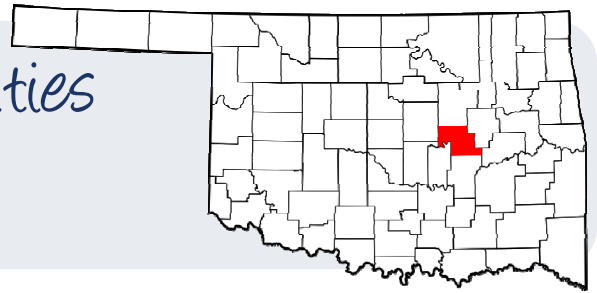


Building Resilient Communities

State Project Report
Okfuskee County, Oklahoma



State: Oklahoma
County Name: Okfuskee
County Type (Metro or Non-metro): Non-metro
State Extension Facilitators: Brian Whitacre, Stan Ralstin
County Extension Facilitators: Ron Vick

1. Provide a Brief Overview of the County Site

Okfuskee County is a relatively rural location (pop. 11,800 as of 2000 Census) in the mid-eastern part of the state. The county seat is in Okemah (pop. 3,000) which is where the majority of the county emergency management personnel are located. Okemah is economically disadvantaged, with a median income of \$21,300 in 1999 (compared to \$42,000 nationally) and approximately 25% of individuals below the poverty line (compared to 12.5% nationally). Further, there are several nearby towns in Okfuskee County that are disadvantaged both economically and socially, including the town of Boley (pop. 1,100) with 40% of individuals living in poverty and 55% African-American.

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?*

18 people (mostly from Okemah), including individuals from:

- a. City & County Emergency Management
- b. Police
- c. Fire
- d. Department of Human Services (DHS)
- e. School system
- f. Health Department
- g. Hospitals
- h. Religious organizations
- i. Tribal organizations

Diversity of this group: 100% Caucasian, age ranged from early 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?*

22 people (mostly from the town of Boley), including the following at-risk populations:

- a. Vulnerable to tornadoes
- b. And the following disadvantaged populations:
- c. Low income (in poverty)
- d. Elderly
- e. African American
- f. Diversity of this group: 95% African – American, age ranged from mid 30s – early 70s, roughly 25% female.

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

18 people, mostly from the EM group (90%). These included most of the same types of organizations as the initial EM meeting, although no religious leaders or tribal organizations were present.

Diversity of this group: 90% Caucasian, age ranged from mid 30s to early 60s, roughly 35% 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) Ice Storms (winter 2009, 2008, 2007, 2005, 2001)
 - a. Key damages – Loss of electricity
 - b. The elderly are impacted more by these storms – they lack mobility, and can suffer worse consequences when going outside. The lack of planning (obtaining enough food for several days, in advance) and poor communication (not letting people know their location) of elderly citizens were also noted.
- (2) Fires (2006, 2007)
 - a. Key damages – Fences / hay / livestock lost.
 - b. Rural areas suffered from these disasters more – fires are generally controlled fairly quickly once they hit a city / town.
- (3) Tornadoes
 - a. Key damages – Trees / property lost. Gymnasium collapsed, businesses lost. Street / road damage.
 - b. Elderly and those with small children suffered more – lack of mobility.

Disasters NOT agreed upon:

- (1) Floods – EM personnel were surprised to see this had been listed by some of the people in the CM group.

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.*

EM personnel felt that they were relatively well prepared, while the CG indicated that the community did not respond well.

(b) Disaster Plan:

- EM personnel were aware of the disaster plan that exists within the county. Some even had copies of it with them, and said that it was renewed quite frequently (a minimum of once per year). Most knew generally what it contained, but others indicated it was something they looked at once or twice and never opened again.
- CG members knew little about the plan – if one existed, they did not know what it contained or how it pertained to them.
- 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, as they are more general in nature and provide a list of “appropriate steps” that can be performed regardless of location.
- The only personnel involved in the development of the disaster plan for the county were from the EM group. No at-risk or disadvantaged individuals were part of the planning effort.
- The EM group did indicate that they would like additional feedback from the CG personnel, and acknowledged the importance of “local emergency planning committees” which could potentially feed into the development of such a plan. However, such committees are not currently formed.

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

Since the dominant disasters the groups mentioned included ice storms, fires, and tornadoes, neither group specifically identified at-risk populations. The CG felt that they may be more prone to tornadoes due to their location in a “valley” compared to the county seat. Both groups generally agreed that the disadvantaged populations included the **elderly** and **those with small children**.

(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, namely: Red Cross, individual volunteers offering services such as generators, churches setting up food banks, the Health Department, and schools. On the other hand, the CG did not feel as if many resources were set aside specifically for the disadvantaged group. The general consensus of the CG members were that people in their city “take care of their own,” meaning that residents would check on other neighbors in times of need, but few outside resources existed or were used.

(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 tornado watches and also after ice storms. TV stations in Oklahoma have good reputations for following potential tornadoes and letting towns know when to expect the storm front to hit them. Other responses included radio and personal contact (which was focused on more heavily by the CG members). The CG expressed concern that sometimes the TV coverage did not focus enough on their specific town.

(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).

The EM personnel felt that the following things were done correctly:

- EOP was in place and used (particularly for list of available inventory such as generators)

- Good communication between OSU / DHS / Emg. Preparedness personnel
- Knowledge level of local EMS and political entities was good.

The CG members generally had different opinions of what went right:

- Good local contacts – once someone gets word about the forecoming disaster, it spreads quickly
- TV report allowed for limited preparation
Community pulled together – local fire departments checked on people.

(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:

- Development of a list of alternative power sources for disadvantaged communities
- Development of a list of water sources
- Creation of an organized core of volunteers / contacts
- Capacity for helping with mental health
- Ability to assess whether shelters were up to health codes

The CG members agreed with some of those, particularly power sources and water sources. They also mentioned:

- Improving communication from the outside
- Faster service by road crews (clearing roads necessary for ice storms / some tornadoes)
- Need for a safe room / food pantry specifically for disadvantaged members

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:

- Health Department
- City / County Emergency Management
- DHS
- Schools
- Hospitals
- Churches
- Fire Department
- Police
- County Sheriff
- Community Action
- Red Cross
- Salvation Army
- Correctional Facilities
- National Guard
- Utilities
- OSU Extension

NOTE: The above list was mostly compiled by the EM group. The CG personnel primarily listed the Red Cross and Fire Departments, indicating that they did not see nearly as much involvement

from other organizations as the EM group did.

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

- Private Sector (shelter, food, equipment, supplies)
- Creek Nation (equipment, generators, food)
- Military (manpower, equipment)
- Ministerial Alliance (food, clothes)

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?*

- DHS (some disagreement about how trusted the DHS is by these populations)
- Rural Fire Departments
- Senior Citizens Centers or Nutrition sites
- Health Department
- Schools
- Police
- Pharmaceutical / medical suppliers
- Home health agencies

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

- TV – still the most dominant source of information
- Individual community contacts (specific names of people living in community given) / kinfolk
- Churches
- DHS / Red Cross (only listed by 1 group out of 3)

(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.*

The primary difference between the EM and CG members were that EM saw a wide variety of resources as trusted information sources for these populations. In contrast, CG saw only a much smaller, more personalized listing of resources as being the best way to get information across to disadvantaged individuals.

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 believed that people living in disadvantaged neighborhoods should develop a separate disaster plan specifically for their neighborhood, even if a community-wide disaster plan already exists. The EM group stressed the importance of this plan not conflicting with any community-wide plan, and also indicated it would be tough to get involvement from many of the disadvantaged communities. The CG members also felt it would be beneficial to set up such a plan, adding that it would be useful to share the results of their plan with the

more centralized county emergency management personnel, who are not as familiar with their particular living situations and geographic location of their residents. The need for improved communication between emergency management personnel and leaders / community members in disadvantaged locations was noted by both groups. This includes the disadvantaged members gaining an understanding that the EM group is here to help. Some members of the EM group indicated that the disadvantaged groups should have a distinct few spokespeople, as listening to 100+ people is not realistic.

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 fairly optimistic:

- Felt it represented a good starting point
- Having an organized plan would help keep people from panicking
- Very inclusive
- Good to look at areas that are at risk
- Useful for future planning
- Involvement of new people is useful, but challenging
- Helps agencies who think about “what if” to be better prepared
- Will encourage participation from larger community groups

But some had some reservations:

- Getting community involvement will be difficult
- Having enough volunteers to develop and implement the plan would be challenging
- Would require some technical expertise to implement
- Education needed before process even begins (particularly for surrounding communities to learn about each other)
- How does it get updated?
- Need for person-to-person recruitment will be time consuming

In the bridge meeting, the question of who raises the money and who handles the funds came up. Additionally, it was unclear whether the mapping would be done for each potential community in the county.

(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.

- The most appropriate entity for constructing the maps varied from community leaders / city council / county government to students from local schools / universities / faculty members.
- 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.

At the bridge meeting, the challenge of getting all appropriate people to the table was again noted, along with the time commitments of these individuals. Also, the discussion of whether the map should include points of interest for all cities in the county was raised again (it was felt that the map should include all cities, but noted that this would increase timeline / complexity of the project).

(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:

- Must be someone from outside the community, with experience (this was recognized by both the EM and CG groups)
- Would be necessary to have this person
- Good for motivation, and experience from other sites

But others noted a few problems:

- Community coach can't do it all
- Difficult for the coach to relate to community
- Trust is an issue
- Can't have an overbearing personality
- How would they be funded?!

Not many notable differences between groups here – both EM and CG personnel were “okay” with someone from the outside coming in to be the coach, as long as they were not overbearing. At the bridge meeting, most acknowledged that bringing in an outsider would be necessary, but thought that (if possible) they should come from a similar (i.e. rural) community. The ability to draw people in is critical to this position, and someone without an understanding of how a rural community runs would not be able to do it. Developing a local support group to help the coach was mentioned. 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 mapping process was noted as particularly useful, although some question remains about which level they will be developed for (can it provide maps for 8-10 communities in a county?)
- Getting involvement from all levels of the community (particularly the disadvantaged) was acknowledged as crucial, and also seen as very difficult to accomplish.
- The best ways to get community buy-in involve starting at the community level (get the target audience hooked in early), asking “what-if” scenarios to disadvantaged groups, and general education about what the process entails.