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Community Involvement in a Changing World

We cannot deny that we are living in a changing world. Technological advances, social changes, and physical reformations of our world are among the few variables bound to radically affect the lives of our generation and generations to follow. I grew up surrounded by a family of emergency response professionals including police officers, paramedics, and firefighters. I myself am a camp counselor at READY Camp (Responding to Emergencies And Disasters with Youth) and founder of READY Club at my formal high school. I have been a youth representative for the American Red Cross for the past two years and have done a considerable amount of research regarding community disaster preparedness and response. I am a CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation), AED (automated external defibrillator), and Basic First Aid Instructor, and enjoy educating others. Between research, teaching, and observing, I have realized the importance of community disaster preparedness and response. Therefore, communities in the United States need to be better educated when it comes to natural, manmade, and technological disasters that are unfortunately predicted to occur in the near future.

Additional research on the subject has convinced me that we as a nation need to take action in educating the members of our communities in disaster preparedness and basic response survival skills. Saving lives in a disaster is the top priority. In order to maximize the number of lives we are able to save, we need to educate to the best of our ability members of our communities. By opening communication pathways between

community members and emergency response professionals, creating a center for educating the community with hands-on experience in disaster response, and integrating more disaster knowledge into our schools, we as a nation can save lives.

Headlines all over the world tell the horror stories of massive earthquakes in Chile and Haiti in the past few months. In recent years, warnings of the effects of a climate change have flooded our biology classes and the public forum. Tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, and hurricanes have the world on edge. According to Brunisma and Picou in the article *Disasters in the Twenty-First Century: Modern Destruction and Future Instruction*, "...the number of 'natural' ... disasters have increased substantially over the past 30 years" (983). It is apparent that natural disasters are an undeniable threat to the safety of citizens of any country.

In addition to the risk of natural disasters increasing, the risk of manmade disasters is also on the rise. Terrorism and crime rates plague many countries in our changing world. The horrifying attacks of September 11th, the recent bombings in Russia, and the ongoing terrorism between the conflicting countries of Israel and Palestine are a few recent examples of the threats of terrorism and the impact it can have on a country. Countries with declining economies are breeding desperate people who will go to extreme measures to improve their quality of life. Who we can blame for this is not the focus we need to have. We need to devote our attention to the most effective response to threats of crime or terrorism on our communities. It is a troubling thought, but the damage could be controlled if we educate and prepare ourselves for a potential attack.

If natural and manmade disasters are not threatening enough separately, studies show that they are linked. A study performed by Nel and Righarts using data from 187

political units between 1950 and 2000 showed that the more hardships (including natural disasters) a country experiences, the higher the crime rate. Natural disasters correlate with (and seem to spark) acts of crime and terrorism (159).

Besides natural and manmade, there are also threats of technological disasters. The impact a technological disaster can physically have on our community is more devastating than most realize. We, as a nation, depend on technology to do just about everything; getting us from place to place, keeping our food cold, keeping our hospitals running, predicting harsh weather conditions, controlling many large devices to keep our communities safe, contacting family members, even keeping track of our daily schedules and “to-do” lists. Imagine if technology were to fail. Besides the frivolous use of our “to-do” lists, everything listed above would have a tremendous impact on every member of the community. I am not suggesting an impending technological disaster such as the paralyzation of the transportation system; however, so many things are dependent on computers today, that some form of technology is bound to fail. When it does, it will require an open channel of communication throughout the community in order to rectify the problem.

These three types of disasters are an all too real trifecta of terror for the many disaster victims around the world. Recent reports of these disasters have been numerous. Brunnsma and Picou state, “In the past eight years, some 422 disaster declarations have been issued in the United States alone...” (983). Despite the prominence of these disasters, there continues to be a lack of knowledge about disaster preparedness and response not only in the United States, but all around the world.

Multiple studies have shown that people around the world are generally not knowledgeable about how to react to a disaster. Karanci, Aksit, and Dirik, scientists in Turkey performed a study on how emergency training translated into real life disaster response. Instructors trained an experimental group of community members in a set of basic emergency response skills. Testing both trained and untrained groups by placing them in a mock disaster, they got their answer. Even months after receiving their training, the trained group performed markedly better than the untrained group (243-258).

According to Bushweller, the American Red Cross performed a study to determine students' general knowledge of necessary disaster preparation and response. The findings were surprising. Children in kindergarten through fifth grade had increasingly more knowledge about how to prepare and respond to a disaster (1). Post fifth grade, however, there was no apparent increase in this important knowledge (1). This means that when children reach age ten or eleven, they are essentially done with formally learning about disaster preparedness and response. It does not mean, however, that they know all there is to know or even what is considered crucial to survival. They have simply been taught to hide under a sturdy object when a tornado comes and to evacuate the building when the fire alarm sounds. With the natural, manmade, and technological threats predicted, this needs to change. We need to do more than educate children ages five through ten about very basic and essential survival skills. Older students and community members need training on how to save their own lives, and what to do in a disaster that could realistically occur at any time.

Some may feel that it is not necessary to take on any responsibility for disaster response. The general public rationalizes their lack of action by claiming, the reason their

taxes pay emergency personnel like firefighters, paramedics, and police officers is for them to save our lives. In the article *Disaster Readiness: a Community-University Partnership*, Calcini and Adams claim that community members who “ignore disaster and safety precautions or defer [their] responsibilities...” increase the vulnerability of their communities to a harsher impact of a disaster (Theoretical Framework).

In an interview with Milwaukee’s first female firefighter, Debra Walsh, we discussed the realistic expectations we as community members can have of our emergency response professionals. She stated that, “Realistically, the number of staff any given community has on duty at any given time is enough to handle an incident the size of a burning factory or a ten-car pileup” (Walsh). On Tuesday, January 19th there was not even enough on duty personnel in Milwaukee to put out a fire engulfing a local pizza place. While the fire blazed at Pizza Man in Milwaukee, Milwaukee firefighters were forced to call in reinforcements from surrounding areas. If a disaster were to occur, affecting even just Milwaukee County, the number of emergency personnel needed to respond would be tremendous. This is a luxury that we simply do not have. The bombarded emergency system would become overwhelmed and consequently inefficient.

During a disaster, saving lives is top priority. Having community members with preparedness training would be an invaluable resource for overwhelmed rescue personnel. If these members could even keep themselves safe and provide basic first aid to the less seriously injured victims, the rescue workers could focus on triage (determine the severity of the injury and how immediate treatment needs to be) and providing life saving treatment. Efficiency is key in this stressful time of panic and chaos.

Some suggestions to help educate people on basic survival knowledge are: make it a community matter, make it the responsibility of schools to teach students beyond fifth grade how to survive in a disaster, or to continue to place responsibility with groups like the Red Cross to provide information and training. Although I believe that schools should take more responsibility for informing students about disaster response and preparedness, and I think that the Red Cross is a fantastic organization capable of many things, I propose that the answer lies within the community. The Red Cross does not have the power or staff to effectively promote this message of survival to every community, even just in the United States. The problem with relying solely on schools for disaster education is that there are many adults living in communities that are no longer in school. An entire two to three generations of community members would be missed. Placing responsibility with communities would ensure that the entire population in each community would be reached.

The community needs to open a channel for communication between members of the community and the emergency response professionals responsible for that community. In a disaster, professionals may become overwhelmed and consequently incapable of being effective in saving lives. Community members need to be aware and informed of the most basic safety precautions and responses in order to utilize the professionals to their full potential. To do this, Cancilini and Adams suggest a relationship between residents of the community and disaster response researchers. The partners would come up with a plan that would be effective in the event of an emergency. The relationship that Cancilini and Adams suggest is facilitated in what they call PAR (Participatory Action Research). Working through three phases, researchers and

community members work together to identify a potential problem in an emergency, brainstorm steps to rectify the problem, come up with and apply a solution, and finally review and conclude if the solution is effective (Theoretical Framework). By creating this relationship and utilizing this system, community members would become well informed of their specific responsibilities should disaster occur. As a result of this process, a plan that would surely include a method of communication between the community members and emergency professionals would be composed. This collaboration would heighten the effectiveness of the professionals.

Perhaps models already exist to help shape future emergency response systems. In the editorial, *The Next Disaster; Are You Ready?*, Margaret Marshall, a retired military mental health nurse, critiques the lack of effective communication channels in the United States. She references the military's successful protocol for disaster response and questions why the United States has not adopted the same or a similar protocol. After becoming a member of the faculty at the University of Texas Health Science Center, she joined a volunteer disaster response planning community group. According to Marshall, "At monthly meetings we discussed disaster planning, disaster training, and networking with the other agencies and organizations in the city to coordinate care and treatment during disasters" (1). She claimed that as a result, her group was ready to respond to a disaster.

The next concern is the need for a center in which community members have the opportunity to participate in hands-on emergency response exercises. Each community needs a facility to hold instruction and to practice emergency response drills. In the article *Education for Public Safety*, Susan Reese reports on a center that was constructed

for this reason at Owens Community College (OCC) in Ohio. The college opened their own center to more extensively prepare emergency first responders for what they would experience in the field. The center provides a venue for hands-on experience instead of solely relying on classroom theory (16-18). While the centers used by communities to train their community members in basic survival skills would be simpler than the center built for OCC, the idea behind the center would be the same.

The third action needed towards the goal of educating our communities is to integrate emergency preparedness into schools. Continuing to increase the knowledge students have about general emergency preparedness and response throughout their school years will have an unmistakably beneficial impact on the rest of the community. According to the United States Census, 21.8% of the citizens in the United States are school age children (United States Census Bureau). Implementing this addition to the curriculum into schools would essentially effect a quarter of the population of the average community. To do this, community leaders would work with the school board to find fifteen minutes a day to devote to emergency education. When the students reach high school, in addition to four years of English and two years of History necessary for graduation, they would be required to take one class in emergency education. This class would be a balance between classroom theory and working at the community center for hands-on practice by responding to mock disasters.

In order to make these changes, the government body of the National Department of Homeland Security must become active in the cause. They have the ability to help fund community centers and facilitate the research and meetings required to open communication pathways. Also, being part of the National Government, they have better

access to law making bodies. By creating general laws requiring every state's participation in this life saving effort, the endeavor would be much more successful.

Since the National government does not have control over school systems, school boards would also need to be involved. They have the power to change their districts curriculums to incorporate emergency education. Along with middle schools and high schools, colleges could also require this course be taken for students to be accepted into the college.

Each person can make a difference. Until the government and school boards realize that community disaster preparedness is an important matter in need of immediate attention, anyone that wants to make a difference can take action. By going to an organization like the American Red Cross or the READY Initiative, anyone can become educated in disaster preparedness. These organizations also provide opportunities to become certified in CPR, AED, and Basic First Aid. Gaining the ability to save a life can have an incredible positive impact during a disaster. Any one person can make a difference by becoming educated in how to save his or her own life, or the life of a neighbor.

Knowing the potential of these disasters occurring sometime during our lifetime, we must create an open channel for communication between community members and emergency response personnel, build community disaster centers for educating community members, and incorporate disaster preparedness and response into the middle school and high school curriculums. Today, there is no solid argument against the fact that our world is changing. It is our responsibility to be prepared for the changes going on in our world. To ignore the needs of disaster preparedness and disaster response

education is to ignore an opportunity to save lives. We need to take action to ensure our community's safety by being prepared to save the largest number of lives possible in the event of a disaster. Natural, manmade, and technological disasters are devastating experiences for any country to encounter. Although all of these predictions of disasters may provide a bleak outlook on our future, we can make it brighter by being prepared for what is to come.