

Breakout Session 2C

Risk Management and Public Perception of Vulnerabilities: How do we build the public's awareness of risks and their vulnerabilities so that mitigation efforts will provide the maximum benefits?

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The group discussed the general problem of achieving accurate public perception of risk and the corollary, encouraging the acceptance of responsibility by individuals. Key points from the discussion include the following:

Communication about risk requires knowing the audience (which includes determining what audience you wish most to communicate with). The public is not homogeneous; people have different backgrounds, different perceptions, different circumstances and priorities. Any attempt to communicate with "the public" must reflect this diversity. Minorities (including ethnic populations, the elderly, and poorer segments of society) are especially at risk of being overlooked. Radio is a generally underused resource for communication, and is particularly valuable for reaching minority communities. In general, public television and radio are seen as reliable sources of unbiased information.

There is a general assumption that people don't understand low probability/high consequence events. This assumption may be untrue; they may well understand the probabilities but have more urgent concerns (such as feeding or clothing themselves or their children). Perhaps there is inadequate understanding of the consequences. Financial constraints are not the only reason for making bad decisions. Vacation homes built on the coast are a decision that may impose burdens on the community; even if the home is adequately insured, the community must pay to replace infrastructure such as roads when a coastal storm strikes

There was an extended and unresolved discussion of whether people behave rationally or irrationally in high-stress situations. Clearly, the way an issue is framed will shape the response. What an observer perceives as an irrational decision may result from a rational assessment of information that the observer fails to recognize. This discussion re-emphasized the importance of knowing the audience's value systems and perceptions, which is critical to successful communication.

Some choices put individuals at risk, others put communities at risk. Similarly, there are two different goals of safety messages: to take personal action (such as fastening a seat belt, building a tornado "safe" room) and to support larger community actions (such as building codes and land use planning).

Because resources are limited, choices must be made about for whom and for what purpose one does mitigation. We need better information on the effectiveness of various mitigation attempts and techniques and need to celebrate successes.

What are appropriate roles of government and the private sector?

- The government has responsibility for land-use planning and other activities for which benefits are long term. It can also help spark awareness of hazards issues.
- Partnerships between government and the private sector, like those in FEMA's Project Impact, are an excellent way to leverage resources and involve the community.
- In addition to mitigating hazards that may directly affect a business, companies can educate their employees. Charles Schwab, for example, has put significant effort into helping employees prepare their homes and communities for potential natural hazards. More must be done to educate the private sector as to the value of mitigation and to encourage a more integrated approach in the private sector
- A specific recommendation was made for systematic disclosure of structural vulnerability as part of real estate transactions (such as flood risk). This is already done in California for flood risk and proximity to fault zones.

What encourages people to take action?

- Experiential, hands-on projects or graphic/visual demonstration of the problem
- Consistent messages, supported by many credible sources, which include specifics on what you can do as well as general educational information about the risk
- Two-way communication, often through respected community leaders who must first understand the message and can then facilitate the communication. However, one must be sure the leaders represent the full range of community groups; it's not enough to assume that the most vocal or those in positions of authority are the best avenue to reach a given group.
- Recognition that actions can serve more than one goal; for example, a homeowner is more likely to strengthen an interior bathroom or closet to serve as a tornado "safe room" than to build a separate structure. In parts of Florida, extra-strong window screens that act as hurricane shutters also provide more security against break-ins.
- Availability of models, templates, etc. that have been successfully used in one community and can be applied, with minor modifications, in other places. For example, a property tax incentive to mitigation in Kauai has been posted on the city web site and could serve as a model for other localities.

We have seen many cultural changes in the past decades--attitudes toward seat belts, smoking, and motorcycle/bicycle helmets, for example. These changes in attitude took a long time, and many different approaches were used to reach different key audiences. A similar long-term multi-faceted effort will be needed to change public attitudes about natural disasters.