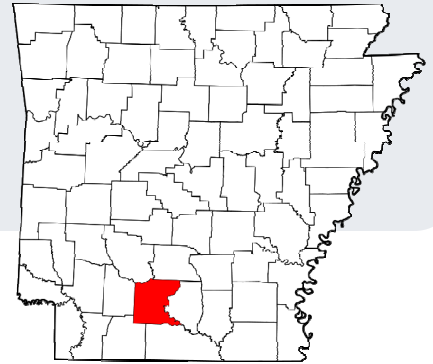


# Building Resilient Communities

## State Project Report Ouachita County, Arkansas



**State:** Arkansas  
**County Name:** Ouachita  
**County Type (Metro or Non-metro):** Non-metro  
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**County Extension Facilitators:** Ryan Francis

### 1. Provide a Brief Overview of the County Site

The small community of Camden is located in Ouachita County in Southwest Arkansas. Ouachita is a non-metro county and Camden is generally known as a pretty town, rich in Civil War history. A number of historic homes remain and community festivals, such as the Daffodil Festival, draw a large number of tourists into the area. Camden, once a relatively prosperous river port and cotton shipping center, became highly dependent on the railroad in the first part of the twentieth century and on the defense industry toward the end of WWII. Camden was the home of a large ammunition depot until after the Korean War. The facilities were later redeveloped into what became the center for a large military artillery and ordinance industry. During the 1990s and post Cold-War downsizing, a large number of the defense contractors closed down their operations in Camden. That, and the closure of an International Paper Company mill resulted in serious job losses. However, in recent years, some of the defense contractors have resumed their work in Camden. Camden is known among the locals for having a large repository of ordinance and explosive materials. The potential for a man-made disaster related to this repository was on the minds of a number of our participants.

The at-risk population in Camden includes a significant number of the mobile home populations who live in areas prone to flood. The disadvantaged populations with whom we had contact consisted of the elderly, lower income residents, and a relatively large concentration of developmentally challenged residents.

### 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?*

27. Participants of the Emergency Managers meeting included both county and city emergency managers, representatives from the sheriff’s office, the fire departments, health services, housing, public schools, local churches, the Red Cross, the Central Arkansas Development Council, Cooperative Extension Service, the food pantry, and the local Boys and Girls Club. This was a relatively diverse group, mostly white but more balanced as to men and women, and with a bias toward older participants. The representatives from the protective services were probably the youngest, ranging from mid-twenties to late thirties. Other participants were more likely to be at least 40 to 60 years old.

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

17. They were all women. One was an elderly black woman who had retired from the CES some years ago. She was accompanied by her elderly sister, who was blind. A number of the participants were developmentally challenged and employed by a local service that assists the handicapped. Many of these participants were also part of the at-risk population, living in areas prone to flooding and in mobile or group homes.

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

19. Several, but not all, had attended one of the previous meetings. Although there were more women than men attending this meeting, this group was somewhat more racially diverse than the previous two groups. It consisted of more blacks than the previous two meetings. With the exception of the two elderly black women who attended the Community Meeting, most of the participants appeared to be between 40 and 60 years old. Most of the participants represented Emergency Management type organizations and a wide array of local government representatives. Relatively few people from the community roundtables showed up for the Bridge meeting. In general, participants at the Bridge meeting appeared to be better educated than those at the Community meeting.

*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.*

See above.

### **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)*

Ice storms (2000-2001)

Flooding (1997,1998,2002,2003,2008,2009)

Tornados (1978,1979)

Hurricanes (Katrina, Rita, and Gustav) (Reported as spring 2005, spring 2006 and fall 2008)

Straightline winds (Winter 2008)

*(a) What were the key damages incurred by the county?*

(the groups did not separate damages according to each disaster):

Loss of power (county wide, especially in rural areas)

Roof and structural damage (county wide)

Drownings in flash flood (Amy Drive, Harmony Grove)

Loss of supply of drinking water (county wide, boil orders required)

Lack of supplies and resources (county wide, especially in rural areas)

Road damage from washouts (county wide)

Road blockage from downed trees (county wide)

Lost services and wages (county wide)

*(b) Were certain neighborhoods or sections of the county impacted more by this disaster and if so, how?*

Rural areas tended to be affected more by the disasters. Participants attributed this primarily to the lack of resources in more rural areas, lack of information about rural roads, and difficulty in navigating rural roads. Those living in mobile parks were more

often affected by flash floods, primarily due to the locations of the parks along rivers and other low-lying areas. The elderly and people needing medical attention were also more adversely affected by disasters because emergency responders could not get to them nor did they always know who needed assistance. Those on kidney dialysis and the developmentally challenged population were mentioned many times in the round tables.

(c) *Were there any disasters and damages on which the two groups did not agree?*

The two groups tended to be in agreement about the disasters that affected them directly. However, the Emergency Managers were much more likely to consider the hurricane evacuees in 2005 as part of the disasters that affected them. They expressed concerns about the hurricane evacuees using up (or in some cases taking advantage of) resources that were needed for local disaster recovery.

#### **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.*

There was general agreement that the community always responds well to disaster. Emergency managers and residents agreed that local people pull together well during disasters but that they can never be fully prepared for disasters. It is easier to prepare for some disasters than others, with ice storms and flash floods being difficult the most difficult. However, a large number of the participants talked about the inability of getting out to those in need of assistance, especially those people who are disadvantaged. Emergency managers spoke more of reaching disadvantaged than at-risk residents, except for those living in the most rural areas. They attributed a large part of the difficulties in reaching those in need to damages, especially tree damage. As one emergency manager explained it ... "most of us live in the county and we first have to get into town before we can get out to help people. Then we start helping those people who are closest in because we have to get the roads cleared." He described the emergency response in terms of a series of concentric circles emerging from a central source.

(b) *Disaster Plan:*

- Did both groups know about the county's disaster plan?

The existence of a disaster plan was the greatest point of dissension in the entire process. Most of those who are formally charged with Emergency Preparedness stated that yes, there is (are) disaster plan(s) and that this (these) plan(s) are revised on an annual basis. Yet, others talked about lack of coordination among different jurisdictions and the lack of knowledge about the plan(s) within the local population.

- Was it comprehensive or did it focus more on specific at-risk or disadvantaged populations, neighborhoods, and/or communities?

According to some, the plan is comprehensive, but according to others, there are no specific provisions for at-risk or disadvantaged groups.

It does not appear that the at-risk or disadvantaged populations have played a role in developing the plan(s). In fact, a number of the emergency planners stated that disaster plans need to be crafted by "command and control" and that the local population does not have enough expertise to contribute to a disaster plan. However, in general, most agreed there needs to be a comprehensive plan

and that it information about disaster planning needs to be better disseminated throughout the community and via a wide array of sources to reach more people.

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

Those defined as at-risk or disadvantaged include those who are: homebound, financially distressed, without transportation, elderly, on dialysis, handicapped, blind, deaf, single parents, illiterate, and non-English speakers.

- (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?*

There appear to be few services specifically targeted toward at-risk and disadvantaged populations, although the sheriff’s office does make some attempt to know who is on dialysis. Other services that the at-risk and disadvantaged populations seem to take advantage of are the Red Cross, local churches and shelters, neighbors and families, food bank, and protective services (fire, EMS, police).

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

Most people got information from the media (weather channel, broadcasts from Little Rock, local radio stations, friends and family, the internet, sirens, and cell phones. The biggest differences between the two groups seemed to be the reliance on weather radios. Most of the emergency managers thought that weather radio use was widespread. Most of the community participants reported not having access to weather radios. Many of the community participants also mentioned that they receive more localized weather reports from local radio stations than from the TV stations broadcasting from Little Rock.

- (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).*

- Notification before storm
- Mock exercises
- Use of necessary resources
- Networking
- Churches providing shelter, food and clothing
- Preplanning on the part of utilities (staging and communications)
- National Guard participation
- City and county plans working

- (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.*

- Local centralization (central command and control headquarters needed so efforts could be coordinated)
- Determining who actually needs help (as opposed to those who abuse the system – this comment pertained to the hurricane evacuees and was repeated many times by different people during the roundtables)
- Communications when cell towers go down
- Need clear chain of command
- Plans for assisting the at-risk or disadvantaged population (those on dialysis or developmentally challenged)
- Knowledge about what to do – not enough information for residents about what to do in disasters

Delayed response in getting assistance (there is a big gap here on part of residents in understanding on how difficult it is for emergency responders to get to people in need)

## 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) Currently involved:*

- Fire Department
- EMT/EMS and hospitals
- Police and sheriff
- Volunteers
- Utilities (Electric, phone, gas, water)
- Red Cross
- Local churches
- Local businesses
- Food services and banks
- Federal agencies
- Game and Fish; Forestry Commission
- National Guard
- City Works
- County Road Department
- County OEM
- News media
- State Health Department
- Department of Human Services
- State agencies
- Local experts and qualified personnel

*(2) Could be involved (services and assets):*

Note that a number of those resources and organizations mentioned as “could be involved” are actually involved. This discrepancy appears to be a consequence of the disconnect between the Emergency Managers and residents. Community members do not appear to know what resources are available and frequently the emergency managers do not understand what resources exist and could be called upon for emergency response and recovery.

- General Dynamics Building (shelter)
- School districts (transportation, food services, shelter)
- Walmart (supplies)
- Home Depot (tools, generators)
- Fire academy (beds)
- Internet service providers (contacting families and agencies)
- Civic organizations (transportation to safety)
- Neighborhood Watch programs
- Community centers (shelter)
- Funeral homes
- Unaffected communities
- Central Arkansas DC (commodities, transportation)
- Translators
- Medical personnel

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

In general, both groups identified similar sources although the community group tended to rank fire departments and churches higher than others). Trusted resources and sources of information include:

- Banks
- Office of Emergency Management
- Red Cross
- Schools
- Area of Agency on Aging
- Local employers
- Central Arkansas DC
- Home Health Agencies
- Churches and pastors
- Housing Authority
- Hospitals
- Fire Department

## 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?*

In general, most of our participants thought that at-risk (those living in vulnerable areas) should prepare disaster plans that could be coordinated with larger area disaster plans. Some of the emergency responders thought that at-risk populations do not have the expertise to make disaster plans. There did not seem to be strong feelings about whether or not disadvantaged people should make disaster plans. Whether or not specific groups of people should make disaster plans seemed to be correlated more with where they lived than with specific characteristics pertaining to marginalization.

## 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.*

In general, participants liked the EPD steps although some thought they were too complicated and others thought the process was too lengthy. Most liked the public involvement and stated that the steps were well thought. Some thought the plans did not incorporate existing plans into the process enough.

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

Most thought the vulnerability assessment was one of the most important parts of the process. They thought local government officials or university and college partners were the most appropriate entities to develop the maps. They also thought it was very important for locals to ground-truth the maps.

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

In general, most liked the idea of the community coach and many thought that using a community coach was the only way that this process could be coordinated. A few people questioned the ability for the community to hire a community coach

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

Participants thought this could be used to help at-risk and disadvantaged groups of people to make disaster plans. However, several times during these meetings, the difficulty of managing the politics of developing disaster plans that include the at-risk and disadvantaged groups crept into the discussion. As one of the emergency managers put it at the bridge meeting “You don’t have the right people here to make this happen” meaning that administrators who could make this happen weren’t involved – they sent someone from their organizations. When we probed on this point, he said it would be difficult to get these people to sit down at the same table, especially those people from different jurisdictions. However, other participants suggested we get representatives from different groups from different strata together to begin the process.