disasters. This event will also provide an important opportunity to share best practices and lessons learned - a common request from stakeholders, and a venue for tabletop exercises.
2. Government agencies in the region can build upon their successful education campaign to promote personal preparedness and extend their agency training activities to review basic information in government response plans and begin to define more specific expectations for agency response activities in a disaster.
3. Regional public safety agencies and SEPA VOAD should plan for 'just-in-time' trainings that will be needed during disasters, such as safety information. This capacity is especially critical for agencies who may not have been integrated into pre-disaster planning but who have needed skills and services.
4. Public health department preparedness programs should consider investing in additional training for community-based organizations already engaged in public health work (e.g., HIV/AIDS education, immunization promotion, maternal child health outreach) to take advantage of their knowledge base and 'trusted' intermediary status in the community during public health emergencies that require non-governmental voices for risk communication.

V. LEADERSHIP

Calls for leadership to organize, coordinate, and engage human service agencies in the work of emergency preparedness were a common thread among the interviews with representatives from government agencies and the human service organizations. There is a specific need to engage social service agencies who do not have a specific disaster mission to participate in planning for emergencies, to ensure continuity of services for their own clients. In many parts of the country following disasters, United Way organizations have assumed this leadership role, particularly when long-term recovery is a significant challenge. Their expertise in financial management, human service agency operations, community development, and relationships with philanthropic organizations and the business community make them logical choices for the complex leadership and fiduciary responsibilities of recovery after a disaster.

There is a need for coordinated, regional planning to develop a more unified approach to human service delivery across Southeastern Pennsylvania, and the involvement of all of the region's United Ways can enhance these efforts. The SEPA Regional Task Force and its Human Services work group can help provide the umbrella for this work. Despite the recognition of the value that human service agencies provide during disaster response and recovery, particularly with respect to meeting the needs of vulnerable or at-risk individuals, many stakeholders expressed concern that many people with special planning needs in disasters live independently in the community and do not have any formal connection to a social service agency.

This white paper was developed for the United Way of Greater Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey (UWGPSJ) by the Center for Public Health Readiness and Communication at Drexel University School of Public Health. More information is available at <http://unitedforimpact.org>.

Recommendations

1. The human service stakeholders in SEPA – government agencies, United Way organizations, and leaders of VOAD, as well as non-disaster focused agencies – should work together to identify and prioritize solutions to the capacity, coordination, communication, and training needs of human service agencies in disasters and develop a concept of operations plan for long-term recovery in the region. This group should also formulate plans for engaging private, business sector resources in emergency response and recovery plans for the region.
2. Planners from public health, emergency management, and other government and non-profit agencies should work with leaders in the social service sector to formulate preparedness and response plans that build community resilience and address the planning considerations of individuals with functional needs who are likely to require special plans in a disaster for communication, medical care, or transportation, recognizing the large numbers of individuals who lack an agency affiliation. Planners should also reach out to the medical community and directly to members of at-risk communities to encourage preparedness planning and develop plans that anticipate their needs for emergency response.

CONCLUSION

Southeastern Pennsylvania has considerable resources that can support the delivery of human services during disasters. The organization of the regional task force and SEPA VOAD for emergency planning, the strength of the non-profit sector, the philanthropic community, and the recently launched 2-1-1 SEPA system provide an effective foundation for preparedness planning for human services in disasters. A commitment to collaborative planning across agencies, information exchange, training, resource allocation, and effective leadership are necessary to leverage these assets so that they are in place when they are most needed.