

Building Resilient Communities

Strategies for Strengthening Disaster Preparation Plans

Project Overview

Situation

The devastating impacts associated with hurricanes, tornadoes, and floods have resulted in catastrophic damage to countless rural and low-wealth communities in many Southern states. While these disasters have created challenges for many individuals and households, they have had equally significant effects on communities. In some cases, these disasters have compromised the physical, social, political, and natural resource infrastructures of communities, especially in low-wealth urban neighborhoods and vulnerable rural localities.

Project Summary

The Southern Rural Development Center (SRDC), in partnership with land-grant university Extension educators in key states, is undertaking community-based field assessments to explore disaster awareness and preparedness among vulnerable households and communities. “Vulnerability” means that not everyone has the resources to prepare for, cope with, and recover from disasters. This could be due to a number of factors such as medical challenges, limited financial resources, language barriers, limited access to transportation, and more.

Purpose

The ultimate goal of this project is twofold: (1) gain clarity on how best to provide vulnerable households and communities with the knowledge, tools, and capacity they need to effectively prepare for, and respond to, a variety of disasters; and (2) determine how well the resources produced as part of FEMA’s Emergency Preparedness Demonstration (EPD) Project can position communities to be better prepared to address the unique needs that face local vulnerable audiences during times of disasters.

Site Selection

The SRDC has partnered with the GeoResources Institute (GRI) at Mississippi State University to conduct an initial vulnerability assessment in the United States for the purpose of determining which areas have experienced a high number and variety of federally declared disasters. Next, considering socioeconomic features such as concentrated levels of poverty, low human capital (i.e., education), high levels of health-related disabilities, and other barriers, areas at higher risk were strategically determined. With the combined disaster and socioeconomic data guiding the selection, Arkansas, Florida, Louisiana, Missouri, and Oklahoma were invited to take part in the “on the ground” field assessments. At this point, two “highly vulnerable” communities from each key state are being recruited to be project pilot sites.

Pilot Site Efforts

The SRDC is working closely with Extension educators from each of the five states to organize and host two roundtable meetings in each selected pilot community site. One roundtable discussion will engage individuals and groups (such as emergency management personnel and other entities) having some level of formal or voluntary involvement in disaster preparedness, response, or recovery activities at the local or state levels. The second roundtable discussion will be designed to reach out to individuals, households, and neighborhood groups that are part of, or are representative of, vulnerable audiences. The central focus of both roundtable sessions will be to identify strategies for ensuring that vulnerable people and communities have viable resources and strategies in place to prepare for and effectively respond to disasters. Following these two roundtable discussions, a “Bridge Meeting” will be organized to share insights and strengthen working ties between the key representatives of the community-based roundtables. The intent will be to explore ways in which those charged with the responsibility for managing disaster activities can build strong working relationships with those who face major disadvantages during times of disasters.

Program Culmination

Once the state sessions are complete, the SRDC along with its state and federal partners will meet to carefully weigh the information captured during the various community roundtables. The group will help identify common themes/concerns emerging from the field assessments, and offer key points that they feel the SRDC should highlight in the final evaluation report to be submitted to FEMA and the USDA/CSREES federal agencies. Included in the report will be specific recommendations for supporting and strengthening disaster awareness and preparedness among vulnerable households and communities.



Supporting Agencies:



FEMA