ADVANCING EQUITY

STRATEGIES, TACTICS, AND BEST PRACTICES FOR DISASTER-IMPACTED COMMUNITIES

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NATIONAL LOW INCOME HOUSING COALITION

DHR RECOVERY RESEARCH RESILIENCE
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

America's disaster housing recovery framework exacerbates and reinforces racial, income, and accessibility inequities at each stage of response and recovery. The framework is broken and in need of major reform. In June 2024, the National Low Income Housing Coalition's (NLIHC) Disaster Housing Recovery Coalition (DHRC) hosted a convening in Washington, D.C. to bring together representatives from more than 60 DHRC member organizations with expertise in affordable housing and community development, fair housing and civil rights, legal aid, environmental justice, and research, as well as those with direct experience recovering from disasters, to work together to identify the most critical opportunities to reform our nation's disaster recovery system and provide needed solutions. The goal was to create standard best practices and identify tactics successfully used by DHRC members to educate policymakers on the need for policy change to ensure a complete and equitable recovery for our nation's most marginalized and lowest-income disaster survivors, including people of color, seniors, people with disabilities, people experiencing homelessness, people with limited English proficiency, and other individuals. These disaster survivors are often hardest hit, have the fewest resources, and face the steepest path to recovery. By identifying successful strategies, tactics, and best practices, organizations in newly disaster-impacted communities and areas at risk of disaster can more easily and quickly replicate them, allowing for a more cohesive and cooperative approach to fixing America's broken disaster recovery system.

NLIHC is dedicated to achieving racially and socially equitable public policy that ensures people with the lowest incomes have quality homes that are accessible and affordable in communities of their choice. The NLIHC-led DHRC includes more than 900 national, state, and local organizations, including many working directly with disaster-impacted communities and with first-hand experience recovering after disasters. The DHRC works to ensure that federal disaster recovery efforts reach the lowest-income and most marginalized survivors. The DHRC has grown into a nationally recognized leader in the field of disaster housing recovery, offering materials and programming to assist organizations working in disaster-stricken areas and providing recommendations that shape disaster recovery reform efforts nationwide. NLIHC advances disaster housing recovery, research, and resilience (DHR) in part through the DHRC.

The convening centered around discussions about different strategies for policy education, the successes and failures of efforts to improve the current disaster recovery and response system, and how ongoing policy education efforts can elevate disaster survivor experiences and directly assist survivors in recovering. At the convening, participants identified critically needed reforms, collected and synthesized best practices, and outlined future steps to achieve an equitable disaster housing recovery system. In doing so, the convening reaffirmed the importance of disaster recovery as a core component of housing development and policy across the country.

This toolkit summarizes the discussions held during the DHR convening and will be used to guide the work of the DHRC in future years. It was written with direct input from members of the DHRC, including disaster survivors with lived experience, reflecting their priorities to address disaster mitigation, resilience, and recovery. The convening – and the resulting toolkit – represent a true alignment among DHRC members around shared priorities for disaster recovery efforts and education.

DHRC members and advocates nationwide can use this toolkit to educate policymakers and the public about the systemic barriers to an equitable and complete disaster housing recovery, the long-term impacts of such barriers, the most prudent and important areas for improvement within the disaster recovery system, and the steps necessary to advance the vision articulated in the DHRC's guiding principles. Community-based organizations, policymakers at all levels of government, members of the media, and others can benefit from the resources and information included in this toolkit as we collectively work towards an equitable disaster housing recovery system.

This toolkit includes best practices and tactics with which community-based, state, and national organizations can use media, the law, organizing, and research to accomplish the goal of reforming the country's broken disaster framework. The toolkit also includes direct examples of how these strategies have been used by DHRC member organizations in impacted communities before and after disasters. This information is supplemented by related details that should make the deployment of these strategies even easier. The topics run the gamut from pre-disaster media strategies, *Freedom of Information Act* requests, and community-based surveys to community tours, pass-through grants, and resilience hubs. Each topic was raised and discussed at the DHR convening, and together, they create a useful set of options for community-based organizations in disaster-impacted areas or areas at high risk of disaster impacts.

The 2024 DHR convening builds on the success of a previous national convening of DHRC members in 2019 in Houston, Texas. The 2019 convening brought together stakeholders from across the nation to reimagine a new federal disaster housing response and recovery framework centered on the needs of the lowest-income and most marginalized disaster survivors and their communities. The 2019 convening culminated with the publication of *Fixing America's Broken Disaster Housing Recovery System*, a two-part report focusing on the barriers to a complete and equitable recovery for America's lowest-income and most marginalized disaster survivors and specific policy reforms that are needed.

Reforming how we prepare for, respond to, and recover from disasters is imperative. Despite the clear need, federal disaster recovery and rebuilding efforts frequently leave the lowest-income and most marginalized disaster survivors without the assistance needed to recover and their communities less resilient to future disasters. After a disaster, they are frequently unable to access the stable, affordable, and accessible homes and resources they need to recover and, as a result, they often have no choice but to return to uninhabitable homes, sleep in cars or at shelters, share lodging with others, or pay more than half their incomes on rent, putting them at increased risk of displacement, eviction, and homelessness.

Inequitable disaster recovery efforts disproportionately harm Black, Indigenous, Latino, and other disaster survivors of color. Recovery efforts tend to prioritize homeowners, who are more likely to be white, over renters, who are predominantly Black and brown. In doing so, disaster recovery exacerbates racial wealth disparities and pushes more low-income renters of color into long-term housing instability and, in the worst case, homelessness. While Black and brown communities are often located in areas at higher risk of disaster and have less resilient infrastructure to protect residents, long-term recovery resources tend to go to communities that face lower risks.

The disaster recovery system also suffers from a lack of transparency. FEMA often refuses to make information about its application and appeals processes public, which leads to higher denial rates for low-income disaster survivors. Members of the public, as well as academic and research institutions, are blocked from accessing vital data needed to better understand the outcomes of recovery programs.

The DHRC is guided by seven key principles, as formulated by coalition members, for reforming our federal disaster housing recovery system. These principles guide the DHRC's work and serve as the basis for measuring the success of any disaster housing recovery system:

- Everyone in need receives safe, temporary housing where they can reconnect with family and community.
- Securing help from the government is accessible, understandable, and timely.
- Displaced people have access to the resources they need for as long as they need to safely and quickly recover housing, personal property, and transportation; disaster rebuilding jobs and contracts are locally sourced, whenever possible.
- Everyone is fairly assisted to fully and promptly recover through transparent and accountable programs and strict compliance with civil rights laws, with survivors having a say in the way assistance is provided.
- All homeowners can quickly rebuild in safe, quality neighborhoods of their choice.
- Renters and anyone experiencing homelessness before the disaster quickly get quality, affordable, accessible rental property in safe, quality neighborhoods of their choice.
- All neighborhoods are free from environmental hazards, have equal quality and accessible public infrastructure, and are safe and resilient.

The convening and this toolkit were made possible through funding by the Walmart Foundation. The findings, conclusions and recommendations presented in this toolkit are those of the authors and the National Low Income Housing Coalition alone, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Walmart Foundation.

ABOUT NLIHC'S DISASTER HOUSING RECOVERY, RESEARCH, AND RESILIENCE (DHR) EFFORT

NLIHC works to advance housing justice through disaster housing recovery, research, and resilience.

RECOVERY

Founded in 2017 and led by NLIHC, the DHRC is composed of over 900 national, state, and local organizations. The DHRC works to ensure that federal disaster recovery efforts reach those most impacted by disasters, including households with the lowest incomes and those who are most marginalized, including people of color, seniors, people with disabilities, people experiencing homelessness, and other individuals. The DHRC provides policy and advocacy support to partner organizations actively responding to the needs of affected populations, monitors federal actions after disasters, and gathers disaster recovery best practices. These partnerships allow for the identification of systemic barriers and opportunities for reform in disaster response that inform the DHRC's policy goals and numerous reports on disaster-related topics. Through meetings and campaigns, DHRC members have built relationships, fostered innovative policy solutions, and deepened their understanding of equitable disaster recovery.

RESEARCH

NLIHC conducts its own research on the impact of disasters on low-income households and seeks to foster research on the topic elsewhere. The NLIHC-led Housing Recovery Research Consortium is a group of scholars and applied researchers from 25 research institutions and advocacy organizations whose purpose is to achieve data transparency and greater access to high-quality data on disaster assistance and recovery; support research through collaboration and the sharing of data and findings; and communicate research findings to the public and advocates.

NLIHC's latest research includes *The National Risk Index and Racial Equity for Renters*, a 2024 report published with the Public and Affordable Housing Research Corporation (PAHRC) evaluating whether the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) National Risk Index (NRI) reflects disparities in natural hazard exposure, impacts, and mitigations for people of color and renters. In 2023, NLIHC and PAHRC published

Natural Hazards and Federally Assisted Housing, analyzing the risks that natural hazards pose to federally assisted homes and their communities, using FEMA's National Risk Index. NLIHC's 2019 report *Long-Term Recovery of Rental Housing: A Case Study of Highly Impacted Communities in New Jersey After Superstorm Sandy* considers the barriers to the recovery of affordable rental housing after disasters and identifies key recommendations to policymakers.

RESILIENCE

As climate change-influenced disasters become more common and severe, the effort to mitigate potential harms and increase community resilience is an absolute necessity. With the growing threat of climate change, natural disasters will occur with greater frequency and intensity in more areas of our country. The lowest-income and most marginalized households are often most at risk because government policies have located their homes in high-risk areas and policymakers have failed to invest in the infrastructure needed to prevent harm. Not only do mitigation and resilience efforts actively reduce risks to life and property, but they can also save money in the long-term, lessening the need for expensive, large-scale recovery projects after a disaster.

The mitigation needs of homeowners, renters, and people experiencing homelessness should be equitably addressed. Communities should strive to integrate the affordable housing needs of an area into its mitigation planning and include mitigation needs into affordable housing plans.

GET INVOLVED

Join the DHRC working group to help ensure a complete and equitable disaster recovery for America's lowest-income and most marginalized disaster survivors.

Register for the DHRC's Disaster Recovery Working Group at: https://bit.ly/3Rm08rb

Become a member of the DHRC at: https://nlihc.org/disaster-housing-coalition

HOW TO USE THIS TOOLKIT

"Advocates need to come up with a strategy. 2024 is not the same world as before the pandemic. Trust is going to be important, and we need to find a way to know when national organizations should step in, and when state and local organizations should bring best practices to the federal level. Moving in the right direction together will make change." – TODD HOLLOWAY, CENTER FOR INDEPENDENCE SOUTH, TAKOMA, WA, AT THE DHR CONVENING.

For the hundreds of communities impacted each year, disasters are a destabilizing force that exacerbates existing racial and social inequality. For the lowest-income and most marginalized households in particular, disasters present a situation that too often leads to greater housing cost burdens, homelessness, and permanent displacement. While federal, state, and local assistance programs exist, they often fail to reach those most in need of assistance or provide only token assistance for families who have experienced significant financial and emotional impacts.

For community organizations, disasters can be similarly destabilizing. Organizations working to assist their communities amid historic economic inequality and a worsening housing crisis now must grapple with even greater disaster-created need, all while enduring the same lack of resources and personal impacts as the communities they serve.

For national organizations, disasters can create tough questions about where to most effectively focus efforts, how to elevate the needs of those they serve, and when and how to get involved responsibly, respectfully, and successfully.

Created with the direct input of 60 experts, including disaster-impacted people, legal aid attorneys, researchers, service providers, and staff from organizations at the local, state, and national level, this toolkit is designed to help organizations implement successful strategies to ensure communities are prepared for disasters, assistance reaches those most impacted by disasters, and communities can recover in ways that lessen, instead of increase, racial and social inequity. The tactics and concepts provided in this toolkit will also ensure that policy reform efforts are conducted in coordination with the thousands of people working towards the same goals in their communities, states, regions, and across the country. By working together towards a shared vision of an equitable disaster housing recovery system, we can ensure that our collective efforts are most effective.

This toolkit emerged from discussions at the DHR convening and outlines best practices and lessons learned, including deploying media and messaging strategies, organizing in disaster-impacted and at-risk communities, leveraging legal approaches, and utilizing research to successfully achieve changes to our nation's disaster housing response, recovery, and resiliency framework.

This roadmap can help to better coordinate efforts to educate policymakers at the local, state, and federal levels, assist organizations newly experiencing a disaster and those already working in the space to integrate new tactics and strategies, and ensure our collective work lifts up the experiences and expertise of disaster survivors. **With the threat of extreme weather already impacting communities across the country, we cannot afford to do anything else.**

In addition to this toolkit, organizations should be aware of additional resources offered by NLIHC on disaster recovery. These materials can supplement this toolkit by providing more information about specific policy reforms, what victories have been achieved since the DHRC was created, and opportunities to learn more about disaster recovery programs. Read more about NLIHC's Disaster Housing Recovery, Research, and Resilience initiative at: https://nlihc.org/disaster-housing-recovery-research-resilience.

WHAT IS AT STAKE

"I became an advocate because I saw how things were hurting my community, particularly the communities of color, working class and immigrant communities. There are a lot of barriers as is, even without a disaster." – RITA ROBLES, NORTHEAST ACTION COLLECTIVE, HOUSTON, TX, AT THE DHR CONVENING.

It is critical that we make our nation's disaster housing system equitable. Disasters are increasing in frequency and severity, just as inequality continues to widen and our nation's housing crisis grows worse. The lowest-income and most marginalized people and communities are consistently the hardest hit by disasters. They are least financially able to evacuate prior to a storm and, until policymakers prioritize their needs, they are most likely to be left behind in the recovery and rebuilding process. Together, we must ensure that low-income disaster survivors can access the resources they need for a complete and equitable recovery and rebuild in ways that alleviate the affordable housing crisis and withstand future storms. Failure to do so will result in spiraling disaster and climate-related impacts that will cost an ever-greater number of lives, homes, and communities.

INEQUITIES FOR RENTERS

Research finds that rental homes are more likely to be damaged or destroyed by disasters and take longer to repair than owner-occupied homes.[1] Natural hazard risk is amplified for lower-cost rental homes, including federally assisted homes. Lower-cost rental homes tend to be older, of lower physical quality, and overrepresented in risk-prone areas. These homes are more likely to be built to less stringent codes and have outdated systems and building materials, which could make them more susceptible to disasters compared to newer properties.

In addition, renters receive less government assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) than homeowners after disasters (Collins, 2008).[2] Despite the clear need, FEMA programs often leave many of the lowest-income survivors – who are disproportionately people of color or other marginalized populations – without a stable, affordable place required to recover. As a result, many of these households have no choice but to return to uninhabitable homes, sleep in cars or tents, stay at shelters, double- or triple-up with other low-income families, or pay more than half of their limited incomes on rent, putting them at increased risk of eviction and homelessness.

Because HUD's long-term disaster recovery program is not permanently authorized, disaster-impacted communities are faced with unnecessary administrative delays. As a result, it takes too long for these critical grants to reach impacted communities and households. Because recovery funds are too often distributed inequitably, temporary displacement of low-income disaster survivors can turn into permanent displacement.

Too often, communities fail to rebuild affordable housing damaged by a disaster, distribute hazard mitigation measures inequitably, and prevent displaced disaster survivors from returning to their original community. These failures retrench pre-disaster segregation in disaster-impacted areas.

RACIAL DISPARITIES

Data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau and analyzed annually by NLIHC show that there are 10.8 million renter households with extremely low incomes – accounting for 25% of all renter households. People of color are much more likely than white people to have extremely low incomes; 20% of black households, 18% of American Indian or Alaska Native households, 14% of Latino households, and 10% of Asian American and Pacific Islander households have extremely low incomes. Only 6% of white non-Latino households in the U.S. are extremely low-income renters.[3]

These racial disparities are also reflected in data on housing insecurity and homelessness. Over 30% of Black renter households spend more than half of their income on housing. According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, in 2020, Native American and Black Americans had the highest rate of homelessness among the nation's racial and ethnic groups. Latinos have the second highest homeless rate – still almost double the homelessness rate of white people.[4]

Racial disparities and inequities likewise exist in disaster recovery. In a study of disaster-impacted counties, researchers found that Black survivors' wealth decreased by an average of $27,000 while white survivors' average wealth increased by $126,000 – further evidence that while the current recovery system is not accessible to many households of color, it favors white households. Moreover, in many areas of the country, disaster mitigation efforts to upgrade infrastructure focus on whiter, wealthier communities to the detriment of Black and brown communities.[5]

Racial disparities in housing are directly related to the disproportionate harm disasters have on marginalized communities.

IMPACT ON IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES

Many immigrant communities have a distrust of police and other law enforcement authorities due to targeting by immigration authorities both locally and by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Often, this distrust results in community members only calling for help or assistance as a last resort.[6]

This distrust was exacerbated by President Trump and his administration, which sought to dramatically modify the "public charge" rule to prevent immigrants from gaining U.S. citizenship if they receive assistance from the federal government. Although disaster and emergency response assistance were not included in the public charge rule, advocates warned that the proposed change would have caused immigrants to be less likely to seek out and utilize emergency disaster response services for fear that doing so might impact their ability to become citizens. The Biden administration withdrew the Trump administration's rule, though trust amongst immigrant communities remain low.

In addition, emergency alerts and instructions are often presented only in English. Immigrant populations and other individuals with Low English Proficiency are often unable to clearly understand what they must do to remain safe during a disaster. While there is no requirement that emergency announcements appear in languages other than English, language access is required for federal- or state-funded programs. Despite this requirement, translated documents can be difficult to access.[7]

IMPACT ON INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES

People with disabilities are twice to four times as likely to die or sustain a critical injury during a disaster as people without disabilities.[8] Yet many emergency plans do not sufficiently address how to reach people with disabilities during times of disaster. Instead, many local authorities rely on a neighbors-helping-neighbors approach that is not workable in many areas of the country. FEMA itself has been slow to roll out training products and other materials to assist local officials in addressing the needs of individuals with disabilities during disaster emergency response. Without guidance from FEMA, local officials often fail to prioritize the care of individuals with disabilities during disasters.

While federal law, including the *Americans with Disabilities Act and the Rehabilitation Act*, prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities under any federal program – including those for disaster preparation and response – practice has lagged. DHS has published accessibility and inclusion guidelines for state and local disaster planners, but these best practices are often overlooked, ignored, or rejected. Advocates from impacted areas frequently report that shelters and outreach and application centers are not accessible, available physical and mental health assistance is inadequate, and sign interpreters and other accommodations are not provided.[9]

People with disabilities are often diverted to "special needs" or "medical" shelters, even if they do not require the level of care provided there. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) consistently issues waivers allowing states to direct people with disabilities to nursing homes, which can be unsafe during emergencies or lead to involuntary institutionalization. During Hurricane Harvey, elderly residents in a Dickinson, Texas nursing home were photographed with flood waters up to their waists, and nursing home residents died in 2017 from heat exhaustion when their facility lost power during Hurricane Harvey.[10]

Although the law requires emergency communications to be accessible to deaf and blind people, accessibility is often erratic. Emergency broadcasts in some states and localities feature no sign language interpreters or partially obscured interpretation that makes it difficult for a viewer to fully understand what information is being conveyed. In the 2019 storm season, the National Weather Service and National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) provided depictions of Hurricane Dorian's projected path in a visual format only, making it impossible for those with vision impairments to understand where the storm was headed.

IMPACT ON INDIVIDUALS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

Individuals and families experiencing homelessness are among those most at risk during a disaster, often relying on nonprofit organizations or informal networks as a means of accessing information, shelter, food, and water. When homeless service or shelter providers are disrupted by a disaster, many unhoused people lose access to information about emergency assistance or evacuations, and means to access food, water, or shelter.[11] Many people experiencing homelessness may lack cell phones that can receive emergency alerts from government authorities that contain critical information about evacuation staging areas or the location of emergency shelter. In jurisdictions that arrest, ticket, fine or harass people experiencing homelessness, there may be an adversarial relationship between unhoused people and local government or police that prevents them from trusting offers of assistance.

Moreover, pre-disaster homeless populations are often excluded from, or face significant barriers to, accessing emergency shelters and disaster assistance. During Hurricane Michael, individuals and families experiencing homelessness were not taken to general evacuation shelters but were placed in shelters that were separated from the public.[12] Following Hurricane Irma, advocates reported that people experiencing homelessness prior to the disaster were forced to wear armbands and were kept separated from other disaster survivors.[13] These actions further stigmatize unhoused people and often prevent them from accessing the resources they need to stay safe during a disaster.

STRATEGIES FOR ADVANCING EQUITABLE DISASTER RESPONSE AND RECOVERY

This toolkit focuses on four key strategies – Organizing, Media, Legal, and Research – and includes best practices for national, state, and local organizations, along with examples organizations can directly replicate in their efforts. By utilizing similar and complimentary tactics and strategies, organizations working in different parts of the country can better coordinate their efforts and improve their work as we all continue to educate policymakers on the need for disaster recovery and resilience reform.

ORGANIZING STRATEGIES

"We need to be relentless. We have to hold people accountable. We have to be persistent. We have to make our voices heard or they're not going to give us what we need." – CHERYL HENDERSON, NORTHEAST ACTION COLLECTIVE, HOUSTON, TX AT THE DHR CONVENING.

In 1991, Peter May introduced the concept of "policies without publics" to describe the frustratingly low level of effort and attention policymakers have given disaster recovery and resilience over past decades.[14] According to May, this failure occurred because some policy areas, like disaster recovery and resiliency, do not mobilize large, organized interest groups. The mobilization that does occur tends to lack a common vision of what is causing the problem, or it is undermined by policymakers who implement policies without public involvement. As a result, significant reforms do not occur, systems are not updated, and a general policy malaise occurs.

But this is not a constant. Areas of policy that have received little or no public attention can be thrust into the spotlight. With ongoing climate change and increasingly severe disasters pushing the issue to center-stage, the potential to mobilize the public around disaster recovery and resilience policy is increasing. The question is: how can we build the political will for policy change?

The simple answer is: Organizing.

According to Dr. Marshall Ganz of Harvard University, organizing is leadership that enables people to turn the resources they have into the power

they need to make the change they want. Organizing is made up of five key practices: telling stories, building relationships, structuring teams, strategizing, and acting.[15] Put simply, our role as organizers is to build an arena in which everyday people can lead. This is something many DHRC members have put into practice, organizing around disaster recovery in communities across the country and at many different levels of government. These successes are at the core of this section, which represents an effort to help advocates replicate their successful strategies in new disaster-impacted or disaster-vulnerable communities.

This is not a step-by-step guide to organizing. The following information is designed to provide a quick, baseline understanding of organizing and supplement existing organizing models with lessons learned and best practices identified by those working to improve disaster recovery and resilience in communities across the country and at the local, state, and national levels.

Power, Self Interest, and One-to-Ones

As with any organizing effort, it is important to start by analyzing the power structure within disaster response, recovery, and resilience in your community, state, or across the country. All organizing is centered around power – who has it and who does not. The task before us is to build enough power to create real, systemic, long-lasting change in everyday people's lives.[16]

Power is simply defined as the ability to act. Most people are conditioned to believe that power is bad and therefore they remain powerless. This perception only benefits those who already have power. Their interests, or put another way, what they need or want, are prioritized and met, and they hold the resources, people, money, or knowledge to achieve those interests. Organizing begins when we reclaim the concept of power and intentionally shift that power to change the systems that harm ourselves, our loved ones, and our communities.[17]

To begin making a change, we need to understand what power we already have and then work to build more. Identifying existing connections and relationships can make it clear where the policymaking power currently exists and where it needs to be focused. This can be done by using a power map. Think about who has the funding, knowledge, political authority, and political attention to address the disaster-related issue

you are working to change. Power is constantly shifting and changing, so you should reflect on and update your power map as you progress through your work.

The information needed to create a power map can be varied, and organizers should pursue it wherever it exists. DHRC members have successfully engaged policymakers at federal agencies, community members in small and large groups, policy experts at national organizations, and others. Some organizations fielded surveys to understand the breadth and severity of community neglect, existing disaster needs, and experiences with government assistance programs. Some organizations reviewed emergency management contracts to find financial connections between disaster recovery-related contractors and elected officials.

Organizers in disaster-impacted communities should not underestimate the high level of deference paid to emergency management and community development professionals by policymakers. Policymakers tend to rely on emergency management consultants, government employees, and appointees in deciding what to do. As a result, power mapping in the disaster and resilience space may be more complicated than in other issue areas, involving multiple departments, consultants, and professionals.

Power mapping also includes recording where other organizations are already doing the work. In many communities, this information and expertise already exists. Lean on your allies in this space to get a better understanding of how power operates.

Once you have a good understanding of the existing power landscape, you can work to build the power you need to bring about change. Power is a product of relationships. If we have a strong network of reciprocal relationships, we build power and can create change. The process of creating these relationships begins with understanding self-interest, defined as that which is important to me. Our self-interest comes from our customs, attitudes, beliefs, assumptions, and values. Self-interest is what moves us all and compels us to act. To start, we need to answer the question, "what do I care so deeply about that I am willing to fight for it?"

Once we know what our answer to this question is, we can begin to build relationships with others who hold a similar interest. This ensures that our relationships are not extractive, and we are working hand-in-hand with the community to achieve a common goal. To do this, organizers use one-on-one conversations. These conversations are deeply intentional and are hard to start, but necessary to build or deepen a relationship, understand the other person's self-interest through their storytelling, and discover common ground where you can begin building toward change.

Organizers must remain nonjudgemental and approach the conversation with curiosity, always listening out for the hint of a story that can lead to the discovery of self-interest and then bravely asking deep and insightful questions.

BEST PRACTICES

- Conduct power mapping with an emphasis on local knowledge and local political realities, as well as state and national trends.
- Contact like-minded organizations at local, state, or national levels to avoid reinventing the wheel regarding institutional or program expertise.
- Preserve institutional and programmatic knowledge for your own use and for other groups during future disasters.
- Stay alert to the needs of organizations at different levels. If needed, serve as a conduit for bringing knowledge about local situations to state and federal levels, and sharing program and policy expertise from state and national entities to local ones.

STRATEGIES AND EXAMPLES

- Collaborate with local, state, and national organizations to create a larger power map to coordinate efforts at various scales.
- Create a power map repository to provide examples of power maps to other organizations in different areas of the country.
- Identify allies in the emergency management community to provide feedback on your power map. This inside knowledge and technical experience can provide a richer level of detail and ensure that targets for policy education have been appropriately identified.

Education

"We spent a whole month just teaching about what CDBG-DR is. People were educated on these programs so they could not be fooled by officials." – CHRISHELLE PALAY, BUT NEXT TIME PROJECT, HOUSTON, TX AT THE DHR CONVENING.

Knowledge is power. In the disaster and resilience context, knowledge means several things: knowledge of how FEMA and HUD programs operate, specific needs in a community, emergency management response and recovery principles, and how federal assistance flows to local and state governments, individuals and households, and private companies after disasters, among other things.

Knowing how disaster recovery programs operate allows disaster survivors to better access available assistance, understand the systemic barriers to a complete and equitable recovery, share compelling stories, and educate policymakers on policy improvements. Knowing the experiences of disaster survivors helps survivors and organizers work together to identify policy solutions and strategies to benefit the community. Any organizing efforts conducted without a full understanding of these issues or the on-the-ground experiences of disaster survivors can risk slowing the recover process or worsening outcomes.

BEST PRACTICES

- Provide the impacted community with updated information on disaster impacts and assistance programs.
- Listen to disaster survivors when they identify gaps in the disaster recovery system and inform your organizing strategy in response.
- Cohost train-the-trainer events with legal aid organizations on legal issues regarding disaster recovery.
- Work with local organizations to facilitate relationships with experts in different aspects of disaster-related law and policy.
- Work to identify good (collaborative) actors and flag bad (extractive) actors.

STRATEGIES AND EXAMPLES

- Hold community education sessions to arm disaster impacted individuals with knowledge on FEMA, HUD, state, and local disaster assistance programs. This should be conducted with an eye towards helping individuals in crisis navigate purposefully obtuse systems.
- Create a knowledge-sharing network with a list serve or regular virtual or in person meetings to ensure allied organizations work in the same direction and disaster survivors help drive decision-making.
- Conduct formal or informal surveys of disasters survivors to help organizers gather critical information on the needs and impacts of disasters.
- National organizations can create templates and materials related to disaster recovery and resilience that can be easily repurposed by state and local organizations.

REBUILD THE BOOT

The Disaster Justice Network (DJN) is a volunteer network of community leaders, faith leaders, advocates, activists, practitioners, researchers, and students. Together, they share critical information that is not easily accessed about the disaster recovery process and weave together environmental justice and disaster expertise to reform our broken disaster housing recovery system.

In response to the coastal construction following Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, Gustaf, Ike, Issacs, Laura, Delta, and Ida, DJN has launched Rebuild the Boot, a coast-wide campaign to encourage resilient rebuilding. With a hands-on approach to education, DJN shares information with communities in Louisiana about proven, resilient techniques to build and re-build. DJN also hosts tool libraries and hands-on demonstrations to support mutual aid. Ultimately, creating a more resilient community "saves our homes, our culture, and our Louisiana," said DJN.

"Rebuilding the Boot" is a public education campaign through which the DJN seeks to share information that can help communities learn how to use proven resilient techniques to build and re-build in a way that protects communities from future disasters. DJN provides technical information on the best ways to repair and build resilient roofing, elevate homes, deal with mold and moisture, and floodproof homes while conducting disaster-related repairs.

Read more about the Rebuild the Boot campaign here.

Serving Direct Needs

"We can't see someone in crisis and ignore that person because we are working on a campaign. We need to help with immediate needs while also connecting folks to solutions." – ANDREANECIA MORRIS, HousingLOUISIANA, NEW ORLEANS, LA AT THE DHR CONVENING.

In the immediate days following a disaster, the primary goal must be to ensure that every disaster survivor's urgent needs are met – whether through governmental assistance, volunteer organizations, nonprofit organizations, or via mutual aid. While organizing can occur simultaneously, it is important to ensure that community members are safe in the immediate aftermath of a disaster.

One of the most important conclusions drawn from the DHR convening was that organizations must be honest about their ability to provide direct assistance to community members. Different organizations do different things and have different strengths. One organization may be skilled at providing direct assistance to households and others may be skilled at organizing or media outreach. When possible, organizations that have a similar self-interest but that address different aspects of community care should partner with one another to maximize their effectiveness.

Organizers need to know and understand that pre-disaster plans may need to change or be delayed to ensure that the immediate needs of disaster survivors can be met. National organizations should remain flexible and communicate directly with their partners at the local and state levels to ensure that the time is right for broader policy outreach and organizing work.

WHAT IS A RESILIENCE HUB?

Resilience Hubs are community-facing facilities that support neighborhood residents, coordinate communication, and distribute resources during disasters, including first aid equipment, home repair equipment, batteries, fans, water, food, and other emergency needs. Hubs provide an opportunity for organizers to effectively work at the intersection of community resilience, emergency management, climate change mitigation, and social equity, while also providing opportunities for communities to become more self-determining, socially connected, and successful before, during, and after disasters.

Resilience Hubs can meet these goals by utilizing a trusted physical space, such as a community center, recreation facility, or multifamily housing building, as well as the surrounding infrastructure, such as a vacant lot, community park, or local business. To serve as a Resilience Hub, a community-serving facility will generally require a series of upgrades to ensure that the facility meets the daily needs identified by community members, while also being able to provide critical services in the event of a disruption, often including:

- Access to electricity, heating, and cooling.
- Access to basic health and medical supplies.
- Access to food, water, and sometimes shelter.
- Access to tools and resources.
- Information, communication infrastructure, and a trusted set of "Hub managers" to streamline information sharing.
- Logistical coordination with partner groups that provide aid and post-disruption support.

Upgrades can range in complexity and cost. Some may be as simple as provisioning additional materials, whereas others may be as sophisticated as installing hybrid resilience power solutions. While upgrades and services carry additional capital and operating expense for the facility, these investments can generate financial, sustainability, and social returns not only for the facility, but also for the surrounding community.

You can learn more about community hubs and how to create one in your neighborhood with these guides from the Urban Sustainability Directors Network and Shareable.

RESILIENCE HUBS IN ACTION

Formed during Hurricane Harvey, West Street Recovery (WSR) is a grassroots organization that uses the disaster recovery process as an opportunity to build community power. WSR works to shift resources and decision-making to flood survivors and frontline communities because the people most harmed by storms are also the ones who best understand what can protect them in the future.

The Northeast Action Collective (NAC) began in 2018 as a group of community members who came together to improve environmental conditions and increase the quality of life in their Northeast Houston Neighborhoods. NAC envisions a world where we all have access to communities of care where directly impacted people have social and political power.

Like many low-income communities and communities of color, members of WSR and NAC were hardest hit by disaster but had the least resources to recover. Often, these communities are completely cut off from official Houston aid centers during disasters.

Both of these powerful organizations came together to create a chain of Community Resilience Hubs throughout their communities. They partnered with Dr. Robert Bullard and the Bullard Center for Environmental and Climate Justice at Texas Southern University to bring their vision to fruition. Utilizing a patchwork of grants and the Biden administration's Justice40 Initiative, which allocates 40% of certain federal climate, clean energy, and affordable and sustainable housing programs to underserved and marginalized communities, WSR and NAC were able to bring their vision to life.

"Whether it's a heat wave in July and August, whether it's a flood as a result of a hurricane, these hubs will serve multiple purposes and will make our community safer, healthier, stronger, and more powerful when it comes to speaking," said Bullard.

Read more about Community Resilience Hubs here.

BEST PRACTICES

- Before a disaster, identify roles and responsibilities of different organizations with a history of collaboration in your community. Who will focus on food? Electricity? Disability-related needs? Create a system to keep in communication in the aftermath of a disaster.
- Ensure that the assistance being provided is catalogued and that any emerging issues are recognized and recorded. Document unmet needs and the failure of assistance programs to serve households.
- Maintain connections with assisted households and, when in alignment with their self-interest, move them towards action. Listen and follow where the community needs the work to go. Before a disaster, larger organizations should identify community groups that will likely be at the front lines of a disaster in a specific area – work to support their capacity and plan for pre- and post-disaster work.
- Facilitate connections and provide technical assistance so directly-impacted organizations and people can attend state-led emergency management and Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD) calls to get information that can inform organizing strategies.
- Facilitate connections and provide technical assistance so directly-impacted individuals can attend legislative hearings and meet with policymakers to share their stories.
- Build partnerships with legal aid organizations and work with them to identify and track unmet needs and barriers to assistance. Use this information to reach consensus with stakeholders.
- Before a disaster, build relationships with state and local organizations that will likely respond directly to the needs of disaster survivors. Maintain those relationships even if no disaster is imminent.
- National organizations should quickly help on-the-ground organizations secure the necessary funding for their disaster response. These funds should be distributed to community-based organizations with as few middlemen and burdensome requirements as possible.

EXAMPLES AND TACTICS

- National and state organizations can work with organizations on the ground and directly-impacted individuals to raise funds to assist household-level recovery.
- Create a series of resilience hubs to help community members access first aid equipment, home repair equipment, batteries, fans, water, food, and other emergency needs.
- Create a tool library where individuals working to repair their homes can access tools to do so.
- Create pamphlets or flyers to share information on recovery strategies and techniques.
- Use social media to share important recovery information to community members.

Community Involvement

"We have been dealing with flooding and tornadoes. We have been organizing other organizations and trying to get additional state funding for disaster housing. We were successful in 2023 and 2024, but in the last legislative session someone in our community was asking why everyone in the community wasn't down at the Capitol to demand more. There are so many barriers for folks to get involved." – ADRIENNE BUSH, HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS COALITION OF KENTUCKY, FRANKFORT, KY AT THE DHR CONVENING.

What do we mean by disaster survivors?

While disasters impact everyone, Black, Latino, and Indigenous people, low-income communities, immigrants, individuals with disabilities, and other historically marginalized communities with the fewest resources to rebuild are hit particularly hard. Due to lack of wealth, income, education, and power, these communities face the steepest path to recovery.

Despite the clear need, federal efforts frequently leave these disaster survivors without the assistance needed to get back on their feet and their communities less resilient to future disasters. The result is a disaster housing recovery framework that exacerbates and reinforces racial, income, and accessibility inequities at each stage of response and recovery.

To achieve a disaster recovery and resilience system that protects everyone, those facing the most significant challenges before and after a disaster must be directly involved and empowered to make decisions about how their community recovers.

How to involve disaster survivors

A strong point of consensus at the DHR convening was that disaster survivors must be at the center of reform efforts. Their voices should be uplifted, their immediate needs addressed, and their lived experience and local knowledge used to drive strategy and tactics when pursuing disaster recovery and resilience reform. This can be easier said than done. When done poorly, such efforts risk tokenizing or exploiting those most impacted by disasters – something that hinders our collective efforts. When done well, efforts will truly reflect the desires and needs of a disaster-impacted community.

To ensure that our relationships are truly reciprocal, we must understand the self-interests of the people we are working with. A good test of whether we are extracting from a community is to ask yourself, "is this action in line with this individual's self-interest?" If yes, great! Take action and build shared power. If not, you are using someone.

We also always need to take our lead from impacted people. Disaster survivors are experts on disaster recovery and resilience. Directly impacted people are smart, autonomous, know what they need, and know their community the best. If we want to fix our broken disaster housing recovery system, we need to put directly impacted people in the driver's seat.

At the most basic level, organizing efforts must be accessible to disaster survivors. This includes ensuring that appropriate audio/visual, close captioning, and translation and interpretation services are available when holding meetings to ensure that individuals with disabilities and individuals with Low English Proficiency can actively participate. Accessibility also means providing services such as childcare, dinner or lunch for longer meetings, and using locations that are physically accessible to people with disabilities. Ensuring greater accessibility helps prevent community involvement and engagement from being extractive. An extractive approach to organizing requires a community to give up additional financial and/or emotional resources in order to provide you with the expertise needed to drive disaster recovery and reform efforts.

Meetings and resources should be planned around the needs and preferences of disaster survivors. In some areas of the country, there may not be a history of large group meetings, necessitating small group meetings at the neighborhood block level, as opposed to larger neighborhood-wide meetings. Organizations should remember if disaster survivors are not present at organizing activities, it is not because disaster survivors "don't exist" or "do not care" but it is likely because the outreach and involvement strategies being deployed are insufficient or are not meeting the needs or preferences of the community.

Centering disaster survivors also requires an organization to ensure that impacted individuals hold positions of power within our own organizations and during recovery and reform efforts. This was described by some DHR convening participants as "treating disaster survivors as consultants." This can take the form of an official requirement in an organization's governing documents to set aside a share of board seats to be held by directly impacted individuals, grant funds provided directly to disaster survivors to use in whatever way they think would be best, or ensuring disaster-impacted people have representation on advisory boards or long-term recovery oversight bodies.

An additional simple strategy for preventing extractive outreach and involvement when organizing for disaster recovery and resilience reform can be to provide direct financial compensation for disaster survivor involvement. Compensating disaster survivors for their expertise and participation demonstrates the value they bring, puts more resources into a community, and can help address ongoing disaster-related needs. Even if organizations do not have the resources to compensate disaster survivors for their participation, they should ensure that the cost of travel, lodging, and related expenses are covered, at a minimum.

By focusing on accessibility, the needs and preferences of disaster survivors, and providing real power and authority to them at the organizational and civic levels, disaster survivors can be centered and uplifted in a real and positive way during disaster recovery and resilience reform efforts.

BEST PRACTICES

- Ensure disaster survivors hold direct leadership roles in organizations and receive the training necessary to excel in them.
- Ensure all activities are accessible to individuals with disabilities and individuals with Low English Proficiency.
- Work to ensure all public disaster-related advisory boards have significant disaster survivor representation.
- Provide childcare, food, and other services to facilitate involvement in organizing activities.
- Compensate disaster survivors for their time and expertise. Ensure organizing efforts are aligned with the self-interest of disaster survivors.
- National organizations should prioritize working with state and local organizations with significant disaster survivor representation.

STRATEGIES AND EXAMPLES

- Reach out to disability-led organizations and learn more about accessibility best practices. Many organizations in the disability justice space act as accessibility consultants. Work with them to ensure everyone can engage in your work.
- Create a standard policy for compensating disaster survivors who contribute to your work to ensure consistency across your organization when working with disaster-impacted individuals.
- Work with legal aid organizations to update your organization's governing documents to ensure a share of board seats are allocated for directly-impacted individuals.

Trauma-Informed Outreach and Involvement

An ever-present theme during the DHR convening was the importance of trauma-informed practices – both in the context of working in disaster-impacted communities and when working with different organizations.

Mental health impacts of disasters can vary depending on the type and magnitude of a disaster, the age, gender, race, or ethnicity of the disaster survivor in question, and pre-existing mental health issues. Numerous studies have sought to identify the rate at which these issues occur, but generally one can expect that at least half of all disaster survivors will experience increased or prolonged stress for a length of time following a disaster. Up to a quarter of disaster survivors may experience severe mental health issues. While these mental health impacts can fade over time, between 10% and 30% of disaster survivors will develop chronic long-term problems.[18] The potential for long-term impacts is increased based on the level of hardship in recovering afterward.

Organizing for disaster recovery and resilience reform can be uplifting, but it can also be traumatizing – especially for those who experienced the disaster directly.

Disaster-related trauma and mental health issues do not just impact disaster survivors themselves, but also the individuals who work with them. Those working on the ground can experience the brunt of these impacts, but secondary trauma and mental health impacts can occur in individuals assisting from afar and those beginning their work during the disaster recovery process.

All activities should be conducted in a trauma-informed fashion in line with the latest developments in mental health research and practice. This does not mean that organizations must prevent disaster survivors from sharing their stories or prevent them from being a part of emotionally charged situations. Instead, organizers should account for the high prevalence of trauma in disaster-impacted communities in their programs and ensure that participation options align with survivors' self-interest. In addition, organizations should do what they can to ensure that members and staff have the space and training necessary to process and recover from secondary and direct disaster-related trauma.

Events or activities to deal with disaster-related trauma can range from having meetings facilitated by mental health experts to simply hosting a BBQ to celebrate a victory or the conclusion of an effort or campaign. DHRC members have found that providing space for fun and relaxation can be a useful organizing strategy and way to curb burnout.

Note: This section only scratches the surface of this important topic. Trauma-informed efforts are critical to disaster recovery and our work to achieve reforms. Readers can learn more from the work of DHRC member The Neutral Ground Collective and access resources released by the Substanc Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and the Climate Psychiatry Alliance for additional information. The Disaster Distress Hotline is coordinated by SAMHSA and operates to connect disaster survivors with mental health assistance (1-800-985-5990, disasterdistress.samhsa.gov).

BEST PRACTICES

- Ensure all programming and activities are conducted in a trauma-informed manner.
- Make connections and help allied organizations facilitate connections with mental health professionals and groups to facilitate trauma awareness and assistance.

STRATEGIES AND EXAMPLES

- Recruit mental health professionals to join your organization or coalition to ensure trauma and psychological health are fully integrated into planning activities.
- Partner with mental health organizations to hold workshops for community members and others.

- Partner with mental health organizations to train organizations, community members, and partners in post-disaster mental health best practices.
- Have fun! Host a BBQ, movie night, bonfire, or some event to give community members and organization members and staff the ability to relax in the midst of disaster-related trauma and work.
- Make information on mental health and trauma-informed practices available to other organizations via fact sheets and toolkits. Help share best practices across the country.

Tactics

Different tactics (i.e., activities undertaken as part of a larger strategy to accomplish a goal) can achieve different results. Individuals working in specific post-disaster locations and periods of time will better understand when and where to deploy a tactic better than the drafters of this guide. As a result, this section outlines multiple successful tactics taken by DHRC member organizations, but it does not detail when they should be deployed – that will be up to specific organizers and the community they are working to support. What we *can* be certain of – as any organizer who has just held their tenth half-empty public meeting or dropped yet another soon-to-be unanswered letter to policymakers in the mailbox – is that tactics need to change when they cease to work.

Escalation is the key to ensuring that the different tactics used are the most effective and build upon one another. Escalation is steadily increasing the pressure of your tactics on the person who has the power to create the change you seek. It is rare that you will be successful at changing a policy or system the first time you act. Thus, escalation is necessary for success. The individual who has the power to make change regarding the issue you care about may try to wait out the different tactics you employ in your campaign. However, a well-organized campaign anticipates this and knows when to strategically up the pressure with new and different tactics. In practice, this might look like asking an elected official to collaborate and have a meeting. If this does not work, an escalation might be flooding their office with letters. If that doesn't yield results, an escalation might be having a press conference outside their office.

During the DHR convening, one participant shared a conversation they had had with an elected official. When asked what the most effective outreach strategy would be, they said "take up as much of my time as possible." These tactics collectively can assist in that task.

After Action Reports

After Action Reports (AARs) are often created by emergency management offices and departments after disasters to review their response and impact, highlight lessons learned, and identify shortages in capacity. Unfortunately, these reports are very rarely made available to the public. Because emergency management too often overlooks the needs of households with low incomes and their communities, existing AARs conducted by state and local governments and federal agencies may not fully include their experiences and needs, nor identify how they were left behind. Organizations should consider creating AARs of their own to highlight these experiences and remind policymakers of the gaps in response, recovery, and resilience efforts.

Once the AAR is written, publish it on your organization's website, reference it at press conferences and public hearings, and send it to elected officials and emergency management offices and departments.

AFTER ACTION REPORTS

AARs commonly include the following sections:

Executive Summary

This can include:

i An introduction to the disaster in question

ii The geographic area covered by the AAR

iii Key findings and focus areas of the report

iv How the report should be used moving forward

Analysis of Core Capabilities

Core capabilities is a term used by emergency managers to describe the activities they conduct. These can range from cybersecurity to housing recovery. Core capabilities are organized by "mission areas" that include Prevention, Protection, Mitigation, Response, and Recovery. You can get a full listing and descriptions of core capabilities here. AARs commonly identify what capabilities were used during the response and recovery from a disaster and identify how successful they were.

While you may not be privy to all the things that your city or state did in the aftermath of a disaster, you are probably aware of multiple problems or failures that occurred. Identify these by core capabilities and rate how policymakers and government officials did.

Scope and Methodology

Use this section to identify how you gathered information – did you interview community members? Did you have a public meeting? List everything you did here. This can be as structured as a community survey (described in the "research" section of this toolkit) or as simple as a series of casual conversations with community members.

Observations

Here you can list out different observations you collected by whether they showed a strength, a best practice, an area for improvement, or an innovation. Describe the different observations you collected and indicate what needs to be done about each one specifically.

An example might be that you identified that an evacuation location did not have sufficient shelter from the sun, harming older community residents sensitive to heat. A course of action (COA) that could be taken by your state or local government might be to ensure that evacuation locations have tents or cooling centers located nearby.

A reminder: sometimes the state or local government gets things right – you should include these successes, too! Highlighting successes make it more likely that success will occur during the next disaster. It can also ensure that your AAR will not simply be ignored by policymakers and emergency management professionals.

An example of an AAR from the City of Austin can be found here.

An AAR template from FEMA can be downloaded here.

Community Tours

One of the most effective strategies to educate elected officials and administrative officials and turn them into disaster recovery and resilience reform champions is to help them see the impact of disasters firsthand. Tours can also be a big draw for senators and representatives who are always looking for opportunities to meet constituents. In the disaster recovery and resilience context, it can be hard for them to deny the need for reform when they are looking directly at the cost of inaction and speaking with an individual who has been harmed.

These community tours can occur at community resilience centers, resource hubs, damaged and destroyed houses, or homes at risk of future disaster damage – wherever it makes sense to accompany a disaster survivor's story with a visual. Organizations should be sure that disaster survivors are compensated for the use of their property if someone's home is used as the setting. As always, it is important to ensure that anyone who may be featured in photos or videos, or scheduled to speak or give remarks, is aware of how their story may be used. Always get consent from disaster survivors to use their stories in public material.

Tours are not only an important way to underscore the need for policy change, but they can result in more immediate access to assistance for the featured disaster survivor or community. In the past, DHRC members have hosted events at the homes of disaster survivors, only to have authorities show up several days later to rectify the issue. It is important to emphasize that the disaster survivor or home in question is just one of many individuals who have been impacted or are at risk of a disaster – they all deserve expedient and sufficient assistance.

COMMUNITY TOURS

Getting Started

- Choose a time and location for your event. Ensure common safety standards, especially for any events held indoors, by providing masks and hand sanitizer for all attendees. If the site contains flood waters or loose electrical wires, be sure to prevent individuals from straying into them.
- Recruit other organizations to host the tour with you; even if the event is at your member's property, other local groups can be on hand to support your call for urgent action by policymakers.
- Contact your elected officials' offices and ask to speak with their scheduler. Explain that you work with an organization dedicated to disaster recovery and resilience and that you would like to host the official and their staff in your community so they can meet residents and better understand what the impact of the disaster looks like.
- If they tell you the elected official is not available, consider inviting a staff member to come in their place.

Sharing the Event

- Promote your event on social media and your organization's website if it is open to the public. Include details about the time and place and how community members can engage from home if they are unable to attend in person.
- Work with your elected official's press secretary to coordinate media contacts in advance of the site visit. Use the event and the presence of your local official to raise awareness of the need for equitable disaster recovery and increased community resilience.
- Task a member of your team with taking pictures during the event. Make sure to share on social media using pertinent hashtags and thank the elected official and their staff for joining.

Planning Logistics

- Work with community members and leaders to identify residents who would be interested in sharing their stories during the event.
- In the days leading up to the event, ensure any organizations you have coordinated with know the plan for the day and consider sending a site map or other materials to your elected official's office if there is not a clear meeting place. Consider reaching out to any offices that declined your invitation to again invite them to the community tour.

- Plan a clear path around the property or neighborhood for your tour.
- Help policymakers understand the damage to the property, the impact on residents, and whether they have been able to access government assistance. Share what the homes on this property mean to the larger community.

After the Event

- Send an email thanking the elected official and their staff. Be sure to include answers to any questions that were raised. Ask them to continue to support disaster recovery system reforms.

Advisory Councils

Disaster recovery and resilience organizers are often asked to participate on boards or bodies that plan for disasters or distribute assistance in disaster-impacted communities. Organizations should work to continuously identify opportunities to place directly impacted individuals on boards and advisory councils to further elevate community needs and voices in those spaces. Even if a council or board may not be directly linked to disaster recovery or may not seem to have any influence over disaster recovery and resilience policy, members may be provided with important information regarding how assistance programs are being conducted that can directly inform organizing and policy education strategies.

At the DHR convening, one organization shared that they had helped members of a disaster-impacted community gain representation on a flood advisory board. That board was subsequently able to lower flood insurance premiums in their community, allowing for many community members to access flood insurance for the first time. Organizations should remain aware of any opportunity to help allies and community members gain access to similar boards.

Additional Strategies

The strategies listed above are not meant to be an all-inclusive list of activities available to organizations working in the disaster impacted space. While media-specific strategies will be discussed in the next section of this toolkit, organizations should remain aware that many strategies are available to them as they educate policymakers about the need for disaster recovery and resiliency reforms.

These include (among others):

- Canvassing
- House parties
- Creative actions (die-in, Christmas caroling)
- Campaign meetings
- Testifying and packing the room
- Thank you cards to decision-makers
- Speaking at religious communal meetings

Build Connections to Emergency Managers

Information and access are often the most important currency during the disaster response and recovery process. Being "in the room" can often be more useful to policy education efforts than a six-month campaign. However, in the immediate aftermath of a disaster and during disaster recovery, it can be incredibly difficult to build the necessary relationships with emergency management and disaster recovery professionals to gain such access. As a result, organizations are encouraged to reach out and connect with such individuals before a disaster occurs.

Emergency managers have a difficult job. At the local level, their offices often have low budgets and are understaffed. They struggle to convince policymakers to invest in robust disaster response and recovery systems. In many rural areas of the country, a county may have just one emergency manager to lead disaster preparedness activities.

The lack of capacity within some local emergency management departments may lead to these departments being subsumed or inexorably intertwined with local and county police departments. Organizations should use their best judgement regarding outreach should this be the case.

Regardless, organizations should work to build relationships with individuals working in emergency management departments and offices – whether this is the chief or department lead, or the individual in charge of distributing assistance to individuals and households. When reaching out, emphasize your connection to the community and your ability to make the professional's life easier by facilitating direct connections to their community. Recent publications throughout the emergency management community have focused on community engagement, but many professionals may not know how to accomplish this task. Present yourself as the solution to this problem.

At the state and national level, emergency management departments have larger staffs, although underfunding is still common. Different offices within a department may be competing among themselves for resources or attention, leading to fragmentation among individuals working on mitigation, resilience, and disaster response or recovery. Organizations seeking to build relationships with state and federal agencies and departments may have better luck finding emergency management staff who want to improve their agencies response for households with low incomes. These individuals are often attempting to foster internal change within their agencies, allowing organizations an opportunity to externally support that change.

Many conversations about housing and civil rights in the emergency management community at the state and local level revolve around the goal of avoiding litigation. Many emergency management offices have a central concern that their programs are not equitable and that they have significant liability to lawsuits filed by advocates and activist groups. Cautious emergency managers may accept offers made by community-based organizations to work with state and local emergency management agencies as a way to lessen the risk of a lawsuit.

By working pre-disaster to create a power map and pursue connections and involvement with professional emergency management staff, organizations can become go-to consultants in disaster planning efforts and become vital partners during disaster response and recovery.

Not only does the cultivation of these relationships result in greater access, but it also makes policy education easier in the aftermath of a disaster. Having a pre-existing relationship can help make your requests, challenges, and disagreements to the conventional way of performing disaster recovery and resilience less "personal" and more "professional." This leads to greater receptibility on the part of emergency management.

BEST PRACTICES

- Build relationships with emergency management professionals in your area. Identify areas of collaboration pre-disaster and discuss how best to assist them in the aftermath of disasters. Maintain these contacts for use during disasters.
- Meet with state VOAD chapters in your area.

STRATEGIES AND EXAMPLES

- Invite a local emergency manager out to lunch or a happy hour and discuss community preparedness.

- Often emergency managers are heavily connected to area fire departments. When making initial connections in this space, find the best messenger. A firefighter or person with an emergency medical service background may be the best person to carry your message when making initial connections.
- Set up recurring calls to touch base and share updates on what each organization is doing.
- Host a series of outreach events allowing emergency managers to discuss different aspects of their roles and share the latest information on assistance programs and preparedness.

Fostering Collaboration with Partners

"We are the change, groups like this coming together being powerful can make the change." – DANA JONES, NORTHEAST ACTION COLLECTIVE, HOUSTON, TX AT THE DHR CONVENING.

People have a tendency to collaborate when confronted with dramatic situations like disasters. During the early years of emergency management as a profession and subject of research, practitioners incorrectly assumed that disaster survivors would be panicked, violent, and greedy in the immediate aftermath of an event. Studies have shown the opposite (although this stereotype too often governs how some law enforcement departments – including those active during Hurricane Katrina – respond to disasters).[19] Individuals impacted by disasters want to work together to assist one another. In this environment, old perceptions and biases can be put aside – albeit temporarily – in favor of the greater good. This important trait makes collaboration a natural tendency among groups working in the post-disaster space.

This work cannot occur – nor would this document exist – without collaboration between groups composed of and working on behalf of disaster survivors. It is *essential*. Yet collaboration can be difficult in the weeks, months, and years following a disaster. New, spontaneously created groups and organizations may emerge from neighbors and community members who rightfully feel that they are being left behind during disaster recovery. Organizations that may not have a history of conducting direct assistance or organizing may be forced into these activities by the severity of the situation. Tensions may emerge between groups that had favorable relationships prior to a disaster or reemerge between groups that had smoldering pre-disaster conflicts. Everyone will be tired, burnt out, and experiencing primary or secondary mental health impacts of the disaster.

While collaboration can be among the most difficult parts of disaster recovery and resilience reform, it can also be the most exciting, rewarding, and useful.

Finding Consensus

The first step in any collaboration effort is to formulate your organizational goals and craft a list of potential allies working in your area. These organizations do not have to be groups focused on serving low-income households, affordable housing, or even disaster and resilience. The strength of any collaborative effort is created by bringing diverse organizations and individuals who possess different skillsets and expertise together to work towards a common goal. What brings these disparate groups together are areas of consensus, where, despite vastly different organizational goals, groups can benefit from each other in support of these efforts.

Given the intersectional nature of housing and disaster recovery and resilience, a wide variety of organizations, from professional infrastructure associations to mental health collectives, can find consensus areas and work in tandem with each other.

Focus, Realism, and Bad Actors

While the broad intersectionality of a disaster does create important opportunities for unique collaborations, efforts such as these can create challenges that groups must navigate – namely, focus drift, an unrealistic assessment of capacity, and the presence of bad actors.

The utility of working with groups from different fields, with different training and expertise, can also bring with it a risk of organizations drifting away from the consensus areas that have driven initial collaboration. Environmental organizations unsurprisingly focus on environmental issues. Organizations at the neighborhood level focus on issues that are being experienced by their neighbors. As a result, coalition partners may not be on the same page, fracturing and diluting the strength of collective efforts.

The specific response to straying focus on the part of a coalition depends on the personalities, politics, and history of the organizations involved. However, clear and honest communication is often the best way to recognize and address the issue. Continuously emphasizing consensus areas, describing where your organization is coming from and asking participating organizations to do the same can help prevent surprises during collaborative efforts. These conversations must be held with respect and empathy for them to be helpful. Even if an organization decides that it no

longer wants to collaborate on a specific effort, it serves no purpose to make them feel burned or wronged; if anything, it could become a hindrance to your efforts later during a campaign.

An additional aspect of collaboration is what participants at the DHR convening labelled "honesty." In this context, honesty refers to avoiding what can sometimes be a powerful impulse: inflating your own or your organization's capacity, and then subsequently failing to follow through with some responsibility charged to your organization during a collaborative effort. As referenced earlier in this section, some groups may be very experienced at conducting one type of activity, some at others. This is not a value judgement, but a statement of fact. Issues can arise when an organization working in a collaborative fashion inflates or falsely implies it may have the ability to coordinate or lead some activity or portion of the effort when in fact it does not have the experience, personnel, funds, or time necessary to accomplish this aim.

DHRC members operating at the local levels highlighted this as a trend they see when larger, outside organizations without a community presence begin work in a disaster impacted area. As a result, organizations should host direct, honest discussions among members of a collaborative effort regarding their own capacity and the capacity of participating organizations. State and national organizations must be clear and direct about the amount of capacity and expertise available to avoid raising unrealistic expectations or taking on a function that is not sustainable. Most importantly, national organizations should take their lead from organizations working on the ground.

While the spirit of collaboration can require that organizations assume best intentions during post-disaster collaborative efforts, disasters do bring out "bad actors" – organizations seeking to extract money, property, or control over disaster-impacted communities. Organizations should be aware of the presence of these types of organizational actors.

Upon confirmation of an organization being a bad actor, organizers should inform allies at the state and national level of their existence. Because state and national organizations are not directly on the ground in a disaster-impacted community, they may not be aware or realize the extent of the bad actors' harmful actions. By keeping partners informed, organizations can ensure that state and national organizations do not inadvertently assist in supporting bad actors or spreading their efforts to other disaster-impacted areas. Likewise, organizations aware of bad actions from groups in the past should inform organizations at the local level of their past actions.

Creating relationships prior to a disaster is the easiest way to ensure that collaborators can maintain focus on areas of consensus, be aware of each other's capacity, and avoid inadvertently assisting the efforts of bad actors in a post-disaster community. Forming good working relationships and cultivating honesty among organizations must be a priority for disaster recovery and resilience reform efforts prior to a potential disaster.

Fiscal Support

Effective collaboration can help overcome funding challenges for disaster housing policy education and organizing by pooling resources and capacity, allowing efforts to reach beyond the scope of many organizations' individual activities. However, the lack of funding can hinder collaboration among organizations, and working collectively to raise funds can provide critical support for inter-organizational cooperation.

This toolkit does not directly address philanthropic outreach by organizations in the disaster recovery and resilience reform space. Regardless, in the context of collaboration, differences in funding needs can be a point of contention or a source of unity. Many DHRC organizations at the state and national level, including NLIHC, provide local organizations in disaster-impacted areas with emergency funding for organizing, policy education, and direct assistance activities.

When done correctly, pass-through grants can help deepen collaboration, capacity, and relationships with organizations on the ground in disaster-impacted communities. However, an organization cannot simply assume that providing pass-through grants will create an effective, collaborative atmosphere. Some tips used by DHRC member organizations when providing pass-through grants include the following:

- Most philanthropic support for disaster-impacted areas occurs during the first eight months following a disaster.[20] Funders should be aware that a fiscal cliff can occur for many organizations after that time.
- Grants should be provided to organizations that demonstrate deep connections with their communities. This means organizations providing grants should pursue pre-disaster partnerships and relationships with organizations in disaster-impacted areas, ensuring that you know ahead of time who is authentically engaging in community-based work.
- Grants should be provided with the fewest strings or least amount of paperwork possible to ensure that organizations with less administrative capacity can easily access critical grants.

- Grants should not be tied to requirements to participate with the organization providing funds. These sorts of requirements can be extractive or seen as a "bribe." Forcing collaboration through funding does not create effective collective efforts. Opportunities for collaboration and support should be offered on a voluntary basis.
- Funds should be provided to a diverse array of organizations; this not only ensures that capacity is spread across a community but by aiding multiple organizations, you can avoid the perception that you are "picking winners and losers" in the post-disaster policy education and organizing space. This makes it easier for organizations that receive grants to work with organizations that may not have received one.

Long-Term Relationships

As many organizations working in and on behalf of disaster-impacted communities know, disaster recovery and resilience projects are long-term endeavors. While FEMA and VOAD organizations commonly leave disaster-impacted communities 18 months after a disaster, community-based organizations will be working on disaster recovery and resilience for many years longer. As a result, collaborations should be built with long-term goals in mind. By pooling resources and capacity, collaboration-based efforts can ensure that policy education and organizing work continues for as long as the community needs.

While the immediate needs of a community may dominate discussion and action during the period immediately following a disaster, organizations pursuing collaborative efforts should create flexible structures that will foster connections between organizations for years to follow during the short- and long-term recovery efforts.

Due to the lack of permanent authorization of HUD's long-term disaster recovery program, long-term assistance often reaches disaster-impacted communities several years after a disaster. Given the flexibility and often large amount of these long-term recovery funds, it is critical that community-based organizations ensure resources reach the most impacted disaster survivors. As long-term recovery programs continue, there will be periodic opportunities to provide input and public comment into these programs, and organizations will need to ensure that the programs are working as intended. Because of the importance of long-term resources to disaster-impacted communities, collaborations that begin in the days following a disaster will need to continue being fruitful and active throughout this longer period.

While the long-term nature of this work may be daunting, the nature of collaboration means that when one organization runs out of capacity or has to step back from disaster-related work, other organizations can step up to take its place. As discussed in the above section, by being honest with other organizations about capacity needs and gaps, organizations can navigate this process to ensure that there are consistent efforts to ensure that disaster recovery and resiliency resources reach those most in need of assistance following a disaster.

This does not mean that every organization involved in a collaborative effort needs to be working all out for the multi-year disaster recovery process. There are natural ebbs and flows. At times, there may be a flurry of activity, and at other times there may be less. What is important is that organizations working in collaborative effort continue to support and remain connected to each other throughout this period, ensuring that the coalition can fully activate when there are needs. This may simply take the form of ensuring that collaborative space continues to occur via monthly meetings, even if attendance or activity levels drop for a period, or it may take the form of prioritizing longer-term projects like after-action reports and research, with a set time to begin more day-to-day activity later.

Collaborative efforts should ensure sufficient capacity for all periods of disaster recovery and resilience efforts and memorialize preserve lessons learned for the future. Many organizations are no stranger to staff or volunteer turnover or burnout. Many organizations that were created in the immediate aftermath of a disaster may disband before disaster recovery efforts are concluded. Effective efforts require lessons learned, expertise, and information gained is sustained and accessible later. Preserving this valuable information allows groups that need to step back from the day-to-day work to stay up to date and informed about the collaborative effort and ensures future organizations do not need to "reinvent the wheel" later when efforts restart.

By collaborating with an eye towards building longer-term relationships, organizations can ensure organizations remain prepared for disaster recovery and resilience developments years after the initial disaster.

BEST PRACTICES

- Build relationships before a disaster with other organizations that have similar self-interest. These organizations do not have to be limited to those working in the same topic area as yours. Try and find areas of consensus to work on together.
- Identify what services or skills each group brings to the table and what each organization can provide after a disaster.
- Create recurring meetings to create space for collaborative, and honest, discussions – these meetings should occur before a disaster and go for as long as community need exists afterward.
- Be truthful about the capacities and expertise of each organization in the collaboration.
- National organizations should ensure that information is shared among groups and provide the space they need to work together. Provide operational capacity, as needed, to ensure collaboration occurs.
- Take examples of unique collaborations in other places to share with your coalition as a model.
- Organizations that have resources should create a standardized way to identify and provide emergency monetary support to organizations on the ground in disaster-impacted areas.
- Produce materials that link disaster-related issues with your issue area. This fosters points of consensus that can be the basis of future collaboration.
- National organizations should work to connect state-level organizations with their counterparts in different states working on similar disaster recovery and resiliency issues.

STRATEGIES AND EXAMPLES

- Create a standing working group to foster and develop relationships.
- Create a set of principles to formalize the areas of consensus among organizations you collaborate with. This document can be used to help avoid drifting priorities.
- If possible, allocate a portion of your organization's budget to support the capacity of organizations impacted by disasters. Standardize the process by which these grants are provided but ensure that they do not create a significant burden on the capacity of the receiving organization.

MEDIA AND MESSAGING

"I believe everyone has a story; no one can tell it better than you. No one can tell a disaster survivor's story better than them; telling stories gives people ownership. Too often, people in underserved communities are used to being taken advantage of, and having their stories told for them. You can't assume what people need. You must hear from people impacted to know what they need to survive."
– PASTOR GREGORY MANNING, LOUISIANA JUST RECOVERY NETWORK, NEW ORLEANS, LA AT THE DHR CONVENING.

As Kathleen Tierney noted in the book *Disasters: A Sociological Approach*, "the need to reduce disaster risks is most likely to gain widespread attention in the immediate aftermath of disaster, as policy windows that were formerly closed are forced open by those events – and particularly by the way they are framed in the media".[21] Emergency management researcher Clair Rubin noted, "certain focusing events drive changes in laws, regulations, systems, and practices. In fact, virtually all major federal laws, executive directives, programs, policies, organizational changes, and response systems have resulted from major and catastrophic disasters".[22]

A dramatic event, like a disaster, can act as a catalyst for policy change. Disasters, for all their death, destruction, and hopelessness, open policy windows that spur reform and give the community the ability to weigh in with policymakers. While not every disaster will create a wide window for such change, organizers should approach disasters as an opportunity to capture the attention of the public and policymakers, to inform them of the broken state of the country's disaster recovery and resilience system, and to educate them on how to fix it. As Dr. Tierney noted, media and messaging are central to these efforts.

Disaster recovery and resilience programs are, often purposefully, extremely complicated and convoluted. Simply stating "someone should help those people" can result in uninformed policies that end up harming the communities they are meant to protect.

An example provided by Dr. Tierney in her book illustrates this point: in the aftermath of the 1994 North Point Earthquake in Southern California, a policy window was created and the public and policymakers soon realized the need to make critical buildings, like hospitals, more resilient to earthquakes. Reacting to this pressure and messaging, California passed a law requiring hospitals to make their buildings more resilient. Those hospitals and critical care facilities that could not meet the new standard

would be demolished. The law, however, provided no additional funding for these resilient retrofits; as a result, only the most well-funded, corporate- and investor-owned hospitals could comply. Hospitals serving low-income areas and patients were unable to meet the new standards and faced demolition.[23]

This example not only shows how disaster-related policy can impact non-disaster related fields – in this case, healthcare for low-income households – but it also illustrates the inherent challenge of messaging and media work during disaster recovery and resilience policy reform efforts. Organizers must offer clear and simple illustrations of the impact of a broken disaster recovery system through the experiences of disaster survivors, while simultaneously providing detailed enough information to advance, at times, intricate policy solutions driven by the experiences of those most impacted by disasters.

Organizers can help strike this balance by elevating disaster stories and community-driven solutions to add to existing disaster narratives. This sustains media and policymakers' attention on disaster and resilience reform throughout the recovery process. By using thoughtful messaging, educating policymakers, focusing on pre-disaster planning, cultivating media contacts, creating your own media content, and elevating and assisting disaster survivors in sharing their stories, organizations can achieve the balance necessary to both sustain interest and attention to the experiences of disaster survivors, while ensuring policymakers understand the need for robust policy solutions.

Pre-Disaster Communications Plans

Anyone working in disaster recovery and resilience has read the same news article a thousand times before, though the geographic location may change: A disaster has hit a city or a country, people from all walks of life have been impacted, and assistance does not appear to be forthcoming as disaster survivors worry that they have been left behind. Recovery efforts stagnate, and many worry about what will happen the next time a disaster occurs.

This narrative, or something similar, emerges from media coverage following a disaster. Reporters like this story because it elevates the drama and struggle inherent in the disaster recovery process, but it is not nuanced enough to educate the public on the policy solutions necessary to address the problem, and it does not connect the impact of the disaster to historical and systemic racial and social inequity that worsens the disaster's impact for low-income and marginalized households.

One way to help inject the nuance into this narrative is the creation of a pre-disaster communications plan. The aftermath of a disaster is a chaotic time which can prevent thoughtful media strategies from being developed. A solution put forth during the DHR convening was the creation of pre-disaster media plans to help guide media efforts after a disaster occurs. While the specifics of a disaster may be unknown until one occurs, for many areas around the country, organizations can reasonably anticipate what types of disasters may occur, and who will be the most impacted. From these assumptions, a plan can be created outlining anticipated issues, likely policy priorities, needed tools (e.g. press releases, letters to the editor, op-eds, press conferences, etc.) and a rough timeline of how to deploy them. In addition to helping raise awareness of the need for disaster recovery and resiliency reform, drafting a media plan also ensures that an organization, or collection of organizations, adequately integrates the experiences of disaster survivors into the narrative.

COMMUNICATIONS PLAN TEMPLATE

Here is a brief description of what a strategic communications plan could look like. Remember, disaster survivors must be fully involved in the creation of this plan.

SECTION I. STRATEGY OVERVIEW

Outline Communications Objectives

Identify the specific goals you will work on after a disaster: What do you want to happen? Is it an increase in accessible assistance? A greater number of accessibility services for disaster survivors? Better resilience and mitigation measures in low-income communities?

Think back to past disasters in your area or in similar areas as if they were your own: Who was most impacted? Who received the resources needed? What would you want to have happened?

Target Audiences

Identify target audiences based on how they relate to your organization and what role they could play in the accomplishment of your goals. List them in order of importance, along with each audience's interests. This might look like:

1. The Mayor and the City Council
2. The Office of Community Development

3. Other organizations working in the space
4. Directly-impacted disaster survivors with low incomes
5. The public in the surrounding area who were less impacted by the disaster.

Desired Action

This section should outline what you want each audience to do. For an elected official, you might want them to support disaster recovery reforms. For an office or department of community development, you may want them to direct greater resources to the low-income community you are working for. For the public, you may want them to educate their elected officials about the need for policy change.

Identify how these actions might be measured. You could measure engagement with a "call to action" link on your website, or you might track the number of state legislators supporting your reforms.

Platforms

Think of the different media channels that your target audiences listen to. This might be a show on public radio, the local newspaper of record, social media, or a blog or podcast. List them out and identify what target audience would be impacted the most by these platforms.

Do not limit yourself to only "official" media channels, like print or television news. Think about your own social media page, or your own weekly or monthly newsletter. What target audience would be most impacted by those?

Messaging

Identify messaging approaches that have been most impactful to your target audience in the past. These could include a research paper your organization produces, stories told by disaster survivors directly, an organizational update on the work you are doing, or stories of different successes.

How will you frame the disaster and the policy goals you listed in the previous section? For instance: flooding in a neighborhood might be because of systemic disinvestment in infrastructure in Black and Latino neighborhoods, allowing you to frame the issue as systemic.

If you are working in a coalition with different organizations, it may be necessary to provide opportunities for many people to speak with media, so that any potential blowback from confrontational strategies is spread across the entire coalition and not just centered on one group. At other times, it may be best

to have all organizations involved in the collaborative effort simultaneously reaching out to policymakers with the same language. This makes it harder for policymakers to ignore the policy solutions that are needed and makes it less likely that the message will be drowned out.

Be thoughtful about the types of media messages that are most effective and track your efforts to ensure your media outreach is consistent. An example is below.

Lack of Assistance (70%) – Stories from the Field

- Repetitive flooding is destroying our neighborhood.
- Flooding impacts prevent disaster survivors from recovering.
- The neighborhood has urged flood mitigation measures for years.

Flood Plane Data (20%) – Community-Driven Research

- [%] of households with low incomes are threatened by flooding in this region.
- An informal survey found that [%] of disaster-impacted households were denied assistance.

Success Stories (10%) – Resilience Measures Save Lives

- A pilot project nearby prevented flood waters from damaging homes.
- After pressure from neighborhood groups, the city reconstructed mitigation measures that saved a portion of the neighborhood – but more is needed.

Key Dates

Use this section to broadly review the timeline after a disaster and identify when specific objectives should become the focus of your media efforts. Every disaster is different so it can be hard to anticipate where a specific disaster recovery effort will be six months after a disaster, but try and plan out what indicators you will look for before you switch from one objective to another.

Strategy vs. Quantity

DHR convening attendees agreed that sometimes the best media strategy is to avoid negative press coverage. Instead of viewing the success of a media or messaging effort in terms of the sheer number of quotes, press releases, or social media posts an organization creates, the priority should be the accomplishment of the goals outlined in the communications plan.

For instance, when policymakers are in the middle of delicate negotiations about a disaster-related settlement or policy change, you may want to avoid a front-page article in a local newspaper criticizing the policymakers for their disaster recovery-related failures, if this news coverage would allow the policymakers to walk away from negotiations. Alternatively, an organization may want to avoid press coverage to protect low-income households who may be using a loophole in the existing disaster recovery system to access assistance. An article detailing the loophole may prompt policymakers to close it, depriving low-income households of sorely needed assistance. While articles on these topics may increase the number of media touches an organization can get, it does not assist in accomplishing the goal of reforming the country's broken disaster recovery system or helping disaster survivors receive the assistance they need.

Not only should an organization executing a media strategy keep in mind the overall goals of their effort, but they should consider how those goals relate to their targeted audience. Messaging that may work with one target audience could be a poison pill for another. Some DHR members have adapted their messaging to better align with the political opinions of individuals living in their area. For instance, instead of talking externally about "equity," you may need to refer to it as "ensuring equal access to services." This is not hiding what you believe or your organization's goals, but rather represents an effort to tailor your message to those you are trying to reach while maintaining your goals. Not using the term "equity" does not mean you are not working towards it; you are simply enrolling another neighbor or organization into your effort by not using a term that might make them immediately stop listening.

One DHR convening participant suggested that when speaking with a target audience, organizations should emphasize the needs and impacts that everyone can agree on first. This provides a base of agreement to further the message or conversation without potentially causing the audience to stop listening or trusting the messenger. A potential partner or ally in the community might not agree that climate change exists, so you

may decide to use the term "extreme heat" rather than "climate change" to create a point of agreement. This also allows your messaging to start off with an undeniable fact, in this case, that the temperature is abnormally high for an abnormal amount of time lately.

Connecting to Systemic Issues

The "stock" narrative of a disaster and disaster recovery discussed at the start of this section very rarely makes the connection between the impact of a disaster and systemic issues. However, the connection to systemic racial and social inequity is central to our argument that the current disaster housing recovery system is broken and needs urgent reform. Making these connections for the media, however, can be difficult. A National Guardsman rescuing a family from the roof of their flooded home is dramatic – it sells advertising and papers. It is harder to convince some reporters to write about how the same family has been forced to live in a flood plain due to historic and ongoing systemic racism in our housing markets, which results in a severe shortage of affordable, accessible rental homes in safer areas.

Expert-level research is not necessarily needed to effectively make the connection to systemic inequities. In Puerto Rico after Hurricane Fiona, only some areas of the island were determined by FEMA to be eligible for assistance, while many areas most impacted by flooding were left out. Organizations in Puerto Rico released a map showing that the towns that did not receive approvals for assistance matched towns with the highest Afroboricuan population. The organizations used a hashtag "#AmendTheMap" to share the data along with the personal experiences of residents denied assistance. Because of this pressure, FEMA amended the map a short time afterward.

As this example shows, one of the best ways to ensure that a systemic analysis is present in disaster-related media is to elevate the voices of disaster-impacted survivors who may be long-time residents of a community and who can tell reporters, in detail, where and how the impact of the disaster is systemic and combine their personal story with data. The personal story often matches the need of media to see and experience the impact of a disaster, while data can clearly demonstrate that this personal story is a result of undeniable systemic inequities.

This method can be particularly powerful at the national level, where data can be aggregated to provide a wide lens view of the impact of systemic inequities. Data, when paired with the stories of disaster survivors, can make the most effective arguments in favor of systemic reforms.

BEST PRACTICES

- Work with other organizations in your area to craft a pre-disaster media plan. Identify what media connections or strengths each organization has and work to outline responsibilities and avenues for getting your messaging out.
- Have messaging ready to go before a disaster to explain the systemic inequities that may be exacerbated by a future disaster.
- National organizations should make information and data on systemic inequity accessible to state and local organizations for use in post-disaster messaging.
- Elevate media and messaging conducted by other organizations.

EXAMPLES AND TACTICS

- Although each disaster is unique, some issues can be anticipated and planned for. Create potential social media hashtags or messaging kits for issues that commonly impact your area after disasters.
- Create different media strategies for different events, such as when your organization files a lawsuit to address civil rights violations after a disaster. If your organization focuses on the material needs of a neighborhood, have a separate media plan for getting the word out regarding available supplies and donation drop-off sites.

Reporter Relations

"You won't be placed every time you pitch, but you miss 100% of the shots you don't take. Pitch yourself, your organization, and lift the voices of those most impacted; every pitch will result in a new connection." – JEN BUTLER, NATIONAL LOW INCOME HOUSING COALITION, WASHINGTON, DC, AT THE DHR CONVENING.

Building relationships with media is one of the most important aspects of communications work in the post-disaster environment. Like a comprehensive media plan, efforts to connect and foster relationships with reporters can be difficult in the chaotic post-disaster environment. As a result, it is best to start building these relationships ahead of time. Having established relationships with reporters and being aware of which reporter is covering your specific issue can save invaluable time after a disaster.

It is important to remember that reporters are subject to a variety of internal pressures. Editors and publishers require certain content, reporters jockey with one another for space to place their stories, or a reporter may

only be assigned to cover disaster-related topics for a limited amount of time. Reporters do not work for you or for the community, and they are not advocates. After you speak on-record with a reporter, they are allowed to publish what you said even if the tone or conclusion of a story is not what you wanted it to be. Having a good relationship with a reporter makes it less likely for this to occur or, at the very least, more likely that they will inform you about it before a story goes to print.

It is helpful to be prepared to respond to reporters who are on deadline. If they know they can go to you for a quote, perspective, or piece of data relevant to their beat, and that you will respond quickly and efficiently – or if they know they can reach out to you for an interview and you can immediately connect them to a directly impacted spokesperson – they will come to you more often and include you and your members in more of their stories. This is part of why it is useful to have a member press corps which you can call on in case of a short turnaround, and messaging prepped ahead of time.

PITCHING A STORY

Interactions with the media often start with a cold call or email to a specific outlet to pitch a story. The first interaction is often quick. Regardless of the type of interaction, reporters usually devote about 30 seconds to listen to or read a pitch. Therefore, your initial pitch must be pithy, precise, and honest, while also sharing relevant key points of your campaign.

Pitches are sometimes made on social media to generate an organic buzz around a topic. Pitching on social media is an effective strategy to increase earned media. This strategy circumvents cold calls or relying on one outlet to show interest in covering your campaign. Pitching on X (formerly Twitter) gets your message out using a platform that you control.

When pitching a story:

- Pitch the right news hook. Think about current events and how they relate to the campaign. Ask the questions:
  - Why is this story important right now?
  - What makes the story or angle unique?
  - Why should anyone care?
  - Is this story the first of its kind?
  - Is the event or development the largest or most comprehensive of its kind?
- Pitch the right person. Use tools like Meltwater, Muck Rack, or Google Alerts to track and identify the right reporter for the right beat.
- Include a press release. Circulate a press release to all media contacts using tools like email, Meltwater, or a wire service about one week before the campaign starts, but pitch the press release to key reporters prior to the wide release. Connect with a few key reporters that you have fostered relationships with or reporters who have recently covered your campaign topic. Share an embargoed copy of a report or highlight new data/ research discussed in your campaign. On the date the press release is widely distributed, circulate it on social media and tag a few additional key reporters who are active on social media.

Reporter Outreach

It is important to foster relationships with appropriate media outlets to increase the opportunity to shape the narrative. This may require tracking coverage of your issue on social media and through media stories and articles; creating email alerts that gather news on buzzwords relevant to your campaign issue (as well as names, such as your org, staff members, volunteer members) is helpful with this. Stay aware of a reporter's beat and track reporters who may be new to the affordable housing space. Shift your communication accordingly and respect a reporter's preferred method of communication. If you are interested in fostering a relationship with a reporter, share relevant new research with that reporter ahead of a wide release.

Media relationships are reciprocal and should generate benefits for both parties. Before initiating any relationship, it will be important to determine your overall goal in reaching out to press and to identify your key messages around disaster recovery and resiliency. Gather background on your key press contacts to determine if they are the right press contacts for your efforts. Determine if they are currently on the housing or disaster beat and if they work for traditional newspapers, online media, television, or radio. Use your local press to generate interest on a national level. Once you have successfully managed to schedule a phone or in-person interview with a member of the media, be prepared with talking points, citations, and testimonials.

Other tips for an interview are:

- Review your main points before the interview. Decide on two or three key messages to convey.
- Remember that **everything** is on the record.
- Steer reporters toward the big picture: this is a systemic problem.
- Learn to pivot.
- Connect local issues to national problems. Share affordable housing challenges specific to your community, share examples of what life is like for extremely low-income renters in your state, or use data to emphasize the importance of state or local housing initiatives and funding.
- Make your points brief and simple and avoid jargon.
- It is ok to say, "I don't know."
- Always end the interview by repeating your key messages or the one key takeaway.

Organizations should strive to become serial "background" contacts for a reporter. A background interview is an off-record question-and-answer session where the reporter is not looking for a direct quote. Instead, they are trying to find information on the problem, its history, its cause, and potential avenues and narratives for them to write the story along (i.e. "a hook"). While this may not result in a direct quote in a story or article, it will allow you to educate the reporter on a certain impact of a disaster, connect the problem highlighted by the story directly to systemic issues, and refer the reporter to different community members for direct quotes. This provides the reporter with everything they need to write and publish the story that you want them to write, and it makes the life of the reporter significantly easier. This makes it more likely that they will reach back out for their next story. Doing this gives organizations direct input into potential media articles even if their work is not the central feature of a media piece.

An additional way to build a relationship with a reporter is to let them know of different community events that relate to their beat, even if they are not events you are directly leading. This builds rapport and a professional relationship with the reporter, making it easier to discuss details of media coverage and more likely they will reach out to you for a direct quote.

Reporters as Advocates

Without wading into a discussion of journalism and ethics, one can safely say that journalists typically view themselves as separate from advocates. While an organizer may be focused on a specific policy solution, a reporter focuses on amplifying what is occurring on the ground or in the halls of power – the truth, as they see it. Largely, this bright-line barrier remains the rule. However, there are times in which the priorities of organizations and reporters intersect. After disasters, reporters are placed on the front lines and will see and experience the depth of disaster impacts on communities. As a result, they often are more sympathetic to community needs than usual.

When a reporter is identified as sympathetic to the issue of disaster recovery and resilience reform, they should be supported. This might take the form of releasing reports and other materials early to that reporter to give them an "embargoed" (i.e. confidential) sneak peek. You might also tip off the reporter for potential unannounced actions or meetings that would be beneficial for the reporter to cover. This also makes it likely they will return to you for a quote in their story about the event. As a result, their sympathy can be transformed into a mouthpiece for disaster-impacted communities. This can raise the profile of your organizing efforts and disaster impacted communities by having consecutive stories covering your campaign or disaster impacts.

The relationship with a reporter-as-advocate is not just a one-way street. Reporters, through their investigations, can be sources of information and access that might not be available to your organization. Reporters, like organizations, can quickly gain competency in disaster recovery and resilience. They may be aware of internal discussions in a departmental headquarters, state house, or city hall. This information can be vital to community-based organizations, giving them an inside look at internal discussions or confirming what they had only heard second-hand information. One DHR convening participant regularly directs friendly reporters to community-based organizations in their state; this not only elevates the work of the community-based organization, but it provides an opportunity for the organizations to see what the reporter has discovered.

An additional and important role of a reporter-as-advocate is public education. Unlike well-drafted fact sheets, charts, and community testimony, reporters use their power of direct questions. Having a reporter digging around for answers on a disaster recovery program tends to get the attention of policymakers and the public in a way that a community member sadly does not. In one instance, a DHR convening participant working to extend a disaster assistance application deadline described an incident where they had been continually stonewalled by a government agency until a reporter tipped off by the group called the department and asked for a comment. The agency announced the extension shortly afterward.

Reporter Information Banks

DHR convening participants recommend using a collaborative reporter database to ease the process of finding and fostering media contacts and to make this information more accessible to community-based organizations.

By pooling information about who is covering housing and disaster recovery within a certain area, groups can collectively streamline the process of seeking out and building relationships with reporters. The collaborative nature of this information would allow for constant updates, ensuring that changes in focus or roles at media organizations are tracked and shared with other organizations working in the space. These reporter databases would have to be protected from bad actors with some form of security password and user agreement to ensure that organizations with ulterior motives are not able to access and use the data.

A reporter database could also be used to track pitches and articles from each reporter, providing background and context if an organization wishes to reach out and make an ask. This also ensures that a reporter is not being overloaded with similar pitches or requests.

Organizations interested in hosting a reporter database should reach out to organizations working in similar geographic areas and collaboratively build out the database, providing access to aligned organizations.

BEST PRACTICES

- Track media sources to identify reporters working on issues like affordable housing, the environment, or weather ahead of the disaster and work to build relationships with them.
- Share relevant and embargoed information with friendly reporters that you build relationships with. This can also include information on community events that other organizations are holding.
- Offer background information on systemic issues related to disaster resilience and recovery to reporters that may be new to the disaster reporting beat.

EXAMPLES AND TACTICS

- Work collaboratively with organizations in your area to create reporter databases with information on what reporters are covering disaster-related and potentially disaster-related issue areas.

Policymaker Outreach

"We held a press conference to talk with national press about Puerto Rico's resources. We brought the voices from Puerto Rico to Congress, because Congress wasn't coming to Puerto Rico." – MARITERE PADILLA RODRÍGUEZ, HISPANIC FEDERATION, SAN JUAN, PR, AT THE DHR CONVENING.

At the most basic level, the direct target audience of disaster recovery and resiliency reform media and messaging efforts are policymakers – the individuals with the power to direct resources to meet the needs of low-income communities and approve needed reforms.

While disasters are very much political events, reporting and statements around them are broadly nonpartisan. Many politicians typically respond to a disaster in an openly nonpartisan fashion. Though their political align-

ment will undoubtedly influence their perspective on events, few elected officials use a disaster as an opportunity for partisan potshots in the press.

This nonpartisanship presents an opportunity for organizations seeking to educate policymakers who may hold different political views.

Framing Disaster Needs as Constituent Issues

DHR convening attendees reported that they have had success educating policymakers when framing disaster-related needs as problems of constituent services as opposed to political issues.

Elected officials – especially members of a local, state, or federal legislative body – are often judged by how well they can assist constituents in accessing government assistance and navigating bureaucratic hurdles. At the national level, members of Congress often maintain large staffs dedicated to this task. Constituent services are typically seen as non-political. By framing the needs of a disaster-impacted community as a constituent issue, organizations can tap into this impulse, separating out questions of expanding access to disaster assistance from, for instance, a political commitment to small government or "pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps." Disasters can create unique situations where someone historically concerned with cutting funding for assistance programs can be heard lamenting how difficult it is for the people of his district to access government aid.

DHR convening participants shared that it can be helpful to emphasize government disfunction when talking about disaster issues in their community. By using this framing, policymakers and their staffs are more likely to approach the issue as a problem they are obligated to solve due to their constituent service responsibility.

By consistently sharing information about constituent needs with elected officials, you can make it difficult for them to ignore these pressing needs. Even without talking about specific reforms, you are laying the groundwork for such conversations by underscoring the deep, existing need for better disaster assistance and resilience.

Volume

One strategy successfully employed by many DHR convening participants is persistent outreach on social media and in letters, press releases, and other products. While letters or social media posts can be ignored by themselves, it can be difficult to ignore a consistent stream of outreach.

We do not suggest "spamming" elected officials with identical social media posts or letters, which will quickly become more of an annoyance than an effective media and messaging strategy. Instead, organizations should continue to illustrate the current conditions in a disaster-impacted community with different photographs, videos, and personal stories of disaster survivors. Organizations can also encourage their members and partners to join in this technique. This can be a useful strategy that is very accessible to individuals who might not have the time or ability to attend in-person rallies and other efforts.

Social media posts should be supplemented with educational materials like sign-on letters, press statements, and press releases. These resources can be drafted to memorialize what is occurring in disaster-impacted communities and to underscore the need for disaster recovery and resilience reform in a more permanent way than a social media post.

Bird Dogging

To "bird-dog" means "to follow, watch carefully, or investigate." The term refers to people who seek out candidates or elected officials, ask them specific questions or share information, and record their response at events and public appearances. Asking questions about the state of disaster recovery efforts for households with low incomes or where a policymaker stands on a particular reform in a public forum makes them less likely to ignore or hide from the issue. Repeated questions and requests on a particular issue also move it to the forefront of their mind and show that constituents/community members care about it.

Events that are excellent for bird dogging include town halls, press conferences, or anywhere the policymaker is in front of more than a few constituents – whether it is part of their duties as an elected official or as part of a reelection campaign. Organizers should keep an eye out for these events and track which would be the best to attend and ask questions.

STEP-BY-STEP BIRD DOGGING

1. Assemble a team. Bird-dogging is more effective if you have a group of people from your organization or your coalition who attend the public event. Asking pointed questions in a public event can be intimidating, and bringing a group of like-minded community members can provide emotional support. Working as a team allows other people to ask follow-up questions and divvy up tasks: someone asks the initial question, others ask a follow up, while another team member records the response.
2. Research the policymakers' schedule and other community events. The best opportunities are events where they will be relatively accessible so that you can approach them directly. Events covered by reporters also present an opportunity to get your question into media articles. Policymakers often post public events on their social media pages, campaign websites, and press releases from their offices.
3. Be obvious. Bird dogging is not a subtle activity. Make it obvious that you are an organizer or community member. Your team can wear matching T-shirts, make signs, or wear pins or other swag that make it clear that you are members of a group. The policymaker and their staff may try and ignore you, so being highly visible makes pretending that you are not there even more awkward and conspicuous.
4. Attend the event. Once at an event, do what you can (within reason) to ask the elected official about where they stand on the issues. You can ask the question directly or ask reporters to ask a question. Someone from the group should take notes or record any interactions.
5. Report back to the group. After the event, debrief with your group on how the bird dogging went, what information was gathered, and what could be improved next time.
6. Keep going. Keep showing up at public events and posing questions on the issues. This also demonstrates that many people care about the issue.

Tips:

Arrive early. This is especially important if the elected official is very prominent. It will be important for you to be close enough to the stage so that you are in their line of sight during the question-and-answer portion of the event.

Have your question ready. Get input from family and friends about the best way to frame a question. Practice asking it to yourself. Make certain your question is brief, fact-based, and direct. The purpose of your question is two-fold: to learn where a policymaker stands on the issue, and to educate the public who may be listening.

Ask your question early. At events where there is a question-and-answer opportunity, most people in the audience will not raise their hand immediately. If you indicate early interest, you are more likely to be called on.

Stick your hand out. Policymakers often walk through the crowd shaking hands and pausing for brief conversations at public events. Be ready for these potential one-on-one opportunities. Position yourself in their path. It is okay to stop and talk to them.

Disperse throughout the venue. Dispersing at the event will improve the odds that more than one of your group will get to ask a question. Also, come prepared with more than one question, as someone may ask your question before you get the chance.

Know the elected official's policy positions. Ask a question that shows you know something about the policymaker's position, and that you want to know more. The bird dogging will be most effective if the questions are based on updated information about their positions and the most recent disaster recovery information.

Be calm and reasonable. Maintaining a respectable tone will bring a more positive response from the elected official, their staff, and the media, if they are present. Getting angry or sarcastic will generally result in being ignored. One can even preface your question with a comment on something the politician has done well, before proceeding to your question.

Take notes and record video. The only way to track their responses is to have a record of what they said. It is also helpful to have notes when you are trying to frame a follow-up question.

Be prepared to speak with the media. In some public venues, journalists like to speak to folks who have asked the elected official a question. Remember to stay on message when talking to reporters by talking about the issue that is important to you.

Letters and Petitions

Support letters can be a useful tool for state and national organizations who are working to support disaster recovery and reform work on the ground. They may not have a direct presence in a disaster-impacted community, but by working in tandem with local organizations, national and state organizations can play a critical role in supporting policy change.

Support letters should mirror and amplify the voices of disaster survivors and their priorities to policymakers in Congress and state legislatures. Letters can be a good way to link local issues in one part of the country to broader reform proposals, educating policymakers to a current disaster-related problem, and underscoring the need for systemic reform. This tactic lets policymakers know that even though a state or national organization may not be directly impacted by a specific disaster, they are following what policymakers are doing about the situation.

Organizations can use support letters to request information and questions about disaster response and resilience activities. If a local organization is being stonewalled by a policymaker or an agency, elevating their requests in a formal letter signed by multiple state and national organizations can build pressure for the release of such information.

As an alternative, organizations can ask policymakers friendly to your disaster recovery and resiliency reform efforts to draft and send a formal letter to an agency or another policymaker requesting information or action on a particular topic. Organizations can then publicize this letter via their media and messaging channels, creating the perception of momentum which can help further advance reform efforts.

Petitions can also be used during disaster recovery. While Change.org or other online petition sites can be used if an organization does not have capacity to host its own, DHR convening participants recommend creating a signup form on an organization's website so that those interested in signing a petition can also get information about your organization's work. Petitions requesting action on lagging disaster recovery, or the implementation of disaster recovery and resiliency reforms, can also be packaged and delivered to policymakers as a strategic media and messaging event, described in more detail below.

Strategic Events

Organizations can also hold events strategically designed to educate policymakers on the need for disaster recovery and resilience reform. These events, occurring on the ground in disaster-impacted communities or at county seats, state capitals, or Washington, D.C., can show broad support for a reform effort, highlight the lack of action during disaster recovery, or bring attention to the stories of disaster survivors. While organizations know best when to deploy different types of events, DHR convening participants spoke about several different ways they have used strategic events in the past.

Community tours, described in the "organizing" section of this toolkit, can be an excellent opportunity to directly show a policymaker and members of the media what the price of inaction on disaster recovery and resilience reform looks like. Inviting a policymaker to see a damaged home or a flooded neighborhood can be a striking reminder of their civic responsibilities. Policymakers will want to attend events to get photos of them "in action" in the media, but by asking direct questions about disaster recovery and reform efforts, organizers can make the event more than just a photo-op. It may make sense to mention your line of questioning to reporters ahead of the event so they are aware. In the past, such events have led to direct action on the part of emergency management and other government agencies to remedy the situation, even while sometimes these solutions only serve the neighborhood or disaster survivor featured at the event.

Another type of event one can hold is a "special delivery" press conference outside a policymaker's office. The delivery of letters and petitions described above can be an event in and of itself. By inviting the press to cover the delivery of the documents, you can create a significant opportunity for a policymaker to be present and talk with you when you arrive at their office and to get your message out to the public. The lack of response or comment on the delivery of the letter by the policymaker can be cited and elevated by the media in their stories covering the event. This happened recently to two different DHRC members who attended the convening – one held a media event highlighting their delivery of a letter to a policymaker, while the other held a large press conference in front of a state capital after delivering a petition to a governor.

An additional type of strategic event can be a "Hill Day" or "Capitol Day," where many organizations take meetings to educate different policymakers on the same day. Just as with bird dogging, being conspicuous is a key strategy to make Hill Days successful. Supporters should wear

similar t-shirts, have uniformly designed fliers, and have matching swag. It is a good idea to provide a training or overview to participants ahead of time. While you cannot (and should not) control what participating organizations and disaster survivors might say during a meeting with a policymaker, you can ensure that they are touching on the messaging that you want to emphasize, like the need for certain reforms or additional funding. In addition to highlighting the broad support of your reform efforts and creating the opportunity to talk with policymakers face-to-face, Hill Days allow you to schedule other related media events – like press conferences with allied policymakers, special delivery events for letters and petitions, and reporter interviews.

Adversarial Messaging

At the DHR convening, participants lamented that sometimes pulling at the hearts and minds of policymakers stops being an effective strategy. Policymakers might be overloaded by stories to the point where the stories stop being effective. They might understand the need but believe there is greater need elsewhere, or they could just plainly not prioritize their impacted constituents. When this occurs, some DHR convening participants have found that adversarial messaging may be required.

Importantly, organizations should note that the use of embarrassment and shame, or potential embarrassment and shame, as a messaging strategy are not the same as "strong arm tactics." Policymakers typically respond poorly to direct threats of adverse organizing and stop listening or talking. In different issue-based campaigns, this might not be catastrophic, but in the context of disasters, being frozen out by an important policymaker can adversely impact those most harmed by the disaster – something to be avoided at all costs.

Sometimes, the threat of potential embarrassment or shame is enough to move the needle on an issue. Strategically inserting a comment to government agencies and officials about going to the media on a specific problem or event that might embarrass them can be just as effective as going to the media directly. Depending on the strategic situation, it may be best to let the government agency or official know that you plan to highlight an issue to the press. This can preserve room to discuss the issue after the story comes out, but it can also tip off agency staff to work against your plans.

It is important to use this approach with caution. Adversarial messaging may be cathartic for disaster survivors and organizers, but it does not necessarily advance reforms in a meaningful way. Organizations should ensure that policy solutions come first.

BEST PRACTICES

- Utilize the nonpartisan nature of disasters to make inroads with local, state, and national policymakers that may not share your organizational values. Frame disaster-related issues as constituent issues for policymakers. Part of their role is to ensure that the people they represent can access government programs, so frame it as part of their job.
- Proactively educate legislators about what you are seeing and hearing on the ground and what you and other organizations are doing about it.
- Consistently keep the issue in front of policymakers with a high volume of letters, press releases, and other media.
- Bird dog local, state, and national policymakers at public events to ask questions about disaster response and recovery. Use formal letters to request information on disaster-related problems, and work with organizations at the state and national level to increase the visibility and impact of letters. Make sure every messaging technique and effort focuses on policy solutions.
- Coordinate with other organizations to let them know what outreach you are doing to policymakers and ensure that messaging techniques are complimentary and building off one another.

EXAMPLES AND STRATEGIES

- Site visits can be an excellent opportunity to directly show a policymaker and members of the media what the price of inaction on disaster recovery and resilience reform looks like. Inviting a policymaker to see a damaged home or a flooded neighborhood can be a striking reminder of their civic responsibilities.
- An organization can hold a "special delivery" press conference outside their office. The delivery of letters and petitions described above can be an event in and of itself.
- An organization can ask an allied policymaker to draft and send a letter to an agency or government official requesting information or action on a particular topic. Organizations can then publicize this letter via their media and messaging channels.
- Hold a multi-organizational "Hill Day" or "Capitol Day" where different organizations take meetings to educate different policymakers on the same day.

Community-Driven Media Efforts

"There's a lot of generational trauma from Hawaii being an occupied state. Indigenous, land-based knowledge is invaluable, and you can't hide resources or a lack of resources on an island. However, you still have to fight to be heard." – NICOLE HUGUENIN, MAUI RAPID RESPONSE, KULA MAUI, HI, AT THE DHR CONVENING.

One of the most resounding themes around media and messaging during the DHR convening was the importance of uplifting the voices of directly-impacted disaster survivors and letting them tell their own story on their own terms. No one can tell the stories of how broken the current system of disaster recovery and resilience is like those who are most impacted by it.

As a best practice, organizations should ensure that a disaster survivor story is elevated any time they are called on by a reporter to comment on a story or issue a press release or another piece of media. Ideally, these stories should be told by disaster survivors themselves, ensuring that any sort of story elevation is not extractive. For state and local organizations, integration of disaster survivors and their stories into media and messaging efforts may be slightly easier than it is for national groups. However, by ensuring active and healthy partnerships with local organizations active in disaster-impacted communities, national organizations can provide wider platforms for the stories of disaster survivors in the national press and their larger social media networks.

These stories do not have to be limited to just interviews; stories can be told through pictures, videos, physical evidence, or anything that gets to the heart of why we push for disaster recovery and resilience reform – what one DHR convening attendee described as "the realness" of the situation. Organizations must get permission to take or share photos of a disaster survivor or their property. Be sure to inform disaster survivors that a photo may appear on the evening news, on the internet, or be distributed more broadly than through just one news article. Without this approval, any use of material provided by a disaster survivor can be exploitative and potentially have legal consequences.

Media Training

Elevating disaster survivors' stories does not mean that an organization can place a disaster survivor in front of cameras at a press conference and hope for the best. There are specific best practices and concepts for dealing with media that if not followed could lead to embarrassment, damage to reform efforts, or additional personal difficulty for the disaster survivors themselves.

Providing free and accessible media training for disaster survivors who show a willingness to speak with the press is central to this effort. This type of training can be offered systematically or in a cohort-based system. Non-local organizations can support this work by providing train-the-trainer media sessions and provide additional planning and operational capacity to ensure that organizations in disaster-impacted communities can easily offer this service.

In addition to training on how to deal with the media, it is important to ensure that disaster survivors are fully informed about what type of assistance programs are available or inaccessible to them, the history of systemic issues that might be relevant to the impacts of the disaster, and other background information to ensure that their story is fully informed by the established facts of the matter. This is not to say that an organization should "coach" or "ghost write" the story of a disaster survivor for them; instead, organizations should ensure disaster survivors have all the facts available to them before they tell their story.

Having a set group of disaster survivors who are comfortable and prepared to speak to the press will make getting their stories into media articles about the disaster all the easier. Reporters will notice the ease with which you connect them with disaster survivors with important stories to tell and will return for future articles.

NJOP COMMUNITY PRESS CORP

Founded in 2014, the New Jersey Organizing Project (NJOP) was created by nine Superstorm Sandy survivors who were struggling to get home and be made whole. They found themselves trapped by the "storm after the storm," the long-lasting financial, emotional, and health impacts of our broken disaster recovery system. Together, they created NJOP and fought for the full and fair recovery their communities deserved. In 2021, when Hurricane Ida hit New Jersey, many inland communities found themselves in the same situation as Sandy survivors nine years before. Now, Superstorm Sandy and Hurricane Ida survivors across the state are fighting together for their right to storm recovery.

NJOP recognizes that in order to reform our broken disaster recovery system, we need to change the narrative that blames individuals for not being able to get home and be made whole. To do this, NJOP created a Community Press Corps, a group of directly-impacted disaster survivors willing to share their stories and speak to the media. Working with NJOP, these disaster survivors are trained on how to speak about their lived experiences in a cohesive way and communicate with the press. In these trainings, NJOP emphasizes that storm survivors are not subjects for sob stories in the press; they are community leaders with solutions, and press stories should reflect this. Led by NJOP staff, the Press Corps has developed into a group of active members trained in telling their stories and talking to the press – both within the context of key moments, and as leaders of NJOP's storytelling efforts in their own right.

Over the past year, NJOP has had much success with this approach. NJOP members have been featured and/or interviewed in around 70 articles in both local and national press, and the program has trained over two dozen members to speak with reporters as members of the Press Corps.

Learn more about the New Jersey Organizing Project here.

Trauma and Trust-Informed Media Outreach

Community-driven disaster outreach requires that the voices of the most impacted disaster survivors are prioritized and centered within it. But this can be easier said than done. Many disaster survivors may – rightly – not trust an organization to care for their story or act in their best interest. As a result, any attempt to collect, share, or elevate a disaster survivor's story must be trust-informed. This point was heavily reinforced by attendees of the DHR convening.

Establishing "trust" with a disaster survivor is not something that is likely to occur instantaneously or spontaneously. As described in the "organizing" section of this handbook, organizations looking to establish trust with disaster survivors must intentionally involve disaster survivors in their operations – meeting their needs, listening to what they know are the biggest priorities for their community, and providing them real power and authority within their organizations. Integrating disaster survivors – or community members who will likely be the most impacted by a disaster – into your organization ensures that this important relationship will exist when it is time for them to tell their stories.

Trust also involves transparency. Organizations should be intentional about when, where, and how they ask disaster survivors to share their stories and be exceptionally open and communicative with a disaster survivor about potential uses for their story.

In addition to establishing a trusted relationship with a disaster survivor, organizations should ensure they do not exacerbate disaster-related trauma. As discussed earlier, many disaster survivors experience significant mental health issues and trauma created by disasters, especially individuals who are the most impacted and who receive the least amount of assistance they need to recover. Asking a disaster survivor to share their story over and over can be harmful to their mental health. Organizations should ensure that whatever media strategy is created that involves disaster survivors sharing their stories in person integrates breaks, alternative interviewees, and a discussion of how a disaster survivor is feeling when sharing their story.

Story Preservation and Collaborative Story Banks

If a disaster survivor has a compelling story that they want to share, but they do not want to talk directly to the media, organizations can offer to tell the story for them or otherwise create a recording of them telling it for future use. This not only minimizes the impact on a disaster survivor who – given the pressing personal needs after a disaster – may not be able to consistently offer their story to different media outlets, but it also minimizes the mental health impact of repeatedly telling a story about a potentially traumatic situation. While recording stories for future use is a best practice, it is of the utmost importance that organizations be fully transparent with how such a recording may be used and when and how the disaster survivor must give direct permission for such a recording to appear in the media. As a best practice, even after the disaster survivor has given approval, the organization should continually check in and confirm that the use of their story is still acceptable to them. If this level of transparency is maintained, an organization can use the disaster survivor's story in print and video media, in their own social media, and via other methods of dissemination.

During the DHR convening, attendees recommended creating a "collaborative story bank" to increase the accessibility and useability of recorded disaster survivor stories. Collaborative story banks can be an effective way to lessen disaster trauma and increase accessibility of media to the stories of disaster survivors. A collaborative story bank involves a list of recorded disaster survivors' stories – or a brief description of them – along with the contact information of disaster survivors. This database can be used by organizations to identify disaster survivors to speak with reporters. It can also be used by collaborating organizations to better access and responsibly share their stories on their own media accounts.

As described in the above section, disaster survivors must be fully aware that their stories are placed in this story bank, and their approval must be gained periodically for the story to continue to be available. Even if a recording is not available, it may be a good resource to provide contact information for the disaster survivors themselves, if they wish to directly control when, where, or how their story is being told.

BEST PRACTICES

- Ensure that a disaster survivor story is elevated anytime an organization is called by a reporter to comment on a story or releases a press release or another piece of media. Ideally, these stories should be told by the disaster survivor themselves.
- Provide media training and additional assistance to ensure disaster survivors can successfully interact with media.
- Ensure that any media-related requests are trauma-informed and disaster survivors are fully aware of media asks an organization may be making of them – including potential consequences and the possible spread of the story beyond local media.
- Ensure that a disaster survivor has full agency over their story and that they have veto power if they do not wish their story shared in a certain way.
- National and state organizations should highlight and amplify the reach of disaster survivor stories.

EXAMPLES AND STRATEGIES

- Create a training cohort of community members to receive media training prior to a disaster. These individuals can talk to the media about their experiences during a disaster and help train other community members in media best practices, broadening the number of survivors who can share their story with the media.
- Create a collaborative story bank to store and facilitate the sharing of disaster survivor stories. Disaster survivors should still have direct control over their stories, but a story bank would allow easier tracking to help determine which disaster survivor might be the best to provide an interview or a story for a specific media piece.

Organization-Operated Media Channels

One of the benefits of today's media landscape is that an organization does not have to rely solely on reporters and established media outlets to craft, amplify, and disseminate its narrative. The reach, flexibility, and ease of content creation can help an organization working in a disaster-impacted area connect with community members and external audiences.

Today's standard level of technology makes it easy for organizations to create engaging content for social media channels, short- and full-length videos (even documentaries), and live broadcasts without or with limited professional assistance. By relying on externally facing media channels operated by the organization itself, an organization can reach a nearly limitless number of audience members who can then be mobilized to support policy education.

An additional benefit of using organization-owned social media channels is the ability to directly control your own narrative – something that is of utmost importance during and after a disaster. While formal media outlets provide unique and important opportunities to get the stories of disaster survivors and the urgent need for reform out to the public, the ability to directly control your own content, framing, and message means that organization-operated media channels are a necessity for any organization working to assist disaster-impacted communities and spur reform.

With the plethora of social media channels in existence today, it can be confusing to figure out which one your organization needs to use. When making this decision, it is best to consider what audience you are attempting to reach and what channel reaches them. Many DHR convening participants have found success using Instagram and TikTok to craft punchy and professional short videos, allowing them to reach younger audiences that use these types of apps. When in doubt, it never hurts to ask a member of your target audience what social media they typically use, but keep in mind that targeting one app alone for your content might leave out another audience. Committing to too many social media accounts can lead to only limited returns if your organization does not have the capacity to utilize them well.

By using social media, podcasts, documentaries, videos, or other types of external-facing media, an organization can create a record of a disaster's impact and the failures of the current response and recovery system that is unique, easily distributable, and in many cases, captivating. Social media content does not have to have high production values or professional editing to be effective. Several participants at the DHR convening

shared that the content that had the greatest reach was often the simplest and easiest to create. A plain video of a disaster survivor earnestly recounting their experiences to the camera can be worth more than the best-written fact sheet.

Social Media Guidelines

Given the ease of creating and posting content on social media, it can be necessary to establish standards and guidelines to prevent misuse or accidentally straying too far from your policy goals. Rumors and false information can also run rampant in a post-disaster situation, and organizations need to be very careful not to reinforce or amplify false or incorrect information. As discussed in the last section, when sharing disaster survivor stories, it is important to get clear approval before distributing them, requiring an at least somewhat formalized approval process.

The best way to ensure that content is consistent and that social media posts come with the approvals and vetting necessary is the establishment of media guidelines.

Community-led organizations often have limited resources allocated for social media management, which is regularly supported by volunteers with varied experience and skill levels. Developing social media policies and guidelines can provide structure, improve clarity, and ensure consistency. A social media policy should include a directory of team members, roles, and contact information to ensure everyone is aware of who has access to social media accounts; security protocols; guidance on how staff should behave on their personal social media accounts; and relevant copyright, privacy, and confidentiality laws. Social media guidelines should include a social media style guide that covers your organization's tone and voice (e.g., use of jargon and emojis, inclusive language, caption length), as well as consistency, design, and curation guidelines. You can also add social media tips and tricks, links to training opportunities, and procedures for dealing with negative messages.

AVOIDING MISINFORMATION

Rumors – whether malicious or the result of misunderstanding – commonly occur after disasters. Social media can increase the reach and rate of misinformation and conspiracy theories. On the other hand, anecdotal information and the personal experiences of disaster survivors can be labeled as "misinformation" by authorities when they do not align with the official narrative or sources.

Organizations should be sure to differentiate between an experience or truth that signals a unique and pressing issue in a disaster-impacted community, and "misinformation" spread by malevolent or uninvolved organizations and individuals.

How can you help stop disinformation? The first step is knowing when you see it.

If you come across a controversial claim from an organization or an unfamiliar social media account, ask yourself the following questions:

- Is it difficult to separate this purportedly factual claim from opinion?
- Does it fail to cite experts from reputable organizations?
- Is the original source of the information hard to pin down?
- Does it confirm your beliefs or play to your emotions?
- Does the group, person, or organization sharing the information have a stake in the claim (financial, political, or otherwise)?
- Does it require belief in a secret plot and a group of co-conspirators?
- Does it scapegoat people or groups?
- Is it spread by someone who recently started their social media account but has a lot of followers?
- Does the post have odd phrasing or spelling mistakes?

If you answer "yes" to one or more of these questions, you may want to do further research to figure out who is creating or pushing the information and whether they are trying to manipulate or mislead readers.

How can you tell if a source is reliable? For a news article, video, or social media post, ask yourself the following questions:

- Does it back up its statements with links to independent experts with relevant knowledge or references to peer-reviewed science?
- Does it fairly present differing points of view while acknowledging the importance of expertise?

- Does it treat individuals who have differing perspectives with respect?
- Does it distinguish facts from opinions?
- Is the content free from racial, gendered, ableist, anti-LGBT or other problematic stereotypes?
- Does it make it easy to identify funding sources or ideological or policy positions?

If you answered "no" to one or more of the questions, think twice before you share the claims. Your next step is to check for credible sources.

When you encounter a reference to a scientific report or study, before you share the claim, ask yourself the following questions. If you answer "no" to one or more of the questions, you may have to do some research to evaluate the credibility of the report.

- Is the study peer-reviewed?
- Have the authors disclosed their conflicts of interest and funding sources? If yes, does the sponsor have a vested interest in the outcome of the study?
- Who produced the study? Are they unbiased toward a preexisting policy or ideological position on the topic?
- Is the tone objective?
- Does it describe potential positives and negatives in clear terms? Does it cite and critique conflicting findings?
- Have other scientists commented about the study? If yes, are they raising major concerns with how the study was conducted? And do these scientists have ties to political interest groups who may have a vested interest in the outcome of the study?

DHRC member the Union of Concerned Scientists has an excellent series of blog posts on identifying and combatting misinformation.

A content calendar is useful if multiple team members manage your organization's social media accounts. A content calendar allows you to anticipate key events and schedule the posts in advance across multiple platforms. The timing of your posts is important and should be chosen strategically for each platform while also considering factors such as the location and culture of your audience. By using social media management platforms, you can schedule posts for the whole month (or more) in advance and set different posting times for each platform and post. If you have more channels and do not have resources for a paid plan, you may consider posting to all of your social media accounts simultaneously, which can also have a notable impact.

Pre-planning is essential. Community-led organizations should provide their members with collaborative tip sheets, pre-written messages, talking points, videos, graphics, and information about who to tag. An excellent example of effective pre-planning is NLIHC's August Recess Advocacy Campaign, which provided housing organizations, advocates, and people with lived experience with graphics, videos, examples of policy targets, and pre-written messages which were adaptable to local and national contexts.

Information People Need to Survive

Outreach via organizationally controlled media channels does not have to be reserved for policy education and organizing. They should be used to amplify information that people need to survive and recover in a disaster-impacted community. What this will look like will be different for each organization depending on their unique resources and capacity.

For some organizations, simply rebroadcasting official information from local, state, and national governments on emergency shelter availability, assistance program application periods, and opportunities for public comment might be all they are able to do. Organizations should make a distinction between emergency operations information like those described above and "PR" related material that may inflate the success of government-sponsored efforts and create false narratives that a recovery has been achieved when many are still left behind.

Organizations offering direct assistance to disaster-impacted communities can use social media to reach disaster survivors directly, as well as solicit assistance and donations to support their work. Many legal aid organizations use social media and other types of media like podcasts and newsletters to disseminate self-help legal information, opportunities to meet and speak with lawyers, and other pertinent information.

Whether an organization provides direct assistance to disaster survivors or simply rebroadcasting official emergency information, organizations should look for partners and collaborators that are conducting additional assistance work and amplify their efforts. The robust use of social media not only broadens the reach of these efforts but also creates a running record of the fact that government assistance was so inaccessible that other organizations had to step in to support specific community needs. It also ensures that community members look to your organization as a source of trust and community strength after the immediate danger of the disaster passes and long-term recovery efforts begin.

Live Broadcasts and Events

Multiple DHR convening attendees commonly broadcast live events to reach new audiences and educate the public on disaster recovery issues and reforms.

A live broadcast on social media often feels like the closest someone not directly on the ground can get to a disaster impact. Using broadcasts to allow audiences to see what a disaster survivor is experiencing can be an excellent way to humanize the issue and create a candid environment for a disaster survivor to share their views on how recovery is leaving them behind. At the DHR convening, a disaster survivor shared that they had conducted a live broadcast focused on the lack of debris removal in their neighborhood a month following a disaster. The broadcast was successful enough that the issue was quickly addressed by government officials the next day.

In addition, NLIHC and the DHRC have a history of conducting live events that are recorded and made available to members and partners afterward. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these events were the focal point for broader advocacy around emergency rental assistance and eviction protections that successfully kept millions of people stably housed during the worst days of the pandemic. These live events featured direct testimony from people in different parts of the country, policy expertise from advocates working on Capitol Hill, and explanations of ongoing research into pandemic impacts that directly informed organizations working at the federal, state, and local levels. Live events like these can be an excellent artifact to both inspire and inform organizations working in your area and be shared with media to demonstrate the need to cover a specific disaster issue.

BEST PRACTICES

- Match your social media efforts to your target audience but be aware of the organization's capacity to run multiple social media accounts well.
- Pre-plan social media posts to ensure that a wide variety of content is made available and that controls to prevent the spread of misinformation are in place.
- Amplify information on how disaster survivors can receive assistance both from government sources and from other organizations.
- Use live broadcasts and events to increase awareness of disaster survivors' experiences.

STRATEGIES AND EXAMPLES

- Create a social media guidebook with sample images and graphics to create a consistent feel across your social media accounts.
- Host a training for community members to show them how to create live streams on social media to show disaster damage and connect it with systemic issues.
- Host a livestreamed panel on a specific aspect of disaster recovery that you feel is not being adequately covered by the media. Invite reporters to attend and learn more about the issue.

COLLABORATION WITH LEGAL AID AND LAWYERS

In the *New York University Law Review* article, "Lawyering in Times of Peril: Legal Empowerment and the Relevance of the Legal Profession," Ariadna M. Godreau-Aubert, founder and CEO of Ayuda Legal Puerto Rico and a DHRC member, argues that "legal empowerment" is a necessary component both of ensuring access to the resources needed for those most-impacted households to survive after a disaster but also to change the legal system and its power dynamics simultaneously.[24] This aim directly aligns with the work of other organizations that seek to provide resources necessary for historically marginalized populations to recover, while changing current systems to prevent future harm and redress historic and ongoing inequities.

Godreau-Aubert makes a distinction between the concept of legal empowerment and "access to justice." Access to justice can be defined as the removal of barriers that impede certain groups, sectors, or individuals from making equitable use of legal processes to obtain legal

remedies, resolve controversies, and uphold rights. While access to justice is necessary to fix America's broken disaster housing recovery system, it still relies on third parties (e.g. lawyers) to facilitate legal remedies and work the complex levers of law necessary to serve the disaster survivor or any other client. This legal framework views disaster survivors not as the source of experience, knowledge, and strength needed to address inequities, but as beneficiaries of enlightened bar associations and attorneys. Godreau-Aubert argues that we must go beyond a focus on access to justice alone and use legal empowerment to better achieve an equitable disaster recovery system and build power for those most impacted by the disaster itself.

Access to justice is important, of course. Self-help guides and pro-bono programs are needed to help disaster survivors access their full recovery. However, these resources fail to dismantle patterns of oppression that place historically marginalized households in the most danger during disasters and provide them with the least amount of assistance afterward. Legal empowerment, on the other hand, "seeks to transform the rule of law and the whole system that feeds on systemic inequality and oppression." Its goal is to "advance equality, fairness, rights, and justice and helping people understand, use, and shape the laws that affect them and their communities".[25]

A simple example provided by Godreau-Aubert can help illustrate these ideas:

> "In the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, people in Puerto Rico faced multiple barriers to requesting disaster assistance. Despite major power outages that lasted for weeks or months, and in some remote areas for a whole year, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) demanded that applications be filed solely via the internet or phone. With tens of thousands of families living under blue tarps donated by nonprofits or government agencies, legal needs were on the rise. While the first few weeks were a turmoil of training 400 lawyers and students, Ayuda Legal Puerto Rico's following months were spent in brigades visiting communities that were too remote for the U.S Army to reach. Ayuda Legal Puerto Rico supported thousands of people by educating them about disaster aid and filing their applications for disaster aid using a laptop and a hotspot, we soon realized the task was impossible.

> At the beginning, the rigidity of the legal profession moved the team to attempt to control community brigade calendars, community outreach activities, and the distribution of Know-Your-Rights materials for survivors. We were soon burnt out. Community leaders, aware of the situation, called us to a meeting and demanded to be trained. They demanded copies of the materials, a translation of the main technical requirements, a draft of a confidentiality agreement, and reams of paper. Within a few days, non-lawyers started to lead, coordinate, and carry out events such as calling people to apply for federal assistance and visiting bedridden elders who could not get to the official disaster relief centers at their homes. Because we realized that food and shelter insecurity was an inevitable consequence of this catastrophe, the goal was to complete as many applications as possible.
>
> Community leaders went beyond the existing protocols and decided to challenge the norms by creating a paper version of the application that they would later submit electronically. We would be the data entry people. They would lead the brigades, weeks before the government could create a comprehensive plan to open Disaster Relief Centers."[26]

Lawyers, in the words of one DHR convening participant, "know the cheat codes." Instead of operating as gatekeepers of legal knowledge, lawyers in the above example acted as community members and organizers. They realized capacity issues within their own organization, had the connections with community leaders and enough trust to have sincere conversations, and had the necessary bravery to give up their important position of authority in favor of community action. As a result, community members were empowered to address their own legal issues and, through their on-the-ground experience, created a novel approach to ensure that the largest number of individuals possible were registered for FEMA assistance. This level of collaboration, connection, and courage is necessary to fix this country's broken disaster recovery system.

Legal Education

A point that was heavily referenced in conversations at the DHR convening was the availability of legal knowledge to community members and organizers. This is also a central element to working towards legal empowerment. Through education, disaster survivors and members of disaster-impacted communities can subvert what has traditionally been a system of inequality and oppression into a powerful tool of empowerment and equitable disaster recovery. Simultaneously, the dissemination of legal information and knowledge lessens the burden on often overworked legal aid providers struggling to provide legal assistance to all who need it. The use of legal education strategies supports legal empowerment efforts and increases access to justice for disaster survivors.

One of the most acute barriers to access to justice, especially after disasters, is the lack of "legal awareness" – e.g. the lack of understandable legal rules, information about what is supposed to exist under the law, what prevails in practice, and popular knowledge of rights. This lack of awareness is often tied to other inequities experienced by a disaster survivor and their community, including low incomes and lack of access to education.[27] These barriers prevent disaster survivors from using the court system, identifying legal issues, and attempting to remedy their situation themselves. Eliminating these barriers, however, is essential not only for disaster survivors to access the assistance they need to fully recover after disasters, but also for disaster survivors and their communities to be fully empowered to address issues and change the system that created these barriers in the first place.

UNORTHODOX FORMATS OF LEGAL EDUCATION

As discussed in the media section of this toolkit, organizations are encouraged to make use of social media to expand and diversify their approaches to reaching various audiences. Similarly, social media provides an opportunity for legal organizations to experiment with new and dynamic ways of sharing information in ways that are clearer, funnier, and more attention grabbing than an information table at a community event or a recorded presentation on legal resources.

Legal information provided via social media is unique due to the algorithms that control what posts viewers see. Content itself may appear on the phone or computer screen of someone who is not explicitly looking for it but who may desperately need it. In addition, social media allows instantaneous sharing of legal information across wide distances, increasing its reach. Someone who comes across a social media post with information on disaster recovery may not be experiencing a disaster at that time, but they may know someone who is working through the FEMA application process and can share it with them.

Many legal organizations have been working to expand legal information beyond information booths and community meetings. Here are two examples:

Emergency Legal Responders

DHRC member Emergency Legal Responders (ELR) is a women-led organization committed to addressing disparities in disaster aid that stem from systemic inequities. In addition to providing trainings for legal and social service providers on common disaster-related challenges and conducting legal clinics focused on legal empowerment in the aftermath of disasters, ELR releases credible, collaborative, mobile-friendly legal resources on disaster recovery issues. This disaster-rights education campaign ensures free access to essential legal information through user-friendly guides, explanatory videos, and virtual and in-person educational events. Their materials focus on disaster preparedness, survivor rights, post-disaster services, and long-term recovery strategies.

ELR shares engaging information sheets that capture attention on social media and convey information quickly to those scrolling through Instagram. Their video content is casual and direct, filmed on mobile phones with ELR members talking directly to the camera. This bite-sized legal content is easy to share and repost on social media, increasing the reach of their information well beyond their direct followers.

Instead of seeking to establish credibility and trust with viewers based on how "lawyerly" they look (e.g., whether they wear suits and carry leatherbound books), ELR utilizes the casual nature of their social media presence to establish personal connections with viewers to build credibility and trust. They also periodically host FEMA- and disaster law-themed bar trivia nights!

Bay Area Legal Services' Hurricane and Disaster Relief Videos

A legal educator does not need to belong to a nimble national organization to break out of the shackles of stodgy legal information formats. In 2023, Bay Area Legal Services' Disaster Relief Project and the Florida Disaster Legal Aid Helpline released a series of informative, tongue-and-cheek videos covering different aspects of disaster legal issues for the public.

The video series, presented by two staff attorneys in a disconcerting deadpan, reviews information ranging from how survivors can file FEMA applications to showing what legal documents should be included in evacuation kits. This information is presented in occasionally absurdist ways. For example, the presenters don football helmets with camcorders taped to their tops as crude Go-Pros to provide a personal POV of how to read a FEMA denial letter, include a picture of Mr. Bean in a folder of disaster-related documents, and nearly drown in a swimming pool. The videos do not satirize the disaster recovery system directly, but one can detect a hint of sarcasm when they inform disaster survivors that they can find the location of FEMA Disaster Recovery Centers "at this easy-to-remember address" and the words "https://egateway.fema.gov/ESF6/DRCLocator" appear on the screen.

This video series stands out as an example of how two attorneys can use unorthodox methods to create new ways to deliver legal information in a funny and engaging manner.

Community-based organizations and legal aid attorneys can work together to provide legal training to community members. These can take the form of stand-alone Know-Your-Rights events in community buildings or online, at community functions, and on social media. By using plain language, these trainings can not only inform community members on how to respond to their own legal problems, but also help lawyers identify broader or systemic legal issues that they can use more intensive legal methods to respond to. It also deepens the relationships between lawyers and community-based organizations – something that will pay dividends throughout the process.

The content of legal trainings should address disaster-specific issues, such as how to apply for assistance, and common barriers, including title documentation issues, civil rights issues, and more. The content should be as expansive as possible and include information regarding self-help legal fixes to ensure that attendees are empowered and trained to share this information with the rest of their community.

Legal aid representatives who attended the DHR convening also found success educating emergency management officials, government officials, and judges in disaster-related civil rights issues, allowing them to better avoid common issues that arise during the recovery process. As referenced earlier in this guide, emergency managers are often nervous about facing lawsuits. By explaining to emergency managers what exactly they need to do in order to comply with civil rights law, legal aid attorneys can help ensure such lawsuits are not needed.

Partnering with legal researchers and think tanks can help organizations parse through complex areas of law quickly and efficiently and identify how complicated rules are impacting or assisting households with low incomes impacted by disasters.

Finally, it is important to note that efforts to expand access to justice and spur legal empowerment require accessibility. This includes translation for individuals who may lack proficiency in English, as well as interpretation services for individuals with audio/visual-related disabilities. It also requires that events focused on providing community members with legal information are physically accessible so that everyone in a community can access them.

BEST PRACTICES

- Conduct regular and continuing legal training for community members that is accessible to everyone in a community by ensuring physical access, interpretation, and translation services.
- The most expansive amount of legal information possible should be shared via training so that community members can take on as many legal issues for themselves as they are able.
- Legal aid organizations should work with community-based organizations to plan and conduct legal information presentations. Legal aid organizations should, to the utmost extent possible, educate and train community-based organizations in providing this legal information to community members at other times.
- Legal aid organizations should pursue opportunities to train emergency managers, judges, and court personnel in disaster-related issues to ensure that potential legal issues are avoided.

EXAMPLES AND STRATEGIES

- Legal organizations should identify community leaders who can be trained in as many legal procedures as is practical prior to a disaster occurring to support legal education in disaster-impacted communities. Organizations can help these leaders establish teams of community members to provide legal information and assistance to their friends and neighbors.
- Organizations should explore ways to think of outside-the-box ways to share legal information. Think of ways that are engaging to a wide variety of audiences, including younger disaster survivors and those using social media.

Legal Aid Capacity

"For low-income households, there is one legal aid attorney for every 7,000 to 10,000 cases. We don't have the people to do the work. We need resources, we need outreach, and we need education." – STEPHANIE DUKE, DISABILITY RIGHTS TEXAS, HOUSTON, TX AT THE DHR CONVENING.

Legal aid capacity needs to be maintained and expanded in the aftermath of a disaster.

Legal aid organizations represent disaster-impacted individuals in their FEMA appeals, protect disaster survivors from unscrupulous contractors, clear clouded home titles and sort out estates, and much more. However, there are not enough legal aid lawyers to meet the growing needs of disaster-impacted households, increasing the barriers to legal access faced by many low-income communities.

By partnering across legal aid organizations and with other non-legal organizations, legal tools can reach more individuals, and legal experts can shift their focus to ensuring that the most impacted areas get the legal assistance resources they need.

Templates

By creating and disseminating legal template letters, legal aid attorneys can help disaster survivors advocate for themselves. In doing so, legal aid attorneys can serve more households, without spending limited staff capacity to help each individual household.

Community-based organizations can help legal aid organizations by helping them to widely disseminate legal templates to the broader community. This joint effort can help establish a level of trust between these organizations and community members and directly assist disaster survivors in addressing barriers to their full recovery.

FEMAAPPEALS.ORG

FEMAAppeals.org is a website created in 2013 by Advocates for Disaster Justice, a partnership between DHRC-member Lone Star Legal Aid, DHRC-member Probono.net, the National Legal Aid and Defender Association (NLADA), and the Standing Committee on Pro Bono & Public Service and the Center for Pro Bono of the American Bar Association.

While FEMA denies a significant share of applications for assistance, particularly from applicants with lower incomes, only a small number of disaster survivors appeal FEMA's decision. One of the reasons why applicants so rarely appeal FEMA determinations is the requirement that the disaster survivor draft an appeal letter explaining the circumstances of their application and why they believe they are eligible for assistance. Because there is no standard, official form or appeals document to fill out, each applicant must create their own letter. For many disaster survivors, especially those with lower incomes or who are from historically marginalized communities, this can be a daunting task.

FEMAAppeals.org uses an interactive, automated interview program that generates an appeal letter based on the disaster survivors' specific answers to questions about their disaster damage. While the website cautions disaster survivors to ask a lawyer to review the letter, the website is exceptionally useful for disaster survivors.

The service has been used over 14,000 times since it was created in 2013, dramatically reducing the burden on legal aid organizations while empowering disaster survivors.

You can access the interactive interview program here.

You can find out more about Advocates for Disaster Justice here.

Funding

Legal aid representatives at the DHR convening emphasized the need for funding to support their work before and after a disaster. In particular, legal aid attorneys called for greater operating funds that can be flexibly used to meet the needs of disaster-impacted communities without burdensome requirements.

Legal aid attorneys are on the frontlines of disaster recovery, working to assist communities impacted by disaster through representation and legal information. Having access to a legal aid attorney can significantly improve the likelihood that a disaster-impacted community can fully recover.

Many of the funding sources for legal aid are specifically earmarked for pro bono programs or come from the Legal Services Corporation (LSC) that prevent direct advocacy to policymakers. While interpretations of LSC restrictions vary from organization to organization, it often prevents collaboration between disaster recovery and resilience organizations and legal aid partners.

Due to these restrictions and overall lack of funding, community-based organizations should support direct, general operating grants before and after disasters to ensure that legal assistance is available to the most-impacted households.

Cooperation

Law is, by design, exceptionally intimidating and confusing. Legal empowerment, however, can occur when cooperative relationships are built with community leaders and community-based organizations. Organizations and disaster survivors benefit when legal experts participate in discussions about how to best achieve and implement disaster recovery and resiliency reforms. Legal aid and pro bono attorneys benefit from the knowledge organizations and disaster survivors have about where needs exist in a community. Most critically, this collaboration should start prior to a disaster to ensure that relationships and connections can quickly be leveraged to respond to such an event.

Cooperation between attorneys and community organizations is important for enforcing civil rights laws. Lawyers cannot take action to address a violation of civil rights laws, if they do not know who in the community has been harmed or what issues are arising. Organizers and community members that are trained on civil rights and due process laws can quickly flag any possible violations for lawyers to act on.

This cooperation should also occur among legal aid organizations. Legal aid members of the DHRC facilitate inter-organizational capacity sharing via long-term collaborative relationships. When one community or region experiences a disaster, partnering legal aid organizations shift capacity to help meet the immediate legal assistance needs of impacted households.

In Florida, DHRC member Legal Services of North Florida holds monthly meetings focused on disaster recovery for legal aid attorneys across the state. Notably, these conversations are held regardless of whether there is an ongoing disaster recovery effort in place, making it easier to coordinate when a disaster does occur.

BEST PRACTICES

- Organizations should work to create templates and automated systems to help disaster survivors assert their rights and make it easier for lawyers unfamiliar with disaster recovery to get involved.
- All organizations should support additional legal aid funding, particularly unrestricted general operating funds, to support efforts in the aftermath of disasters.
- Legal aid and community-based organizations should work together to establish partnerships before disasters occur to create the channels needed to share legal information with disaster survivors and other legal aid attorneys.

EXAMPLES AND STRATEGIES

- Establish regular working groups for disaster lawyers working in the same region or state to ensure that connections are made and that all have situational awareness regarding legal aid capacity and efforts.
- Talk with disaster survivors and community-based organizations to discover if there are any forms or documents that they often have difficulty completing. Work with them to create an automated website to simplify the process of creating a disaster-related legal form or letter. Work with the community organization and survivors to ensure that disaster survivors are aware and can utilize the website.

Intentionality and Legal Action

"We need to use lawsuits to get to the real solutions. We need to treat these issues as systemic challenges instead of playing whack-a-mole." – ANDREANECIA MORRIS, HOUSINGLOUISIANA AT THE DHR CONVENING

Sometimes, litigation is needed to help advance the goals of community-based organizations and disaster survivors. Litigation often gets the attention of policymakers and media, allowing organizations to advance needed systemic reforms.

Legal action, however, cannot exist in a vacuum. Taking legal action without involvement or awareness of the organizing efforts taking place around an issue can lessen its effectiveness or, at worst, actively harm disaster survivors. Engaging in legal strategies in conjunction with community-based organizers can strengthen legal efforts, such as by using coordinated public narratives and leveraging political pressure, improving the odds of a successful outcome.

Coordination

Many of the legal organizations participating in the DHR convening report that working with community-based organizations can amplify their impact. Community-based organizations or disasters survivors can serve as plaintiffs in legal cases or draw attention to legal efforts in media or through organizing strategies.

Issues can occur, however, when the lack of collaboration leads to the duplication of efforts. Organizers working around a specific issue might not realize that a legal aid organization is working to address the same issue via legal action. Legal organizations might be working to identify potential plaintiffs might not know that organizations helping survivors document stories.

Relationships between legal aid organizations and community-based organizations should be developed before a disaster even occurs, ensuring that lines of communication and cooperation can be activated in the aftermath of a disaster. Including legal organizations in conversations around community-level disaster planning – and vice versa – can be an excellent way to begin fostering these relationships.

Effective coordination may require legal organizations to manage expectations about the extent to which legal action can address an issue. While many attorneys may have had similar conversations with individual clients, it can be a difficult discussion to navigate in the context of

a disaster. Lawsuits can take years, are expensive, and may have little actual impact on a disaster survivor's recovery other than the receipt of an apology from a government agency. Establishing higher levels of trust with community-based groups can allow these conversations to occur more easily and increase coordination.

Direct partnerships between legal aid organizations and community-based organizations can, at times, be just as effective as a filed lawsuit or administrative action. The presence of legal aid organizations in a coalition can create the implied threat of legal action. This implied threat can be increased by featuring or showcasing a legal aid organization during the messaging and media portion of the campaign or inviting a legal aid attorney to speak during press conferences or media events.

Even if direct legal action is not the best strategy immediately, changing factors can make it more attractive later. By connecting with community-based organizations throughout the process, legal aid organizations can better anticipate when this point arrives and act upon it with greater cooperation and trust from involved non-legal organizations.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, FURIA Inc., a DHRC partner in Puerto Rico, worked directly with community-based organizations to assist with FEMA assistance appeals, anticipating that a future lawsuit would be necessary. After working together with the organizations, they were able to file a lawsuit with 14 community-based organizations as plaintiffs. These plaintiff-organizations were then able to use the media to increase attention to the lawsuit, which brought pressure on the territorial government to settle.

Over time, the relationships between disaster lawyers and community-based organizations and organizers will need to deepen. At the same time, it is important to ensure that lawyers do not take the lead on planning community-based organizing efforts; instead organizing decisions and policy solutions should remain where they belong – within the disaster-impacted community and with disaster survivors. This principle is likely familiar to any lawyer who has done movement-based work.

Legal Aid Data

Through legal aid intakes and client referrals, many legal organizations collect large amounts of data regarding immediate needs and deficiencies in the country's disaster response and recovery system. Despite the value of such data in demonstrating barriers to recovery in disaster-impacted communities, there has not been any standardized best practice or method to capture and analyze the breadth of this important data.

Because FEMA rarely shares granular data on its disaster recovery programs, it can be difficult to comprehend the full scope of the barriers that exist for households with low incomes to apply for assistance. Legal intake data could provide a workable alternative to this unavailable data.

Researchers and academic institutions should partner with legal aid organizations and community-based organizations to help identify any patterns that might indicate programmatic issues or systemic inequities in disaster recovery. Legal aid attorneys can work with data researchers to integrate data collection activities into their work and better capture critical data points when interacting with their clients.

On the other hand, community-based organizations often excel at collecting on-the-ground data that can be extremely helpful in the lead up to legal action. In Houston, DHRC-member legal aid partners worked with DHRC-aligned organizers and community members to collect information about stormwater drainage. These data, collected throughout the community, directly informed the legal action filed on their behalf. Given the capacity constraints of many legal aid organizations, it can be an effective strategy to rely on community-based organizations to gather the data necessary to establish and back up a cause of action or administrative complaint.

Uplifting Community Voices

The administrative process used for adjudicating a wide variety of disaster-related issues can often be dehumanizing and silencing. The process, by design, removes the personality, emotions, and background experiences of disaster survivors in favor of creating a sterilized environment for the adjudication of the questions of law and fact at issue. While this is a common issue in movement-oriented and community-level lawyering, during disaster recovery, this can be uniquely painful for disaster survivors. Legal aid organizations must ensure that the voices and experiences of disaster survivors remain valued, even if a magistrate or judge might view them as irrelevant.

Ensuring that any legal strategy continues to value the experiences and stories of disaster survivors can be difficult for legal aid organizations that lack the capacity to effectively create spaces where disaster survivors feel that they are being heard and have agency. Given the high workload of such organizations, especially after a disaster, this can be a difficult task to accomplish while also ensuring that an attorney is meeting the requirements of multiple legal cases and their clients. However, legal aid organizations can work with community-based organizations to provide opportunities for disaster survivors to be heard. This might include a pub-

lic meeting for lawyers to hear the experiences of disaster survivors on the topic of a legal action, or it might be a request in a settlement agreement for an agency or state or local government to provide such opportunities for public comment moving forward. While the specific asks and format of such story-sharing events will depend on the desires of the disaster survivors and legal case in question, legal aid organizations should remain open to potential outlets for disaster survivor experiences and integrate them into any legal strategy in conjunction with their conversations with community members and community-based organizations.

Post-Lawsuit

One issue raised during the DHR convening was the need for better coordination and attention around the "post-lawsuit" phase of any collaboration. The success of a lawsuit must be measured by whether the community is helped and the problem at issue has been solved.

It can be supremely disappointing for lawyers to celebrate a victory when the underlying harm that spurred the lawsuit or complaint is still occurring. This undermines current and future efforts to create trust and effective partnerships between the community and legal organizations. Legal organizations should work to ensure that community members know the potential outcomes of the case and how those outcomes may impact disaster survivors so that expectations are managed and that everyone involved participates with their eyes wide open.

Implementation issues are common in the aftermath of successful disaster-related legal action. Even if a case is victorious and funds are distributed to the community or a policy is changed, participating legal organizations must ensure that compliance and enforcement fully remain consistent for as long as possible. Failure to do so leaves the community just as disempowered as they were before legal efforts began. As such, community members and lawyers should view the successful completion of the case as the start of an ongoing enforcement monitoring effort that may require follow-up legal action.

BEST PRACTICES

- Community-based organizations should invite legal aid partners to participate during organizing discussions and meetings, and legal aid organizations should be willing and able to join these efforts.
- Lawyers and legal aid organizations should avoid taking a leadership role in organizing discussions in favor of amplifying community voices and decision-making.

- Legal organizations should create spaces to host and share the stories and experiences of disaster survivors and work to include these stories within their legal work. Disaster survivors must be heard and involved in the process, even if a court might view such stories as irrelevant.
- Legal organizations should ensure that the data collected during intake of disaster survivors can be anonymized and used by community members to educate policymakers about the barriers to disaster recovery.
- After lawsuits or other legal actions are concluded, legal organizations should continue to track enforcement to ensure compliance and that disaster survivors receive the assistance they are entitled to. Victory occurs when the issue or problem is resolved, not when a court or administrative judge finds in favor of your client.

EXAMPLES AND STRATEGIES

- Work with community-based organizations to host meetings where legal aid attorneys working on a legal action can hear directly from disaster survivors and educate them about how such a legal action would impact them.
- Streamline intake data and create an online database to track legal issues arising in real time. This anonymized data can be used by organizers and assistance organizations to make important decisions about where to place capacity and attention.

Avenues for Action

"The good and the bad about the disaster space is that it touches every law in existence. We can use other areas of law in the context of disasters. Laws that have been on the books for a while." – ALICIA EDWARDS, NC LEGAL AID, GREENSBORO, NC, AT THE DHR CONVENING.

Legal action can allow community-based organizations to circumvent deadlocked legislatures or recalcitrant government agencies and officials, provide important information to disaster survivors and advocates, and directly increase access to recovery resources for impacted households.

This section is not a step-by-step guide to conducting legal action, nor does it encompass all possibilities for legal action in the interests of protecting disaster survivors, at-risk communities, or reforming the country's broken disaster recovery system. For additional information on legal action after disasters, see the National Disaster Attorney Guidebook from Equal Justice Works and the American Bar Association's Young Lawyers Division.

National Database of Legal Strategies and Wins

DHR convening attendees called for the creation of a national clearinghouse of legal strategies and victories as the first step to achieving a better-coordinated legal effort to achieve disaster recovery reform. Legal aid attorneys do not have time to attend every meeting or read every disaster-related case from across the country. As a result, successful legal actions are not effectively communicated to legal aid organizations that could replicate them, and legal practitioners spend significant time and effort independently devising similar legal tactics and strategies.

Given the wide range of legal tactics utilized after a disaster, it can be difficult to collect every disaster-related legal decision, effort, or ruling via conventional legal compendiums. Instead, a collaborative effort among disaster lawyers and organizations to collect and report on successful legal strategies could help accomplish this task. Knowing what has worked in other communities, when it worked, and why it worked will allow for similar efforts to be replicated in areas across the country without the siloed trial and error process that currently exists.

A free and open-access collaborative compendium of disaster law cases could also serve as a useful nexus for lawyers seeking to find out more about legal efforts around disaster recovery and include best practices. Although a single organization may not have the capacity necessary to take on such a project, a collaborative approach that allows lawyers to share and summarize their efforts could make it more feasible to create such a database.

Administrative Complaints

Because disaster survivors do not have a private right of action to access FEMA assistance, wrongful denials and other harmful actions by FEMA are rarely tried in court. FEMA reviews and assesses applications for assistance and appeals of denials without a hearing, making it difficult to track which legal strategies have been successful and preventing recurring, systemic issues from being elevated to higher courts for precedent-making decisions. Similarly, federal agencies, including FEMA and HUD, require that complainants go through an internal complaint process before being elevated to the court system. This can delay resolutions for disaster survivors alleging discrimination or the misuse of government funds.

Given these limitations, administrative complaints have been used widely by legal organizations that are part of the DHRC and were raised frequently by DHR convening participants as a central avenue for legal action. While the decisions issued to address administrative complaints do not carry the full force of a judicial decision, they can lead to important policy changes within federal agencies and their grantees – without requiring a lengthy and messy legislative effort in Congress.

FAIR SHARE HOUSING SETTLEMENT CASE

In 2015, many victims of Hurricane Sandy were facing challenges with the Superstorm Sandy recovery programs administered by New Jersey. Low-income renters, who were far more likely to be Black and Latino than impacted homeowners, were offered only small amounts of assistance that did not allow them to return to their pre-disaster communities and drove many households to relocate long distances from their former homes. Moreover, the state allocated far more federal disaster recovery funds to homeowners than renters, though many homeowners were also unable to access assistance.

It became clear that the state's response to the disaster was discriminatory and unlawful. Because the state refused to voluntarily correct its wrongdoing, the only viable option was to take legal action. DHRC member Fair Share Housing Center, the Latino Action Network, and the NAACP New Jersey State Conference joined forces to file a federal fair housing complaint against the state in 2014 alleging that the state's distribution of assistance violated the federal Fair Housing Act and Title VI of the *Civil Rights Act of 1964*. The plaintiffs highlighted the disproportionate impact of the storm on low-income communities and communities of color, showing that even though approximately 40% of the damage from the storm impacted renter households, the majority of whom were led by people of color, only 20% of state aid reached these households. The case was successful and resulted in the largest fair housing settlement in history, leading to over a half-billion dollars being shifted to rebuilding programs supporting these neglected communities through an agreement between the plaintiffs and the State of New Jersey.

The settlement required the state to replace and develop affordable rental housing in the nine counties most impacted by Sandy, create a new program to serve low-income homeowners whose homes were damaged by the storm, provide additional funding to support housing for people with disabilities impacted by the storm, and dedicate additional rental assistance to support low-income renters and to ensure all denied applications for the primary disaster recovery program would be reviewed and reconsidered. In addition, the state agreed to conduct outreach activities and provide housing counseling to low- and moderate-income disaster survivors, including those who are not English proficient. The settlement was an important step forward in ensuring that all impacted New Jerseyans, not just a select few, had access to the resources they needed to recover from Superstorm Sandy. It also paved the way for more adequate and equitable use of federal funding.

As a result of this legal action, more than 7,000 low-income families were able to access new or rebuilt affordable housing, and hundreds of homeowners were made eligible for assistance.

The settlement also helped spur national change. In 2016, five federal agencies, coordinated by the U.S. Department of Justice, issued the first-ever federal civil rights guidance document setting forth civil rights obligations for all recipients of federal disaster recovery funds. This landmark guidance drew on the frameworks of the Sandy settlement and lessons learned from other storms, such as Hurricane Katrina, to create standards for equitable resource distribution and language access in disaster recovery. HUD also incorporated clearer equity standards in its requirements for distributing federal funds, including measures to avoid a repeat of the severe underfunding of renter needs initially seen in Superstorm Sandy.

You can read more about this Superstorm Sandy Administrative Action here.

DHR convening participants highlighted the role of legal aid attorneys as "watchdogs," using administrative law efforts to help ensure greater compliance with applicable federal law.

DHRC member Lonestar Legal Aid in Harris County, Texas successfully used administrative action via the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to prevent systemic illegal dumping into open drainage ditches in low-income communities. DHRC member Texas Housers has filed many administrative complaints to HUD regarding discriminatory state-level plans to distribute funding inequitably. One administrative complaint, filed by DHRC members during Hurricane Ike and Hurricane Dolly, resulted in a requirement that state agencies demonstrate that HUD funds would be used to affirmatively further fair housing in their jurisdictions.

In North Carolina, DHRC member Legal Aid of North Carolina spoke at the DHR convening about a successful legal action in 2024, which reversed a state requirement for disaster survivors to provide title documentation for their homes to receive assistance. In response to the complaint, HUD reached a voluntary compliance agreement (VCA) with North Carolina that directed state agencies to remove the requirement and work with greater focus to enroll impacted households in the state's long-term disaster recovery program. The VCA led to greater access to disaster assistance for residents of mobile home parks and Black households, who are more likely to lack clear title to their homes.

Civil Rights Law

At the DHR convening, participants frequently spoke about using administrative complaints to increase enforcement of civil rights law and undo harm caused by violations. Agencies purposefully obfuscate the legal rights of disaster survivors, hiding behind intricate systems and explanations to mask when civil rights violations are committed. Despite this, organizations have been successful using landmark civil rights laws, including Title VI of the *Civil Rights Act* and the *Americans with Disabilities Act* (ADA), to assist disaster survivors and spur policy changes.

The first step to successfully pursuing civil rights lawsuits is educating disaster survivors on their rights and what actions disaster survivors should take when their rights have been violated.

DHR convening participants have found much success in using due process arguments to circumvent the difficulty of filing lawsuits against federal agencies. One important example is *ACORN v. FEMA,* a case brought by Public Citizen on behalf of ACORN in the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. The lawsuit argued that FEMA had violated the due process rights of evacuees denied long-term housing assistance by failing to provide adequate explanations for why they were denied. Without specific information on why they were denied, disaster survivors were unable to appeal, violating, as the plaintiffs argued, their right of due process under the Fourteenth Amendment. Although the court denied ACORN's request for a temporary restraining order, the court rejected FEMA's arguments saying that "[i]t is unfortunate, if not incredible, that FEMA and its counsel could not devise a sufficient notice system to spare these beleaguered evacuees the added burden of federal litigation to vindicate their constitutional rights."[28]. The court ordered FEMA "to provide, as soon as possible, more detailed explanations for the denials of evacuees' eligibility for housing assistance benefits under Section 408, including the factual and statutory basis for the denial and more fulsome instructions as to how each evacuee may either cure their ineligibility problem(s) or proceed with an appeal."[29]

As a result of the action, 1,063 households were provided housing benefits for which they had previously been denied. The action also spurred FEMA to review and update the language in their denial letters to better specify why a denial has occurred, although there is still much work to be done on that subject.

As this case and the above section on administrative action show, there are multiple legal avenues to pursue civil rights-related litigation. A list of relevant civil rights statutes covering disaster survivors and disaster recovery programs is provided here:

- Title VI of the *Civil Rights Act of 1964*
- Title IX of the *Education Amendments Act of 1972*
- *Rehabilitation Act of 1973*, as amended, Sections 504 and 508
- *Age Discrimination Act of 1975*
- *Civil Rights Restoration Act of 1987*
- *Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act*, as amended (the *Stafford Act*), Sections 308-309 (42 U.S.C. §§ 5151-52)
- *Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act* (PKEMRA), Section 513 (6 U.S.C. § 321b) and Section 616 (42 U.S.C. § 5196f).
- *Architectural Barriers Act of 1968*
- *Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990*
- Title 44 C.F.R. Part 7, Subpart A, Nondiscrimination in FEMA-assisted Programs – General
- Title 44 C.F.R. Part 7, Subpart E, Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Age in Programs or Activities receiving Federal Financial Assistance from FEMA
- Title 44 C.F.R. Part 16, Enforcement of Nondiscrimination on the Basis of [Disability] in Programs or Activities Conducted by the Federal Emergency Management Agency
- Title 44 C.F.R. Part 19, Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Sex in Education Programs Receiving Federal Financial Assistance
- Title 44 C.F.R. § 206.11, Nondiscrimination in Disaster Assistance
- FEMA Policy 305-111-1, FEMA Tribal Policy (Rev. 2)
- FEMA Policy 101-002-02, FEMA Tribal Consultation Policy (Rev. 1)

Freedom of Information Act Requests

Filing Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests is another strategy used by legal experts. While it is important to state that one does not need to be a lawyer to file a FOIA request – many reporters file FOIA requests, for example – it is placed in this section because it is often an important service that lawyers and legal organizations offer community-based organizations.

FOIA requests – and similar opportunities at the state level – are useful in disaster recovery and resilience reform efforts for two primary reasons. First, they can be used to gain access to data or information that would otherwise stay out of the public eye. FOIAs can be filed to access specific data sets, training manuals, communications between government officials on certain subjects, all of which can be useful to make the case for reforms, assess systemic issues, or help support future legal action. However, some federal agencies are more responsive than others when it comes to responding to FOIA requests. Requests can languish for an exceptionally long time when an agency drags its feet in responding, requires arbitrary reviews of the information in question, or claims that the amount of paperwork necessary to fill the request requires additional time or monetary fees. Organizations should be aware that overly broad requests for information can result in the needed data or documents, or it could result in the disclosure of a massive amount of paperwork, requiring significant capacity to sort through upon receipt.

An additional reason for filing a FOIA request is to support organizing efforts. In this case, the filer may have no reasonable expectation that the agency will respond in a timely manner. Instead, the request is filed to bring more public attention to the underlying issues. FOIA requests can demonstrate the lengths to which community members are able to go to find the specific data in question.

It is important to ensure that the information an organization is seeking is not otherwise available; an intensive search of information available online, as well as a conversation with agency staff, can assist in determining if the information you are seeking already exists in a publicly accessible place and format. It is also good practice to connect with other organizations working in your area or working on disaster recovery and resilience efforts in other communities to ensure that such a request has not already been made or if they know where to find the information or data in question. This can help prevent needless duplication of efforts.

It is useful for organizers and community members to review potential FOIA requests with a legal professional to ensure that the correct level of specificity is used, and that this legal strategy matches organizing goals.

FILING A FOIA REQUEST

There is no set form you are required to fill out or one-stop-shop available to help submit a FOIA request. Requests must be submitted directly to FOIA officials at different government agencies, and each agency maintains slightly different standards and timelines for responding to requests.

Most FOIA requests do not involve fees. However, if a request requires a significant amount of staff time to fulfill, an agency may request funds from you to meet it. Depending on the agency, this might be leveraged to prevent access to the information or otherwise avoid the work necessary to meet the request. Fee waivers are available under FOIA and can be requested at any time throughout the request process. Fee waivers are granted only when the information requested is in the "public interest" because it is likely to contribute significantly to the public understanding of the operations and activities of the government and the request is not primarily in the commercial interest of the requester. The standard does not depend on the requestor's ability to pay, just whether the information requested is in the public interest.

Requests are processed by federal agencies on a first-come, first-served basis. However, some requests may be deemed by the agency as "complex," meaning that they would require someone with expertise in a specific field or a large amount of time to process.

If you need the information quickly, you can request "expedited processing" to skip ahead of the existing line of FOIA requests. Whether or not you receive expedited processing depends on whether you can demonstrate that you have a "compelling need" for the records. This requires showing that either a) failure to receive the records on an expedited basis could be reasonably expected to pose an imminent threat to the life or physical safety of an individual; or b) if the person filing a request is a "person primarily engaged in disseminating information" (like a reporter or, potentially, an community organization) and demonstrates that there is an "urgency to inform the public concerning actual or alleged federal government activity." Some agencies have additional standards for expedited processing, which are usually described in the FOIA section of their regulations.

The federal government maintains FOIA.gov to help streamline FOIA requests to federal agencies. The website allows you to search for different government agencies, view their FOIA standards, and directly submit a FOIA request. It is advised that advocates share a draft of their planned FOIA request with a legal professional before submitting it to increase the chance that fees will be waived, that the request will be expedited, or that the request will be filled at all.

Regulatory Comments

An additional, quasi-legal strategy raised by participants of the DHR convening is the engagement of community members in the regulatory process. Submitting regulatory comments allows disaster survivors to have a voice in how regulations are drafted, and by using unique storytelling and community involvement, it can be a powerful way to educate policymakers.

When Congress changes an existing law or creates a new one, federal agencies must implement the law through regulations. Federal agencies also review existing regulations and amend them, even when there are no changes to the underlying statute. Both the creation of a new regulation and the modification of an existing regulation provide organizations with an opportunity to shape policy and educate policymakers.

Congress passes legislation and the President signs it into a law. Usually, these laws spell out the general intent of Congress but do not include all technical details needed to putting Congress' wishes into practice. Regulations add those important details.

Two publications are key to the federal regulatory process. The *Federal Register* is a daily publication that contains proposed regulations, final rules, official notices, presidential documents, and other items. All final regulations published in the *Federal Register* are eventually gathered together ("codified") in the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR). The federal government uses the words "regulation" and "rule" interchangeably; however, some federal agencies define a "rule" as a document published in the *Federal Register* and a "regulation" when as its codified form in the CFR.

Before publishing proposed regulations, federal agencies must send them to the Office of Management and Budget's (OMB's) Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs (OIRA), which in theory has up to 90 days to review the regulations, although OIRA has been known to hold on to proposed regulations for more than 90 days. Rules under review by OIRA, as well as their status, are listed here. Once cleared by OIRA, the federal agency must publish a "notice of proposed rulemaking" (NPRM) in the *Federal Register* that contains the proposed language of the regulations. The public must have an opportunity to submit written comments, and there is generally a 60-day period to comment.

Once the comment period on the proposed rule is closed, the federal agency must consider all comments and may make changes based upon them. Once those changes are complete, and after another review by OIRA, the federal agency publishes a final rule in the *Federal Register*. In the introduction (preamble) to the final rule, the federal agency must

discuss all meaningful comments received and explain why each was accepted or rejected. In addition to the actual text of the changed or new regulations, the final rule must state a date when it will go into effect, generally within 30 or 60 days.

DHRC members have historically found that FEMA only very occasionally releases *Federal Register* notices regarding its household-level programs. However, changes to resilience programs and other non-response programs do use this process. This is because a significant portion of the rules for assistance programs are created and modified outside of FEMA's regulations, allowing for quicker changes to program rules but also removing the public's ability to submit comments. A significant request for information and reform of FEMA's Individual Assistance program did occur in 2024 after spending several years at OIRA, permitting DHRC members to submit comments calling for reform. Unlike FEMA, HUD commonly utilizes the *Federal Register* for regulatory updates and requests for information, which are used to improve long-term recovery operations and housing-related resilience efforts.

Sometimes, organizations will ask supporters to submit identical comment letters in response to a *Federal Register* notice. While this can be useful in showing the federal agency the broad support for policy change, it is less effective as a stalling tactic when the rule is particularly bad. Federal agencies commonly combine form letters or letters that have a high degree of identical language into just one letter, negating all the work organizers did to get supporters to submit them. As a result, drafting a unique comment letter in your own language is the most successful way to influence the regulatory process and educate government officials.

Regulatory comments present a unique opportunity to directly weigh in with a federal agency regarding policy. There are precious few opportunities for direct feedback to federal agencies where the agency is obligated to respond. As such, it is important to ensure that members of disaster-impacted communities are educated and able to respond to such opportunities either directly or via a community-based organization. Simply asking disaster survivors to submit form letters is not sufficient to ensure these stories reach policymakers. Instead, organizations should work with community members to submit unique comments that directly contain their experiences in their own words, while using data or policy analysis to underscore their priorities.

HOW TO READ A REGULATION AND SUBMIT A COMMENT

How To Read The Federal Register

Both proposed and final rules are standard features in the *Federal Register*.

The opening heading will look like this (with different numbers and topics):

> **Department Of Housing And Urban Development**
>
> 24 CFR Part 990
>
> [Docket No. FR-4874-F-08]
>
> RIN 2577-AC51
>
> Revisions to the Public Housing Operating Fund Program
>
> - AGENCY: Office of the Assistant Secretary for Public and Indian Housing, HUD
> - **ACTION: Final rule**

Below the heading will be the following categories:

- SUMMARY: This is a short presentation of what is proposed or implemented and what the related issues and rulemaking objectives are.
- DATES: Here is either: "Comment due date," the date by which comments to proposed rules are due; or "Effective Date," the date the final rule will go into effect.
- ADDRESSES: For proposed regulations only, this section provides the room number and street address for sending written comments, although it is now preferable to submit comments electronically at www.regulations.gov
- FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: The name of an agency staff person responsible for the issue is presented, along with a phone number and office address.
- SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: This section is often called the "preamble" and can go on for many pages. It contains a detailed discussion of the issues and the rule-making objectives. The law or sections of a law that give legal authority for the regulations are generally mentioned. With final rules, there must also be a discussion of all of the significant public comments submitted, along with the agency's reasons for accepting or rejecting them.
- LIST OF SUBJECTS IN xx CFR PART *xxx*: The actual changes (or new provisions) begin at this heading. Key words are presented here.

At the very end, the document is dated and "signed" by the appropriate government official.

BEST PRACTICES

- Use administrative complaints in support of community requests and efforts; such efforts can include violations of civil rights law, constitutional rights, or other regulatory enforcement mechanisms.
- Legal aid organizations should prioritize rights-based education for disaster survivors and act as watchdogs to prevent the violation of their rights during disaster recovery.
- Legal aid organizations should work with community-based organizations to increase the number of regulatory comments submitted to federal agencies to educate them on the barriers to disaster recovery. These comment letters should always be unique to avoid being discarded.
- Disaster survivors should be fully assisted to allow them to be involved in the regulatory comment process.

STRATEGIES AND EXAMPLES

- Create a national database of successful legal actions in the disaster-related space, along with information on the filings, legal strategy, and context of such cases. The database can be collaborative in nature, making it easier to compile and manage.
- Work with community members and community-based organizations to host a "how-to" session on submitting regulatory comments. An automated system, like those used for FEMA Appeals discussed earlier in this section, could be utilized to help disaster survivors quickly create unique and truthful testimony demonstrating the need for reforms.
- Host discussions between community-based organizations and legal organizations to coordinate and streamline FOIA requests for disaster-related information. A database of recent FOIA requests and the results could help prevent duplicative requests.

RESEARCH COLLABORATION

"A rule of our research efforts [at the Disaster Justice Network] has always been to show up, shut up, figure out what people need help with that you can be of service to." – DR. NNENIA CAMPBELL, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE WILLIAM AVERETTE ANDERSON FUND FOR HAZARD AND DISASTER MITIGATION EDUCATION AND RESEARCH, BELLINGHAM, WA AT DHR CONVENING.

Disaster research in the United States began in the late 1940s following the conclusion of World War II and the proliferation of nuclear arms across the globe. The U.S. military wanted to know how U.S. residents would react should nuclear war erupt. Officials perhaps naively thought that, should the unthinkable occur, there would be a recovery, and they sought to plan for a post-nuclear-catastrophe world. To find some sort of analog for the end of human civilization, researchers looked to large-scale disasters as a stand in. As more and more researchers began to work in the disaster and post-disaster recovery space, a new discipline emerged as the Cold War slowly drew to a close.

Today, disaster research is a rapidly growing, albeit still young, field encompassing sociological research, geography, public health, and a wide variety of qualitative research fields. The relative youth of the field means that best practices and strategies for effective community-driven research are still in flux, although many academics and researchers – some of whom attended the DHR convening – are working to establish the frameworks needed to assist disaster-impacted communities and prevent extractive or exploitative research practices.

Discussions of "research" at the DHR convening covered several different uses of the term. These include qualitative study of disaster-impacted communities to understand the experiences and needs of disaster survivors as told in their words, as well as quantitative research focusing on data about housing and government assistance programs. Discussions also covered research that might come from an academic or research institution – like a university – or non-peer reviewed research conducted by community groups in the aftermath of a disaster. Discussions centered around how to use such research, how to encourage greater research into disasters' impacts on historically marginalized communities, how to grow partnerships between researchers and communities, and how to ensure that all of this occurs in a non-exploitative fashion that helps instead of harms disaster survivors. During the DHR convening, participants highlighted multiple best practices that can help organizations and disaster-impacted communities work towards these goals.

Research and Action

"We need to shift from doing our research 'on' communities to doing it 'for' communities to doing it 'with' communities." – CHRIS EMRICH, PROFESSOR OF ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCE AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION, UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA, ORLANDO, FL AT DHR CONVENING.

Many DHR convening attendees stated that they, as a practice, back up any argument they make with data and research. The combination of data and research with the stories of disaster survivors can form a powerful argument and educational tool showing the need for disaster recovery and resilience policy reform. Housing advocates have long used data to measure, visualize, and communicate their communities' unmet housing needs to inform policy at the national, state, and local levels. Ensuring the collection and use of data in federal advocacy around affordable housing was one of the reasons NLIHC was founded in 1974.

There are many ways to use research to educate policymakers about the need for reform. DHRC members have used research demonstrating the inequitable outcomes of disaster recovery programs to support legal arguments, include in factsheets and memos sent to the offices of policymakers, deploy in media and public information efforts, and more. They use research to efficiently and overwhelmingly demonstrate the truthfulness of disaster survivors' stories and demonstrate the scale of issues beyond just one neighborhood or household's experience.

However, using data to educate policymakers can be difficult, even for the most experienced practitioners. Below is a series of examples and best practices that were highlighted during discussions on the subject at the DHR convening.

Framing Data

How data is presented and what data is recorded is important to the success of efforts to integrate data into policy education. Researchers typically draft peer-reviewed papers with a research audience in mind, meaning that the conclusions and information provided are often recorded in highly technical language that is difficult for people, media, and policymakers to access. This information usually needs to be broken down and repackaged into easily understandable formats that can be used to underscore the truth of disaster survivor stories and the need for disaster recovery and resilience reform. When researchers talk about data and what the data show, the conversation can quickly become hyper-technical, alienating both policymakers and disaster survivors. By framing data effectively, this can be avoided.

Repackaged research should be used in a variety of different ways to educate the public and policymakers. Data can demonstrate that a particular disaster survivor's story is just one of countless other untold experiences within a disaster-impacted area. Data can also be used to refute an incorrect assumption held by policymakers that is driving harmful policy changes. To support these uses, organizations have found it useful to use simple graphs and charts to illustrate complex research conclusions. Excellent examples of such graphs and charts can be found in NLIHC's *The Gap* and *Out of Reach* reports, which boil down complex data about housing and unaffordability into graphs that tell a compelling story.

A word of caution is warranted, however: a simplified data illustration is a double-edged sword. It can be easy for individuals to draw incorrect conclusions if a chart or graph is not accompanied by effective explanations. Organizations must ensure that anyone using such tools understands the data that are being presented and can effectively explain these data to avoid incorrect conclusions. The best way to prevent misunderstanding is to rely on charts that need no further explanation – the message must be clear to all.

Importantly, the effective presentation of data can also be used to educate community members themselves. The research can give additional context to their experiences following a disaster and empower them to take informed stances on disaster recovery and resilience-related issues in their communities. While disaster survivors have significant experience and expertise navigating disasters, they may lack the academic credentials that unfortunately are required by some policymakers to add credibility to their testimony or demands. Arming disaster survivors with research and the ability to interpret and integrate that research into stories about their hard-won experience and expertise can increase the chances that disaster survivors are taken seriously by policymakers and give disaster survivors themselves the confidence to share with policymakers what their communities need.

An excellent example of this is the use of data to underscore a currently ongoing Title VI of the *Civil Rights Act of 1964* complaint filed by DHRC member Texas Housers regarding the state of Texas's distribution of HUD disaster mitigation funding in 2021. The organization included an analysis of census data and information on the initial distribution of the funds to demonstrate that areas that were less likely to have significant non-white populations were more likely to receive funding under the state program. Its complaint resulted in a decision by HUD that Texas had violated civil rights law. Although the enforcement of HUD's decision has been disappointing, data research played a central role in proving discrimination, providing a clear example of how to use data to help ensure disaster survivors receive the assistance needed for an equitable and complete recovery.

THE DISASTER EQUITY DATA PORTAL

The Disaster Equity Data Portal (DEDP) is an ongoing collaboration between disaster recovery organizers and DHRC members Louisiana Fair Housing Action Center, the Houston Organizing Movement for Equity (H.O.M.E), Fair Share Housing Center of New Jersey, Ayuda Legal Puerto Rico, and Texas Appleseed. The goal of this website is to use interactive data maps to show how major disasters harm communities. The website helps the public, media, and policymakers better understand who has been impacted by a disaster, who needs help the most, and whether disaster assistance programs are effectively reaching those communities. The website also shares accessible data about applications for assistance and approval rates.

Multiple dashboards provide several important types of information:

- Storm Impact and Damage are demonstrated by the number of FEMA Individual Assistance Applications (although this is often not a perfect indicator of damage due to barriers to applying for FEMA assistance).
- Social Vulnerability of different disaster-impacted areas are demonstrated via an overlay with data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Social Vulnerability Index (SVI). This allows for the quick identification of areas that are less resilient to disasters based on indicators such as wealth, infrastructure, and access to services.
- Equity and Outcomes are demonstrated using data released by FEMA on the demographics of applicants to show who is applying for assistance and whether those applications are being approved. Indicators, such as income and housing tenure, are included. There are also data on the amount of funds provided to each population group, allowing for a real-time glimpse of assistance program equity.

The Disaster Equity Portal recommends that the data be used to:

- Monitor the FEMA Individuals and Households Program to ensure funds are reaching the hardest-hit areas and people.
- Determine whether federal disaster recovery funding is equitable. For example, the Hurricane Harvey dashboard shows that wealthier households were more likely to have applications for assistance approved by FEMA and received more assistance on average than households with less wealth.

- Track differences in how federal disaster recovery programs are administered over time and between disasters. To illustrate the importance of this issue, consider two major hurricanes that hit the U.S. and its territories in 2022, Hurricane Fiona in Puerto Rico and Hurricane Ian in Florida. In Puerto Rico, nearly three times as many people applied for FEMA Individual Assistance as compared to Florida. As of February 25, 2023, however, only 17,000 households damaged by Hurricane Fiona received housing assistance, compared to 71,000 households damaged by Hurricane Ian in Florida.
- Educate policymakers on solutions to make the American disaster recovery system work better for everyone.

You can visit the Disaster Equity Data Portal here.

Data, Stories, and Accessibility

Quantitative data must be presented in combination with the stories of disaster survivors. Using too much data risks overlooking and undervaluing the experiences of disaster survivors, while providing too little data can risk undermining policy education efforts by not emphasizing the systemic and widespread nature of the issue or problem in question.

This can be a difficult balancing act with no clear formula for deciding how much is necessary. To ensure that disaster stories are being given effective space, organizing efforts must involve disaster survivors themselves in the decision-making process and ensure that they are able to fully access and understand the data. This allows them to make educated decisions on when and how to include data with their storytelling.

Scientific studies typically do not drive policy change, although they can inform them. What drives policy change are personal stories and experiences. As a result, research and data presented need to boost the personal stories and experiences being shared – not the other way around.

An additional point to note is the importance and utility of interactive and accessible data. Interactivity turns a chart or map into a useful tool, capturing individuals' attention and allowing the audience to view the data in the way that is most personal to them. For community members, this kind of format can be empowering, allowing them to create data conclusions for themselves as opposed to being just passive listeners or watchers.

Data must be accessible to all disaster survivors. This means two things: the data must be useable for individuals with audio/visual impairments or

individuals with Low English Proficiency, and members of the disaster-impacted community must be able to access the data. One example of a failure to achieve this type of accessibility is FEMA's OpenFEMA website. While it is an exceptionally useful tool that DHRC members support, the files and data on the website only exist in downloadable formats that either require specific software or are so large that they can be difficult to download at lower broadband speeds. In consequence, only those who can afford specific research software or live in locations with access to fast internet services are able to access it. At a minimum, anyone who is *included* in a data set should be able to *access* that data set, and a disaster-impacted community must be able to access research on itself.

Surveys

A survey can be a useful tool during disaster recovery and resilience advocacy. Surveys can challenge the assumptions of policymakers that the existing needs of a community are being met, provide opportunities for individuals to share their stories with the wider world, and serve as arguments for significant reform.

Surveys can come in a wide variety of forms – e.g., online polls, scientifically-based surveys, non-scientifically-based surveys – and can focus on collecting data points via yes-or-no questions or collect narratives and experiences from impacted individuals that can be used to extrapolate out to the broader disaster-impacted community.

Information collected can range from whether community members did or did not receive FEMA assistance, how long they were without power, or whether they continue to struggle in accessing food or afford housing. In the past, DHRC members have used surveys to demonstrate the impact flooding had on a specific neighborhood and the harm caused by housing assistance programs to rent prices.

It is important to clearly communicate with the public about how a survey was conducted. Organizations should not misrepresent a survey as an academic report, nor should they suggest that a survey's findings are stronger or broader than they are – doing so may undercut the organization's argument and damage its credibility with policymakers. Instead, organizations should present the survey for what it is: a glimpse into the experiences and views of disaster survivors at a specific point in recovery.

Organizations can also work directly with academic institutions to create a scientific survey that can be viewed as an "academic survey." But organizations should be aware that such surveys take a significant amount of time and resources to create – time and resources that may be better spent elsewhere.

FEMA DIRECT LEASE PROGRAM COMMUNITY IMPACT REPORT

Formed in 2022, DHRC member Maui Housing Hui began as a group of renters educating themselves about their rights and then spreading what they had learned to other renters on the Hawaiian island of Maui. As they learned more, the renter community in Maui began to identify where renter protections fell short and what they could do to advocate for change. Then, in 2023, the Maui wildfires hit their community. Maui Housing Hui knew that it had to jump into the ring and expand their mission to reflect the lived realities of their community. Ever since then, the group has worked relentlessly to address the housing needs of its community through outreach, education, and research.

In the aftermath of the wildfires, Maui's already ongoing housing crisis was made all the worse. A year after the wildfires, Maui's renter population was flooded with an influx of people impacted by the wildfire and now without permanent housing. FEMA's failure to deliver an equitable direct lease program exacerbated the issue, harming not only the survivors of the fire, but the existing renters on the island.

From firsthand accounts from their members, the Mui Housing Hui knew this was an issue. Whenever members raised the issue with their elected officials, however, they were constantly challenged to provide data to prove this was the case. As a result, the Maui Housing Hui created its own data and released a FEMA Direct Lease Program Community Impact Report, including the results from a survey of impacted renters about their experiences and perceptions around the direct lease program and Maui's rental market.

The report highlights the most pressing needs and concerns of renters on Maui and FEMA's failure to deliver a just direct lease program. Overwhelmingly, according to the report, renters agreed that the program had had negative impacts on households, regardless of whether they had participated in the program.

The report was the first of its kind to explain how the FEMA direct lease program is perceived to impact the community from the community perspective itself. Maui Housing Hui has used these data in ongoing education efforts with elected officials and to garner media coverage.

Read more about the FEMA Direct Lease Program Community Impact Report here.

Data Access

A recurring topic in DHRC discussions about data and research, including at the DHR convening, is the lack of available data on federal assistance programs.

Ill-defined terms, like "unmet need," and unclear methodology often render the data that are accessible misleading or not useful. In 2019, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security Office of the Inspector General was found to have frequently redacted reviews that were critical of FEMA's performance. Although the head of that office resigned after the changes were made public, the episode underscores the need for third-party, objective researchers and the general public to have access to reliable data to ensure that recovery plans are followed, and programs are fully administered.

Application and assistance outcomes should be tracked over the long-term to enhance data collection and analysis capabilities for disaster researchers and policymakers. Program enrollment data, de-enrollment data, and other metrics showing the successes and failures of a disaster recovery program should also be collected. These enhanced data can be used to create best practices that are incorporated into future disaster planning and response efforts. To ensure that these best practices and outcomes have the greatest reach, data collected by the government must be open and accessible, while protecting personally identifiable information. Prioritizing data transparency allows policymakers and advocates to be informed about program results and areas for improvements.

Data transparency efforts should ensure that sensitive and personally identifiable information is not made publicly accessible. Immigration status or other information commonly used to persecute marginalized populations should not be made available to entities that would use this information to remove individuals from non-disaster related assistance programs or as a pretext for deportation or detainment. Protecting these data will ensure that eligible individuals will continue to apply for emergency programs and participate in conversations and collaboration between communities and disaster planners.

Organizations should be intentional and assertive in calling for greater access to disaster data at the most granular level possible. This will allow for the distribution of better information about the inadequacies of the current disaster recovery system and support the formulation of successful reforms.

BEST PRACTICES

- Back up disaster survivors' stories and experiences with research to increase their credibility and demonstrate the systemic nature of the issue being discussed. The data should support the stories, not the other way around.
- Ensure that data and research conclusions are presented in a simple and clear fashion utilizing charts, maps, and other visual aids.
- Use interactive data, which can be appealing to users and allow for a more personal connection with the research being shown.
- Ensure that the data and research can be clearly understood by the public and that community organizers can easily explain it.
- Ensure that research is fully accessible to individuals with disabilities and can be understood by the community in question, allowing the research to empower community members who participated in its creation.
- Push for access to as much data as possible, especially program data from federal agencies.

STRATEGIES AND EXAMPLES

- Organizations should use surveys to demonstrate the extent of needs in disaster-impacted communities, refute allegations that recovery programs are meeting that need, or identify areas of inequitable response. These surveys can be used to inform both a community's response to a specific disaster-related issue and educate policymakers on the need for change.
- Explore ways to increase the interactivity of data and research. Create a series of maps or graphs as a way of showing multiple aspects of data in one unique tool.
- Researchers can create templates for community-based research that can help community organizations conduct their own research in the absence of professional researchers.

The Community and Research

"Community organizations want to work with researchers and vice versa, but they don't always know they want to work with each other." – DR. SHANNON VAN ZANDT, PROFESSOR OF ARCHITECTURE & URBAN PLANNING, TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY, COLLEGE STATION, TX AT DHR CONVENING.

DHR convening participants frequently spoke about how research, policy education, and community-driven work intertwine. Often, disaster-impacted communities can be rightfully skeptical of academic researchers arriving following disasters, retraumatizing disaster survivors, taking time and attention away from other recovery and response work, and misconstruing the impact of such work. Academic research has historically been of less use to local organizations than data analysis and the creation of non-peer reviewed research. It takes a significant amount of time to complete an academic study, and conclusions are not often connected to the organizing efforts occurring on the ground in the community being researched. As Andrew Rumbach, Senior Fellow at the Urban Institute, stated during the panel presentation on research at the convening, "community-engaged research often takes too long and costs too much. Even in successful efforts, there's a high cost and if it doesn't go well, the research is a waste of time, or even worse, extractive, leaving broken relationships in its wake that make future relationship building more challenging."

Discussions at the DHR convening largely focused on how to prevent these failures and build a research regime that is community-driven and community-beneficial, helpful and effective in changing policy, and non-extractive. While there are certainly aspects of the academic-community research relationship that are driven by standards and trends in the research community more broadly – and therefore beyond the scope of this toolkit – there are best practices to achieve more effective relationships in this area.

LOWLANDER CENTER

An example of sustained relationship building between researchers and disaster-impacted communities can be found in the work of DHRC member Lowlander Center. Based in the bayous of Louisiana, the Lowlander Center is a nonprofit organization supporting lowland people and places through education, research, and advocacy.

The Lowlander Center supports coastal and bayou lowlands – human and natural – by honoring residents, including Indigenous and all diverse historied groups, by helping them to achieve full engagement for a resilient future. Learning from the past, using rich, traditional ecological and historied knowledge, and bridging available technical support and resources, partners of the Center explore and find paths for problem solving. Lowlander views human and environmental rights as core values for a resilient future, and the group works through collaboration with a diverse group of committed activist volunteers — mostly women — who share values of environmental and social justice.

The Lowlander Center engages in community-based participatory research, which has led to a wide variety of publications by Lowlander collaborators. The emphasis on relationship-building and community partnership has created a deep connection between the Center and the communities it assists, allowing for quick and effective research to be conducted in a respectful and non-exploitative manner.

Community-Based Research

The traditional model of disaster research involves researchers parachuting into a community after a disaster and seeking to conduct research with no previous connections or relationship with the community in question. It was agreed at the DHR convening that this model is extractive and should be avoided; it extracts information and knowledge held by a community for the professional or personal goals of a researcher. Instead, community-based research is established on trust, shared goals, and relationships between researchers and the community.

DHR convening participants involved in community-based research emphasized the need for researchers and academics to arrive in a community prior to a disaster and to spend time building long-term rela-

tionships with members of that community. Researchers should not bring preconceived notions or goals to these types of activities; instead, the researcher should seek to assist community members in accomplishing their goals. This may include direct research or data analysis based on a researcher's skills, but it could also be something not connected or only tangentially related to research, such as organizing spreadsheets, finding grant opportunities, or compiling examples of successful recovery strategies.

When trust has been developed between the community and the researcher, the researcher must find out what questions the community wants answered. Researchers could assist informal research that is already occurring, helping to add additional credibility to community research that many see as illegitimate, training neighborhood scientists to do field work directly in their community, or other actions. This was referred to by one DHR convening attendee who works as a researcher as "painting your baby" meaning that a good community-connected and community-conscious researcher can easily work with a community-based organization doing its own research to add additional credibility and increase the impact the research has in organizing efforts.

At other times, community research questions might not be clear. Community members and organizers may not have considered how research could assist in their efforts. They might not know what disaster topics could be researched in the first place. This does not create a blank check for a researcher to do what they wish; rather, it creates an opportunity for the researcher to work directly with community members to explore feasible research topics, identify which would be the most beneficial to address community needs or efforts already in motion, and design research collaboratively.

Upon the conclusion of the study, it is of the utmost importance that researchers not simply send the completed manuscript to the community members who assisted them and then leave town. For the research to not be extractive, the community must receive a tangible good from it. This means that the research findings will need to be explained in culturally competent and accessible ways. Researchers must be able to answer the question, "How will this help me?" when it is asked by a community member.

Academic and Community Partnerships

A strong relationship with academic institutions can create unique opportunities for additional resources and capacities for disaster-impacted communities. However, it is important to note that certain considerations should be taken to avoid exploitative relationships.

The community-based research process takes significantly longer than traditional research models. The creation of trust and long-term relationships takes months to years to complete – something that might be less practical for researchers working on a time-sensitive, grant-funded basis. To combat this, DHR convening attendees suggested that researchers at academic institutions focus on their own geographic area in building these relationships, ensuring that, even while not actively engaged in community-based research, connections are still being built. These connections can then be utilized by researchers when disasters happen and research needs exist. If a researcher from outside that geographic area wants to conduct a study or research effort in that community, they should partner with local institutions to access those relationships.

In addition, DHR convening attendees noted that relationships between community groups and academic institutions can provide additional capacity for disaster-impacted communities. Professors are typically armed with a cohort of promising PhD or graduate students who can conduct important and beneficial work for a community. In the past, members of the DHRC at academic institutions have urged their students to provide direct case work and assistance to community members in filing appeals of FEMA application denials and legal and administrative research. This not only creates a tangible good for the community, but it also educates the students on the importance of community connections in their future careers.

THE WILLIAM AVERETT ANDERSON FUND

Academic and research institutions should not only work to deepen connections with disaster-impacted communities, they also must bring the community into the research profession. The William Averette Anderson Fund (BAF) focuses on just that task. Bill Anderson was one of the first researchers to conduct research into hazard risk and disaster impacts in historically marginalized communities. As one of the only Black researchers in his field, he realized that many of the errors made in research – leading to failures like the response to Hurricane Katrina – resulted from an immense disconnect between historically marginalized communities, researchers, and emergency managers. He realized that to empower these communities and protect them from disasters, he needed to bring community members into the research and emergency management fields. Doing so would benefit both the quality and effectiveness of future research but also allow resilience and emergency management efforts

to better reach historically marginalized populations. In support of this effort, he became a tireless proponent for diversifying the field of disaster research, mentoring hundreds of students of color during the course of his long career.

After Bill Anderson's passing in 2013, BAF was created to continue his work. The fund works to support graduate students in the hazards and disaster field to build a future cohort of professionals, mentors, academics, and researchers who can address inequities and make fair and swift disaster response possible. Their initial focus is on delivering robust professional development support to graduate students of color who are historically underrepresented in careers related to hazards and disasters. Their work hopes to empower the next generation of professionals, academics, and researchers as leaders who are well-equipped to facilitate meaningful social change on complex issues of inequity. Ultimately, their aim is to prioritize the lived experiences and expertise of marginalized communities in solidarity with their pursuit of disaster risk reduction and environmental justice.

BAF facilitates a fellowship program that offers professional development workshops, a mentorship program, and mentor-directed programming, and it is working on a collaborative community research pilot program to directly support fellows seeking to conduct community-based research in their communities. Since its establishment in 2014, the Fund has enrolled over 100 students. BAF fellows represent more than 20 disciplines ranging from the social sciences to engineering, to emergency management. BAF alumni have gone on to professional roles in academia, research, policy, and practice, representing institutions such as Howard University, FEMA, and the CDC.

Find out more about the William Averette Anderson Fund here.

At the same time, not every academic institution operates in an enlightened and responsible manner. Academics and researchers at such institutions are under a wide variety of pressures; they are judged not only on how well they teach, but on the number of grants they can bring in and how much research they can publish. This situation can encourage irresponsible and exploitative research and discourage taking the time necessary to develop community relationships.

Too often, when funding becomes available for research after a disaster, researchers appear on the scene to access it. This type of research, due to its lack of connection with community-led efforts on the ground, typically focuses on pointing out failures, but rarely involves suggesting solutions. It tends to view the community through the false lens of "objectivity" and devalue the experiences and knowledge of disaster survivors. These negative behaviors are taught to students of these institutions, creating a self-replicating cycle.

While these problems can and do occur at some academic and research institutions across the country, they do not need to be the norm. By working to conduct community-based research, researchers can unlearn these incorrect priorities and pass such knowledge on to future generations.

One idea raised during the DHR convening for combatting such negative actions from some academic institutions is the creation of a "Research Bill of Rights" establishing a set of rights that a disaster-impacted community has regarding research and a set of responsibilities that a researcher must follow when it comes to community-based worked in the disaster space. Not only could this document serve as a standard for interactions with disaster-impacted communities, but it could also provide a framework for community-based research more broadly.

BEST PRACTICES

- Dispose of traditional research methods in favor of community-led research tactics and priorities.
- Researchers should spend significant time building relationships and assisting disaster-impacted communities prior to the initiation of any research, even if the needs are not directly related to research.
- Research questions should be posed by the community and not by the researcher. Researchers should spend time educating community members on what a research question is and the impact a research project could have on their lives.

- Upon the conclusion of a research project, researchers should spend time explaining the conclusions and educating community members on ways to utilize the research to educate policymakers.
- Academic institutions should focus on building relationships and trust with their local community even when research is not being directly conducted. Outside researchers should work through these local institutions if they wish to perform research. These local institutions will have a responsibility to ensure research is non-exploitative.
- Community-based organizations should be aware of the pressures placed upon researchers from certain academic institutions and remain aware of potentially exploitative practices.

STRATEGIES AND EXAMPLES

- The creation of a "Research Bill of Rights" can help standardize the rights of disaster-impacted communities and prevent exploitative practices. Such a document would include the rights of a community to be involved in research design, access to community knowledge, and direct input into the final project. The document can also outline the responsibilities of researchers in adhering to non-exploitative research practices.

CONCLUSION

"…we walk a ways together, no matter if it is in cold rain or moonlight. Sometimes the only music is hammers and saws, but we keep going, aiming for the high ground where they will be standing with their arms out, saying Come here, and rest. Let me help you." – "THOSE WHO CARRY US" BY SILAS HOUSE

The first convening of the DHRC occurred in 2019 in Houston, Texas. That gathering, held only two years after the catastrophes of Hurricane Maria, Hurricane Harvey, and the destructive 2017 wildfire season, brought together advocates, organizers, and disaster survivors from across the country. For many, it was the first time they had realized that other communities thousands of miles away were dealing with exactly the same issues they faced in their neighborhoods. It felt like the start of something powerful – a manifestation of the potential for cooperation and collaboration. We were frustrated and weary, but we had found each other! More importantly, we were able to agree on what needs to be done to ensure a complete and equitable recovery for the lowest-income and most marginalized disaster survivors and their communities.

In the years since, strangers who met at that initial convening became colleagues who, in turn, introduced us to new future colleagues. New and important partnerships were created and brought into the work of disaster recovery and resilience reform. Our collective knowledge of disaster impacts, resilience, research, and emergency management has grown by leaps and bounds as our experience as a field continues to deepen.

While the 2019 DHRC convening focused on what policy changes were needed, the 2024 DHR convening focused on how we realize these changes through emerging best practices and lessons learned from years of working together.

This toolkit reflects that we and our colleagues from across the country are smart, resourceful, strategic, and passionate. It demonstrates that by working with, instead of simply next to, each other, we can fix America's broken disaster recovery system and ensure that disaster-impacted communities can fully and equitably recover and be resilient in the face of disasters in the future.

See you on the high ground.

APPENDIX: LIST OF CONVENING ATTENDEES

Sapna Aiyer, Texas, Lone Star Legal Aid

Veronica Beaty, California, California Coalition for Rural Housing

Nayda Bobonis Cabrera, Puerto Rico, Firmes, Unidos y Resilientes con la Abogacía (FURIA, Inc.)

Adrienne Bush, Kentucky, Homeless and Housing Coalition of Kentucky

Nnenia Campbell, Washington, Bill Anderson Fund

Toi Jean Carter, Louisiana, Louisiana Just Recovery Network

Alys Cohen, District of Columbia, National Consumer Law Center

Dr. Cristina Muñoz De La Torre, Oregon, Just Solutions Collective

Commissioner Rainey Dock Matthews, Hawaii, Maui County Commission on Persons with Disabilities

Meg Duffy, Texas, Texas Appleseed

Stephanie Duke, Texas, Disability Rights Texas

Alicia Edwards, North Carolina, Legal Aid of North Carolina

Dr. Christopher Emrich, Florida, University of Central Florida

Cameron Foster, New Jersey, New Jersey Organizing Project

Hannah Friedrich, Louisiana, University of Arizona and Disaster Justice Network

Andrew Fuller, District of Columbia, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Brittanny Perrigue-Gomez, Texas, Texas RioGrande Legal Aid

Brianna Goodwin, North Carolina, Robeson County Church and Community Center

Kathy Grunewald, Florida, Legal Services of North Florida

Rev. James Harris, Louisiana, Micah 6:8 Mission

Linda Harris, Louisiana, Micah 6:8 Mission

Cheryl Henderson, Texas, Northeast Action Collective

Jordan Hocker, Hawaii, Maui Housing Hui

Sade Hogue, Texas, Northeast Action Collective

Todd Holloway, Washington, Center For Independence

Nicole Huguenin, Hawaii, Maui Rapid Response

Dr. Sabrina Johnson, District of Columbia, Natural Resources Defense Council

Dana Jones, Texas, Northeast Action Collective

Appendix: List of Convening Attendees continued

Rev. Gregory Manning, Louisiana, Broadmoor Community Church and Louisiana Just Recovery Network

Dr. Carlos Martín, Massachusetts, Harvard Joint Center for Housing Studies

Tammie Martin, North Carolina, Robeson County Church and Community Center

Leslee Matthews, Hawaii, Maui Rapid Response

Brett Mattson, District of Columbia, National Association of Counties

Natalie Maxwell, Florida, National Housing Law Project

Zoe Middleton, Texas, Union of Concerned Scientists

Christine Moffett, District of Columbia, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Elaine Morales-Díaz, Texas, ConnectiveTX

Andreanecia Morris, Louisiana, HousingLouisiana

Shari Myers, Minnesota, The Partnership for Inclusive Disaster Strategies

Gamelyn Oduardo, Puerto Rico, Hispanic Federation

Seana O'Shaughnessy, California, Community Housing Improvement Program (CHIP)

Dr. Laura Olson, Minnesota, Jacksonville State University

Julia Orduña, Texas, Texas Housers

Maritere Padilla Rodríguez, Puerto Rico, Hispanic Federation

Chrishelle Palay, Texas, But Next Time Project

Hannah Perls, Massachusetts, Environmental & Energy Law Program (EELP)

Cynthia Robertson, Louisiana, Micah 6:8 Mission

Rita Robles, Texas, Northeast Action Collective

Dr. Andrew Rumbach, District of Columbia, The Urban Institute

Bryan Russell, Florida, Disability Rights Florida

Andrew Shoenig, North Carolina, MDC Inc

Madison Sloan, Texas, Texas Appleseed

Alexandra Staropoli, New Jersey, Fair Share Housing Center

Ayate Temsamani, District of Columbia, Enterprise Community Partners

Lauren Thornberg, Florida, Florida Housing Coalition

Dr. Shannon Van Zandt, Texas, Texas A&M University

Alec Vandenberg, District of Columbia, National Alliance to End Homelessness

Maria Watson, Florida, Shimberg Center for Housing Studies

David Wheaton, District of Columbia, NAACP Legal Defense Fund

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