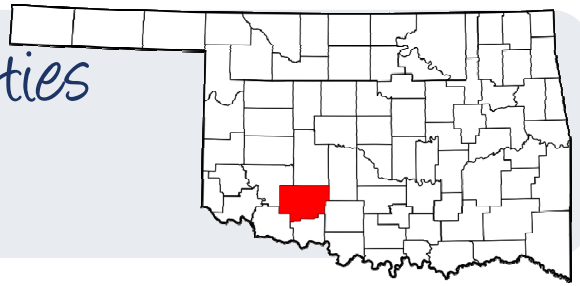


Building Resilient Communities

State Project Report Comanche County, Oklahoma



State: Oklahoma
County Name: Comanche
County Type (Metro or Non-metro): Metro
State Extension Facilitators: Brian Whitacre, Stan Ralstin
County Extension Facilitators: Marty New

1. Provide a Brief Overview of the County Site

Comanche County is an urban location (pop. 113,000 as of 2007 Census estimate) in the southwestern part of Oklahoma. The county seat and dominant population center is in Lawton (pop. 90,000), which is located next to Fort Sill military reservation. The proximity of the military base is an important part of Lawton's economy and its emergency preparedness readiness. Lawton itself is economically disadvantaged, with a median family income of \$44,300 in 2007 (compared to \$60,374 nationally) and approximately 20% of individuals below the poverty line (compared to 13.3% nationally). Further, there are a significant number of African-Americans (22%, vs. 12% nationally) and slightly higher than average disabled residents (18% vs. 15% nationally).

2. Tell Us Who Took Part in Your Roundtable Sessions

(a) *How many attended your "Emergency Management" (EM) Roundtable and what type of organizations did they represent?*

10 people, including individuals from:

- City & County Emergency Management
- Police
- Department of Human Services (DHS)
- School system
- Health Department
- Hospitals
- Tribal organizations

Diversity of this group: 80% Caucasian, age ranged from late 20s to mid 50s (mostly in the 40s), roughly 40% female.

(b) *How many attended your "Community" (CG) Roundtable and what type of at-risk or disadvantaged populations did they represent?*

8 people, including the following

- Low income (in poverty)
- Mother with disabled child
- Hispanic
- African American

Diversity of this group: 50% African – American, 10% Hispanic, age ranged from early 20s – early 60s, roughly 40% female.

- (c) *How many attended the Bridge meeting and what diversity of organizations or groups did they represent?*

14 people, mostly from the CG participants (65%). From the EM meeting, representatives from the health and fire departments were present. Diversity of this group: 40% African - American, 30% Hispanic, age ranged from late teens to early 60s, roughly 50% female.

If feasible, provide an overview of the diversity of your participants in terms of gender, age, race and ethnicity. This does not have to be precise, but just some idea of the mix of people who took part in each of your sessions.

3. Identify and Describe the Recent (Past 3-5 Years) Disasters Agreed or Disagreed upon by the Two Groups *(From Roundtable Session 1: Questions 1 and 2)*

- (a) *What were the key damages incurred by the county?*
(b) *Were certain neighborhoods or sections of the county impacted more by this disaster and if so, how?*
(c) *Were there any disasters and damages on which the two groups did not agree?*

Disasters agreed upon:

- (1) Floods (2007 – 2009)
 - a. Heavy rains are common in this area, and can quickly cause flooding. Areas that are prone to flooding are well-known to local emergency management personnel.
 - b. Key damages – property damage (mostly focused on residential flooding), road damage, business flooding.
 - c. The elderly are highly impacted by these storms – they lack mobility and cannot quickly leave if their location is in danger of flooding.
- (2) Wildfires
 - a. Key damages – Trailers destroyed / farm equipment lost.
 - b. Rural areas suffered more.
- (3) Wind storms (2004, 2007)
 - a. Key damages – Trees / property lost (particularly trailers).
 - b. Trailer parks suffered disproportionately.
- (4) Hail damage

Disasters NOT agreed upon

- (1) Rural floods – most of discussion of EM group concerned flooding in urban areas, while several CM participants discussed their experiences with flooding in more rural areas.

4. Describe the Nature of the County's Preparation and Response to the Disaster(s) *(Roundtable – Session 1: Question 3 and Session 3: Questions 3a, 3b)*

- (a) *Preparedness: How prepared was the county for the disaster(s) from the perspective of the two groups? Describe areas on which they agree, as well as differences of opinions they had on the county's level of preparedness.*

Both EM and CG participants felt the community was relatively well prepared. The EM group discussed the usefulness of the Emergency Operating Plan (EOP) while the CG indicated that they thought that a plan existed, but they simply didn't know what it was. However, as discussed below, the CG felt that they had good advance warning for most of the disasters.

(b) Disaster Plan:

- EM personnel were aware of the EOP for the city / county, and indicated it was updated annually.
- CG members knew little about the plan – they felt that one likely existed, but did not know what was in it.
- The disaster plan was comprehensive in nature, meaning it did not focus specifically on at-risk or disadvantaged groups. The plans do not provide any detailed focus for any single group, they are more general in nature.
- There was no direct involvement from the at-risk or disadvantaged community in developing the emergency disaster plan. However, the EM group did indicate that they had conversations with individuals who provided service to at-risk groups, such as nursing home administrators.
- The EM group also acknowledged that it was possible for at-risk or disadvantaged groups to be overlooked, since this population changes regularly.
- The need for incorporating how to handle pets into the disaster plan was acknowledged by the EM group.

(c) At-Risk or Disadvantaged Populations: Who did both groups (EM and CG) identify as being “at-risk” in the county?

The dominant disasters mentioned by these groups included floods, wildfires, wind storms, and hail. The only at-risk population that was identified were those living in neighborhoods that were consistently damaged by floods (within the city of Lawton). When heavy rains occur, both EM and CG members knew exactly which portion of the town would flood. Both groups generally agreed that the disadvantaged populations included the **elderly** and **individuals with low income**.

(d) Services Available for At-risk or Disadvantaged Populations: What major types of services and/or assistance were identified as available during the disaster(s) for at-risk or disadvantaged people or places?

The EM group felt that significant resources were available for the disadvantaged populations, such as shelters if floods or wind storms hit, the Red Cross, Salvation Army, County Health Department, and church volunteers. The CG identified some of these same sources, such as the Red Cross, Salvation Army, and churches. They also discussed several not included by the EM group, including hospitals, local food banks, Fort Sill (if necessary), United Way, and mental health groups. Both groups generally agreed that a significant number of resources existed for at-risk or disadvantaged groups.

(e) Information Sources: What resources did both the EM and CG groups identify as being reliable sources of information?

The dominant source of information for both the EM and CG was the TV, which was used heavily during flood watches and tornado warnings. Both groups agreed that the TV coverage was generally good. Radio, Code Red (an automated callback service that calls your cell or home phone when bad weather is imminent) and 211 were all mentioned as important sources of information for the community in general.

(f) Positive Responses to the Disaster: Summarize (in bullet form) what both groups (EM and CG) agreed were the things that went right during the course of the recent disaster(s).

Both groups agreed that the availability of early warnings was crucial to being prepared for a disaster, and felt that the provision of early warnings was well done and represented a positive for the community. The EM personnel felt that the following things were done correctly:

- Good job working together to respond to floods / fires, including: city - fire departments, county – sheriff’s office, and volunteer fire departments.
- Felt the emergency personnel were well trained
- Felt communication between organizations was good
- Low turnover among emergency management personnel helps (same people addressing multiple disasters – get to know faces, etc.)

The CG members had a few different opinions of what went right (in addition to the quick response noted earlier):

- Police responded quickly
- Information quickly available on TV / radio telling people what to do

(g) Areas of Improvement: Present (in bullet form) the key items that both groups (EM and CG) agreed have to be addressed before a future disaster strikes.

The EM personnel felt that the areas that needed to be addressed were:

- Response of the public needs to be improved (multiple stories of people driving around “street closed” signs).
- The at-risk community will continually complain about infrastructure problems, but complete overhaul is not likely.

The CG members mentioned:

- Louder or more sirens for tornadoes – some cannot hear (particularly at night)

5. Summarize Existing Community Resources

(Roundtable – Session 2: Questions 1 and 2)

For each pilot site, please provide a summary of the local organizations/resources that were identified as (1) currently involved; and (2) could be involved in helping the county prepare for, respond to and recover from disasters.

(1) Local organizations/resources currently involved in helping the county prepare for, respond to, and recover from disasters:

- Red Cross
- Salvation Army
- Police (city / county)
- Fire departments
- Health Department
- City / County Emergency Management
- DHS
- Schools
- Hospitals
- Media (TV / Radio)
- Churches
- Fort Sill (military)
- Food banks
- OSU Extension
- Public Works
- Utilities

NOTE: While the EM group compiled the large list shown above, the CG was fairly coherent with that list. The CG did not list a few resources, such as public works or utilities, but generally both groups were very similar.

(2) Local organizations/resources that could be involved in helping the county prepare for, respond to and recover from disasters:

- FEMA / OEM – mentioned by EM group (didn't see as much involvement from state / national level as some might have liked)
 - Businesses / Wal-Mart
 - DHS not overly involved
 - Cable / satellite / Dish
- } Mentioned by CG: most felt they could provide relief

6. Identify Trusted & Respected Resources *(Roundtable – Session 2, Question 3)*

(a) *Who did the EM group identify as trusted sources of information about the needs of at-risk or disadvantaged populations and neighborhoods?*

- Salvation Army
- DHS
- Social Security
- Ministerial Alliance
- Eldercare Organizations (Nutrition Project)
- Schools
- Battered Wife shelters
- Police / Fire

(b) *Who did the CG group identify as trusted sources of information about the needs of at-risk or disadvantaged populations and neighborhoods?*

- Red Cross
- United Way – have some pamphlets already
- Police
- Churches (particularly due to language barrier)

(c) *Please describe any key similarities or differences between the two groups' responses. If this was discussed during the Bridge meeting, please add any insights from that session.*

CG noted more personal resources, such as churches and Red Cross. Some of the resources were listed by both groups. The EM group displayed some reservation about how trusted the DHS / Social security were by disadvantaged community members.

7. Development of a Disaster Plan by At-risk and Disadvantaged People *(Roundtable – Session 3: Question 5)*

Did the groups (EM & GC) at the Roundtable discussions believe that people living in at-risk or disadvantaged neighborhoods should develop a disaster plan for their neighborhood? What thoughts did they have regarding ways to build a strong working relationship between EM and at-risk or disadvantaged groups?

Both the EM and CG group members generally believed that people living in disadvantaged neighborhoods should develop a separate disaster plan for their neighborhood, even if a community-wide disaster plan already exists. The EM participants, in particular, thought that giving the community some ownership of the plan would encourage participation – something that they felt was lacking in the current EOP. The CG members generally agreed, mentioning that these types of plans could fall somewhere between the county-wide plan that the EOP addresses and the individual family plan that most families have, such as where to meet after a fire. The EM group did indicate that the local plans need to be realistic, and developed in conjunction with the community-wide plan. Including representatives from various groups (at-risk, disadvantaged, EM) was seen as a good way to ensure that the EM people respond in a positive way to these plans.

8. Assessing the Emergency Preparedness Demonstration (EPD) Project (Roundtable – Session 3, Questions 1, 2, and 4)

(a) *EPD Steps: Please summarize the group's responses to the EPD Steps.*

Most were optimistic about the process:

- Seems to be a reasonable approach
- Identifying and covering the needs of the community is important
- Focus on entire community is good
- Good to look at areas that are at risk
- Getting community involvement will be crucial
 - Using maps to get them involved is a good idea
- Involvement of new people is useful, but challenging

But some had reservations:

- Getting community involvement will be difficult
 - Are there other ways? Website / public broadcasting?
- Having enough volunteers to develop and implement the plan would be challenging
- Would require some technical expertise to implement
- How does it get updated?
- How do pets fit in?

In the bridge meeting, the question of who raises the money and who handles the funds came up several times.

(b) *Vulnerability Assessment: What reactions did the two groups (EM and CG) have toward the vulnerability assessment step (mapping process)?*

The general reaction of both the EM and CG groups to the vulnerability assessment step (mapping process) was positive.

- Construction of the maps was viewed as best performed by some type of committee representing the local government and the university. The CG was particularly high on having university involvement, feeling that the university should lead the effort.
- Having community members “ground-truth” the accuracy of the maps was well-received by both the EM and CG groups. This was seen as an integral part of the overall process – getting meaningful feedback from the disadvantaged or at-risk community is crucial to the success of the project. It was also seen as a way of ensuring the map was accurate and prevents the excuse of “I didn’t know that was there” following an emergency.
- At the bridge meeting, the challenge of getting all appropriate people to the table was noted repeatedly.

(c) *Community Coach: Please describe the reaction of the two groups (EM and CG) to the concept of a community coach.*

Most generally thought the community coach was a good idea:

- Would be necessary to have this person (with expertise for maps / holding meetings)
- Good for motivation, and experience from other sites

But others noted a few problems:

- Some were okay with an outside person, others wanted a local person to be the coach
- If the coach is from another community:
 - Difficult for the coach to relate to the community

- Trust is an issue
- Can't have an overbearing personality
- How would they be funded?!

The CG was “okay” with someone from the outside coming in to be the coach. The EM group, however, were adamant that the coach needs to be someone from within – a known face. Further, most of the local people who could fulfill this role are already fully employed, leading to time management issues. At the bridge meeting, several people (including the EM individuals present) were receptive to the idea of an outside coach partnering with a local EM leader to form a “co-coach” team. The cost of paying for the coach was also brought up several times.

(d) Final Community Recommendations: During the Bridge meeting, participants were asked these questions. Please provide a summary of their responses:

- The general consensus from this community is that **yes**, the EPD is a valuable project and should be pursued to help communities with disaster preparedness.
- The program needs to be seen as a full-on, long-term solution and NOT a “band-aid” to an existing problem.
- The mapping process was noted as particularly useful, and a “must-have” for getting involvement from the targeted groups.
- Keeping the process relatively simple was stressed – it should not be elaborate.
- Getting involvement from all levels of the community (particularly the disadvantaged) was acknowledged as crucial, and also seen as very difficult to accomplish.
- Addressing the pets issue needs to be a part of this program.