

Post-Disaster Recovery Seminar: Lessons Learned from Hurricane Isaac

May 5 and 7, 2014

Everett, Washington and Tacoma, Washington

Overview

Several cities, counties and the state of Washington are currently in various stages of developing disaster recovery plans. Recovery planning is a rather new topic that very few jurisdictions have experience in. October 2013, a delegation of seven representatives from the region visited Louisiana to learn about best practices in recovery planning. One topic of importance they were trying to understand is how the National Disaster Recovery Framework would be utilized during recovery, which was a major benefit to the St. John's Parrish in Louisiana. As a result of this informative visit, the region invited two key leaders to come to the Puget Sound region to share their experience with our region.

Speakers

Natalie Robottom, President of Saint John the Baptist Parish

Raymond Goodman, Disaster Recovery Manager for Saint John the Baptist Parish.

Background

St. John the Baptist Parish has a population of approximately 46,000 and is located geographically, on the Mississippi river, on the interstate between Baton Rouge and New Orleans. Hurricane Isaac made landfall August 29, 2012 as a category 1 hurricane. Major storm surge and heavy rainfall lead to heavy flooding in St. John's. Water service and power outages affected 95% of residents.

The Parish already had robust disaster response planning in place. During Hurricane Katrina, they were the first parish to have the infrastructure back up and running, as damage wasn't as pronounced there. During Katrina and Rita, the Parish served as a staging ground for rescue and recovery efforts into New Orleans so they had experience with how the response and recovery worked. They had evacuation means set up, but they did not anticipate needing them for many residents. The Parish annually updates emergency contracts and plans, which were in place when the storm hit. They had also developed an association of faith based organizations who could help with the social, emotional, and physical needs of the community. They had elected leaders from the churches leading the group (though the chair and vice chair were flooded).

However, the unanticipated storm surge and flooding presented a significant challenge. They were not prepared for loss of transportation access, or loss of drinking water--It had never flooded before; More than half the parish flooded. Not only were they unable to get out, the resources they needed could not get in. Six thousand residents were evacuated from flooded areas to the staging area--this included 180 pets and 93 medical special needs individuals. Though seven thousand homes flooded, there was no loss of life. They had very little backup housing because hotels were flooded. Many residents had to leave the parish, and had to try to access services within the parish without being there.

Recovery Framework

St. John the Baptist Parish was the first community in the country to implement the National Disaster Recovery Framework. FEMA came in during the initial response, and asked that they try this newly created recovery framework, giving President Robottom documents to read, asking her to assign a local disaster recovery manager to coordinate with the state, FEMA, and local community members. However, they were still flooded and still trying to get infrastructure back up and did not have staff to lead this effort. The President had to find someone who may not be affected by the response and could give the recovery framework the necessary time and focus it needed. They needed someone who had the skills to lead this effort from start to finish. Raymond Goodman is the Parish utility manager and he came to mind as someone who could make this happen.

President Robottom stated that during pre-planning, organizations should find and assign the right person to serve as a recovery coordinator for your organization or jurisdiction; that way you will have someone in place, and know you have someone who could be on the ground running during the response phase. Once the parish started working within the framework, they had a moment when a light bulb went off, and it became clear how it could help. Both speakers emphasized that it could not be driven by the government; it had to be driven by the community. It took several weeks to make sure they knew what their goals for recovery were. These could be developed beforehand.

Recovery Coordinator Perspective:

Mr. Goodman provided an overview of his job as the recovery coordinator for the Parish. He is not an emergency manager and does not have a background in recovery planning; instead he was forced to learn the job as the recovery unfolded.

One of the first tasks he was faced with was to form a long term recovery group to address the needs of the homeowners. Though they were doing everything they could to address problems with utilities, infrastructure, etc, they recognized that the government cannot do everything. The long-term recovery team set up volunteer committees including: donations/volunteers, cleanup, construction, case management, emotional/spiritual needs, and unmet needs. That long-term recovery group is still active. He shared their progress and successes thus far:

- **Homeowner Requests:** 1273
- **Projects Completed:** 1227
- **Volunteers:**
 - 4,125 Volunteers
 - 191,093 Hours
- **Donations:** \$259,488.54

Recovery cannot happen without volunteers. The community was devastated and they very much needed people willing to come in and devote their time, unpaid. They are 18-21 months into this effort, and still aren't done. It was noted that with any disaster you have to expect the unexpected. No one expected the flooding to happen; FEMA says it's not if it's going to happen again, it's when. They are better prepared for that in the future than they were because they have established committees to

work with the community.

The core principals of the National Disaster Recovery Framework:

- Individual and Family Empowerment
- Leadership and Local Primacy
- Pre-Disaster Recovery Planning
- Partnerships and Inclusiveness
- Public Information
- Unity of Effort
- Timeliness and Flexibility
- Resilience and Sustainability
- Psychological and Emotional Recovery

The Parish wanted to include all community members in the recovery and rebuilding. The Parish's role was to organize, coordinate and advance recovery. FEMA was there to guide and help them, and they put someone on every subcommittee, but they were not there to tell the Parish what to do and how to do it. The Federal Disaster Recovery Coordinator facilitated coordination and collaboration, and was the primary contact, but the Parish was in charge.

The framework is organized into recovery support functions:

- Community Planning & Capacity Building
- Economic
- Health and Social Services
- Housing
- Infrastructure Systems
- Natural and Cultural Resources

One of the reasons why the recovery was successful was because the community supported the process. They branded the recovery: "One Parish, One Future: Building Back Better and Stronger." Robottom explained that it was important to promote it this way, because it was important to show that it is good for the whole parish, and they weren't leaving anybody out. Goodman noted that there are probably already people involved with the city that would be useful in recovery, you should find them now before the disaster.

Community and Public Outreach

The Parish hosted over 12 public meetings and an online survey in addition to dozens of smaller meetings to solicit input from the community. Input from residents helped them identify over 80 projects; then residents cast ballots to identify top five priority projects for each committee. Those projects the priority topics the team tries to find funding for, though if they can find funding that goes for a lower priority, they will go after it. It was noted that one of the hardest things to find funding for is mental health.

Robottom added that having this plan in place helps you direct how to spend grants and awards from

FEMA and other sources. These are clearly projects their community needed; they were validated by a vote of the people. These projects are moving because the dollars FEMA rewarded them for recovery.

This public process was a great way to identify the kinds of projects that could have been done before a disaster to lessen its impact. For instance, they made agreements with neighboring parishes for emergency water. If you can do something before a disaster, you'll be better off, but you also need shovel ready projects for use of post-disaster funding. Restoring just to the pre-event state can be a waste of money. Oftentimes with slightly more money upfront, a jurisdiction can improve infrastructure and not have the same failures every time. They are trying to address possible improvements.

Throughout the process of identifying projects, they did not eliminate any project and worked to listen to all community members from High School students to people in nursing homes. Some projects maybe didn't make sense for the parish; however they did not take it off the list. They used the votes to drive the priority. The majority of the projects recommended by the community were already identified by the Parish through previous planning. The community validated that these were priorities and the Parish was on track. The community recovery strategy was a blueprint, their map to where they were going.

President Robottom said the Parish could not have pulled together this recovery plan if not for Mr. Goodman taking the lead and serving as the point person. More support from the state emergency management office on recovery would have been helpful, though they were very helpful with response. FEMA was wonderfully supportive throughout this effort and continues to be an active partner. She encouraged participants to partner with the different agencies at the state level now and establish relationships before the event.

A video about the recovery efforts and damage from Hurricane Isaac was shared with participants. It explains the process to develop a citizen's advisory committee, and how the National Disaster Recovery Framework was used for recovery initiatives.

Full video here: <http://www.fema.gov/media-library/assets/videos/83137>

Questions from participants:

Q: Did you have a loss of tax revenue?

A: Robottom said they did, but because of the emergency dollars that came in, they actually had an increase in funds. For instance, any area that flooded had a homestead exemption, where they didn't have to pay property tax for 2013. We didn't see that loss because of the recovery dollars.

Q: A participant asked why hotels and motels were not available to use for housing.

A: Robottom explained that they were damaged, did not have utilities, and were inaccessible. All our evacuated residents were being transported out. That lack of housing hurt us, and made us move them

from the Parish.

Q: A participant asked how was the decision was made at the federal level about how much money was needed.

A: Robottom said it's formula driven, but it's also based on need. They were included in Sandy legislation -- She said she didn't know how much they would have gotten if Sandy hadn't happened a few months later. She noted there is more Federal attempt to control recovery spending with timelines, to prevent money from going unspent ten years later. However, she added the legislators setting these policies don't know what it's like on the ground trying to meet all the requirements to actually spend the money. She said you have to do a lot of leg work in advance, before you get the money, in order to meet deadlines. A lot of times the allocation goes to the state, and the state allocates from there.

Q: A participants asked, How do you get people to return? He noted that fewer people live in New Orleans now.

A: Robottom said that part of it is looking at conditions pre-storm. If your housing is destroyed, and you rebuild it, is it now out of the price range of your residents, or maybe it's owned by a new management company that doesn't accept your community members. Additionally, people need to have to have a job to come back to. We knew we had to get jobs back up. We had learned a lot from Katrina. For people to get back to work, you need schools. Most of all, she noted, you have to drive decision making from within the community and ensure they are making decisions for themselves.

Q: A participant asked what piece of the recovery plan created the most controversy.

A: Robottom said they were working on a land use plan before the storm hit, but afterwards they had to review our priorities. For the most part people insisted we needed protection from future flooding. She noted that many residents had moved from New Orleans after Katrina, stayed and built in St. John's to be safer, and were then flooded again.

Goodman agreed, saying the water infrastructure was the biggest piece. There was no confrontational thing, but infrastructure was the most interest. Robottom said that had meetings in each area of the Parish. We do not take a vote on each project, but because of these meetings and votes, we know what our community wants and needs.

Q: A participant asked, How did disaster psychology impact the community?

A: Robottom said they all deal with it, and it comes on at different times, for different people. One of the committees was emotional and spiritual needs. We had pastors, mental health experts, etc. It's on going.

Q: What involvement was there from the business community?

A: Home Depot provided a lot of donated material or reduced price materials for rebuilding. Businesses donated a lot of money. Typically they will donate to Red Cross, etc, and that doesn't necessarily go directly to you. Since it was a limited disaster, we got a lot more focused help then we might have. We had a couple of businesses that had to make a decision about whether it was worth rebuilding, or moving. If your business is damaged and your employees may not be there anymore, how do you get back up and running?

Q: Who organized the faith based group?

A: Robottom said she did initially pre-disaster, knowing we would need the help. They elected from their members, two people to be the leads during an event.