Building Community Disaster Resilience: Perspectives From a Large Urban County Department of Public Health

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An emerging approach to public health emergency preparedness and response, community resilience encompasses individual preparedness as well as establishing a supportive social context in communities to withstand and recover from disasters. We examine why building community resilience has become a key component of national policy across multiple federal agencies and discuss the core principles embodied in community resilience theory—specifically, the focus on incorporating equity and social justice considerations in preparedness planning and response. We also examine the challenges of integrating community resilience with traditional public health practices and the importance of developing metrics for evaluation and strategic planning purposes. Using the example of the Los Angeles County Community Disaster Resilience Project, we discuss our experience and perspective from a large urban county to better understand how to implement a community resilience framework in public health practice. (*Am J Public Health.* 2013; 103:1190–1197. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2013.301268)

BUILDING COMMUNITY

resilience to disasters—the ability to mitigate and rebound quickly—has received increased attention in the relatively new field of public health emergency preparedness and is now a central focus and a required activity for all public health departments that are recipients of Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Public Health Emergency Preparedness (PHEP) grants.[1] Critical lessons from Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the H1N1 pandemic of 2009, and, most recently, Hurricane Sandy continue to demonstrate that underlying issues of lack of trust and the absence of sustainable engagement with community-based organizations, faith-based organizations, and other neighborhood-level organizations create significant disparities in population health outcomes following emergencies and disasters. This situation hampers public health interventions in both everyday public health work and emergency response.[2,3] As a theory and approach, community resilience provides a framework that embraces principles of equity and social justice with a focus on developing the core capacities of populations both to mitigate disasters and to rebound from them.[4] The challenge is to clearly and operationally define community resilience, develop principles

and practices that expand and enhance current community-based activities, and, through these changes, better align and integrate traditional public health and public health emergency preparedness.

Although the term community resilience is relatively new to emergency preparedness, the emerging operational frameworks embrace many of the core components of effective community-based public health practice and, in many ways, represent a reframing of long-standing approaches to improve community well-being that have not been incorporated in preparedness programmatic activities.[5]

We review the origins of the community resilience framework in the multidisciplinary research on individual resilience and assess how community resilience and related frameworks are shaping federal policies in all agencies involved in disaster and public health emergency response. We describe how the community resilience framework augments public health preparedness and reinforces longer-standing public health approaches to improving community health by examining a multi-year process developed by the Los Angeles County Department

of Public Health (LACDPH) to implement this approach. The strategy consists of operationalizing community resilience through the following steps:

- Improving the community engagement skills of health department staff and building sustainable community engagement processes;
- Developing a resilience tool kit that can be used by community organizations to build coalitions and coordinated neighborhood strategies to increase community preparedness and specific mitigation skills; and
- Identifying metrics so that systematic interventions that can improve the abilities of communities to promote resilience and mitigate disaster impacts can be measured and evaluated.

DEFINING COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

Most definitions of resilience refer to notions (derived from physics) of rebound, or bouncing back, from deformation or distress. The concept of individual resilience has evolved in psychology and the behavioral health sciences as a means to understand what adaptive capacities allow some individuals to continue

Human Participant Protection
The human subjects review was from Rand and LA County Department of Public Health committees.

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