

**IAEM AD Hoc Committee
Diversity and Emergency Management
White Paper**

October 2013

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Executive Summary

It is important that emergency management recognize, celebrate and embrace diversity. Diversity is the broad representation of culture, religion, values, ethnicity, gender, education, life experience, professional experience, and other qualities that make us individually unique. As Emergency Management evolves into a stand-alone practice it becomes increasingly important to advocate for a more diverse group of practitioners and training so we may better serve our equally diverse populations. This requires open minds and open discussion throughout the field of emergency management. If we do not understand the cultural, religious, and social differences that make up the communities we serve, we cannot effectively mitigate, prepare for, respond to or recover from anything.

This paper will briefly address best practices and concepts for identifying at-risk populations that exist within the communities we serve. As economically distressed and vulnerable communities in the United States continue to grow, emergency management organizations have to develop an understanding of diverse communities, diverse value systems, and diverse ethics. It is essential that the emergency management planning process include all of the communities they serve, in order to effectively plan and respond to disaster in these communities. In the past, disasters such as hurricanes Katrina, Rita, Ivan, and Sandy have demonstrated how the lack of cultural diversity among the first responders can affect in more culturally diverse, vulnerable and/or distressed communities. The

outcomes of this paper will support positive social change and set the stage for increasing diversity throughout the practice of emergency management.

As emergency management agencies/offices increase their diversity (cultural, age, gender, etc.) practitioners should acknowledge a few key issues:

- Acknowledge, appreciate and value differences.
- Find ways of adapting a culture of diversity with new hires rather than forcing them to adapt to the traditional office culture.
- Encourage communication and dialogue about differences and diversity.

Why is this discussion necessary when we discuss community emergency preparedness? Time and time again we have seen racial and ethnic minorities suffer disproportionately adverse outcomes in the wake of disasters across geographical and social landscapes. This has been evidenced by the Loma Prieta and Northridge Earthquakes in California, to wildfires in the Midwest, to hurricanes on the East coast, and countless other disasters across the United States and around the world.

Background

Recent disasters have demonstrated that basic social inequalities between affluent communities and economically distressed and/or vulnerable communities remain present in today's society. When residents of vulnerable communities are not appropriately prepared to address a disaster, the lack of effective response can have a crippling effect on the lives of residents (Brody, Peacock, and Zehran, 2007). Cultural diversity needs within the public serving organizations have previously received little attention and as our society becomes more global and diverse, it is important that those in public administration reflect the residents they serve (Pitts, D. W., and Jarry, E. M. 2009). Recognizing this, some emergency management professionals have expressed an interest in developing more specific programs to address the issue, especially when considering the number of minorities in the profession remains disproportionately low in relation to other public service

professions (Long, 2009). Emergency managers need to understand the role that socioeconomics and culture play in disaster response within the economically distressed communities. The ability of an emergency management professional to engage with economically distressed communities is paramount in cultivating trust between the community members and local emergency management organizations (National Consensus Panel on Emergency Preparedness and Cultural Diversity, 2011). In 2009, California conducted a study to provide a status report on related programs and policies, to map the current preparedness gaps with activities to address them and to identify efforts to integrate culturally diverse communities into emergency preparedness activities in California. While this report explicitly focuses on California, the methodological framework is designed to be relevant to other states and regions interested in conducting similar analyses for their diverse communities. As we might envision research and interviews identified significant individual-level and institutional-level barriers adversely affecting the ability of culturally diverse communities to engage or be engaged fully in the spectrum of critical preparedness actions. Individual-level barriers included economic factors, lack of trust in emergency planning and response officials, language issues, as well as cultural and geographic isolation. Institutional-level barriers hindering agencies' ability to develop and execute culturally competent emergency preparedness strategies included insufficient funding, lack of community input in the development of plans, and limited collaboration between agencies and across sectors. The findings also illuminated a range of promising practices and strategies that agencies are implementing to address these barriers, the vast majority of which are taking place in the Bay Area and Southern California. Such methods include active collaboration with the local community throughout the planning process, recruitment of bilingual/multicultural staff, and conducting needs assessments. The conclusions on the challenges and barriers inhibiting culturally diverse

communities from engaging in preparedness activities and being fully integrated into emergency preparedness agendas in California reinforce the findings of a number of national studies. These findings indicate that challenges and barriers to preparedness among diverse communities are not new, but deeply rooted in social, economic, and political complexities. Thus the elimination of disparities in emergency preparedness among culturally diverse communities requires tailored strategies and demands the attention of, and collaboration between, public health officials, emergency managers, policy makers and all other entities involved in the development and implementation of emergency preparedness programs and curricula. Despite entrenched barriers to developing and implementing successful strategies, a number of promising practices and programs were identified that may serve as model initiatives. Findings and recommendations from the California report may facilitate the development of culturally competent emergency preparedness activities and inform policy as well as the effective allocation of resources to address programmatic gaps and emerging priorities.

Diversity in Emergency Management

Cultural diversity within the workforce is defined as the mixture of human differences and similarities among the professional staff, which will include race, culture, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age, profession, and socioeconomic characteristics. Cultural diversity is not only a racial concept, but also pertains to culture, religion, values, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, education, life experience, professional qualifications, and the many other characteristics that make people unique as individuals. Cultural diversity within the public serving organizations workforce is best described as a team of professional with various

backgrounds collaborating with different ideas which can result in greater solutions (Choi, S., & Rainey, H. G. 2010). Cultural diversity should be recognized not as an equal opportunity principle, but as the social understanding of how public service can be more efficient if public organizations staff their teams with members who reflect the community they serve. In a study by Hur, there was a focus on ethnic and racial diversity and the theory that diversified workforces perform better and bring more benefits to organizations (Hur, 2012). The study used a qualitative approach and focus on data from 464 police departments of cities with more than 50,000 residents, the research concluded that there was a decrease crime control performance (Hur, 2012). The study suggested that managers should consider introducing diversity management practices within their departments to introduce greater results of being diverse and protect and increase the benefits from diversity and help enhance organizational productivity (Hur, 2012). Examining chronic and emerging barriers and challenges to meeting the emergency preparedness needs of culturally diverse communities, program and policy gaps, as well as promising practices and strategies to address identified priorities can assist in providing directions for future efforts at the state, regional and local levels. As we address building a resilient nation as a national imperative, it will be necessary for emergency managers to understand the value of building culturally diverse teams.

Benefits

The United States of America was built by a diverse group of people. The strength, resilience, and richness of the United States of America are based on the diversity of its citizens. Everyone is equal in worth, and is entitled to the same privileges and opportunities regardless of their age, national origin, disability, gender, or race.

Each of us has our own unique, experiences, background and talents. Diversity is important because it provides our society and culture with unique and inspirational perspectives. Diversity can create new ideas and exchanges that can be beneficial to a society, or even the world. The wise emergency manager incorporates this value in their strategic plan and find ways to bring their diverse community together before, during and after emergencies and disasters. Diversity creates an emergency management organization that is enriched with people from different cultures and that have different experiences, lifestyles, backgrounds, perspectives, and ideas. This kind of diverse workforce will:

- Recognize and value talent.
- Plan for the whole community.
- Eliminate barriers and ensure all employees are treated fairly and have the opportunity to reach their maximum potential.
- Encourage the exchange of ideas which not only broadens the scope of problem solving, but also improves the possibility of solving problems.

Smart emergency managers today understand diversity is more than just a feel-good notion on a human resources poster. They understand and create a culture in which:

- Diversity enriches the educational experience. We learn from those whose experiences, beliefs, and perspectives are different from our own.
- It promotes personal growth--and a healthy society. Diversity challenges stereotyped preconceptions; it encourages critical thinking; and it helps us learn to communicate effectively with people of varied backgrounds.
- It strengthens communities and the workplace. Emergency preparedness engagement within a diverse setting prepares us to become good citizens in an increasingly complex, pluralistic society; it fosters mutual respect and teamwork; and it helps build communities whose members are judged by the quality of their character and their contributions.
- It enhances our economic competitiveness (which translates to economic recovery). Sustaining the nation's prosperity in the 21st century will require

us to make effective use of the talents and abilities of all our citizens, in work settings that bring together individuals from diverse backgrounds and cultures.

Conclusion

General Electric has captured the true spirit of diversity in this vision: "*As a global company, our talent must reflect the communities we serve and with whom we do business.*" As emergency managers we must reflect the populations we serve if we hope to engage and empower in a meaningful way. The benefits of improving diversity affect emergency management organizations and responders in a positive way. Emergency management agencies can capture from their diverse staffs a variety of alternatives to disaster response challenges. Cultural diversity encompasses the whole range of human experiences including, but not limited to, age, gender, racial classification, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic class, ability, national origin, geographical location, political orientation, physical size, and appearance. These factors influence the cultural experiences and backgrounds of individuals and groups. Cultural influences shape the framework within which people view the world. They influence the distinct way in which people define and organize reality, as well as guiding beliefs and basic assumptions about life. Culture is an important guiding force in individuals' lives and shapes not only their perceptions but their relationships with people and the world around them. Cultural groups share behavioral patterns, symbols, values, beliefs and other characteristics that distinguish them from other groups. Cultural groups can provide a source of belonging, mutual help, validation, identity and self-esteem. They are not mutually exclusive in that individuals can hold simultaneous memberships within different groups. Understanding cultural diversity involves gaining a greater awareness of

the ways that cultural heritage and background influence one's values, assumptions, thought processes and relationships. The process of learning about cultural diversity involves moving from a mono-cultural perspective to a cultural pluralist perspective which involves acceptance, valuing, utilization and celebration of similarities and differences at the personal, interpersonal, institutional and cultural levels. One of the most effective ways to achieve an understanding of cultural diversity is by taking advantage of opportunities to develop genuine relationships with individuals who are culturally different from you. An African proverb offers "It's not about us without us." This simply means to bring everyone to the table. Many of the problems experienced by culturally different groups and individuals are based on cross-cultural miscommunication and misinformation. Communication is necessary for reducing misinformation and building bridges across the barriers created by societal beliefs about race, ethnicity, gender, age, status, class, disabilities, sexual orientation, religion, etc. Creating a community that supports cultural diversity will enrich the emergency management environment by stimulating new perspectives. This, in turn, will potentially generate new questions and new answers to some old problems. The more informed each practitioner is about diversity, the more impactful all of our efforts will be locally, nationally, and around the world.

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