

Moving Beyond Conference

Tuesday, January 9, 2024

Legislative Office Building in Hartford, Connecticut



Addressing Disaster Response and Preparedness Gaps in Connecticut

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As climate change continues to amplify the frequency and severity of weather-related hazards, the need for effective disaster preparedness becomes increasingly critical.

We conducted a study as part of an effort to assess disaster preparedness and identify the roots and repercussions of preparedness disparity across socioeconomic groups in Connecticut. The results highlight how state-level disaster management systems might worsen preparedness gaps among towns and leave much of Connecticut poorly equipped to handle the growing threats of climate change-induced disasters in southern New England.

Our research to date indicates that longtime state and regional preparedness practices have yet to update to reflect current climate forecasts, effectively equip local emergency volunteers, or improve communication services to the extent necessary. For Connecticut to effectively manage the rising incidents of climate change-induced disasters, it's crucial for local-level disaster management to revise practices. This involves fostering more community-based engagement, particularly with a focus on collaborating with the state's most vulnerable populations.

Key Takeaways

In our study, we interviewed Connecticut Emergency Management Directors and conducted a resident survey in four Connecticut counties on perceptions and concerns regarding Connecticut's disaster preparedness.

Our interviews with Emergency Management Directors reveal a number of significant themes:

- **Connecticut's State Response Framework depends upon a declining number of aging Emergency Management Directors** who are overburdened in light of increasingly frequent and severe weather-related hazard events.
- There are widespread issues with **inadequate communication systems between Emergency Management Directors and community members**.
- There is an overall sense that **residents lack risk awareness and preparedness knowledge**.
- **The state is not providing adequate financial resources** to support Emergency Management Director responsibilities, the development of emergency plans, or attract much needed additional employees/volunteers.
- The general **lack of diversity among Emergency Management Directors** in Connecticut lies in sharp contrast to increasing numbers of low-income residents who may be linguistically isolated, ethnically diverse, or otherwise marginalized.

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Additionally, our resident survey data indicates that racially minoritized and impoverished residents:

- Are seeking more preparedness information than less vulnerable residents
- Prefer person-to-person sources of emergency and disaster-related information, ideally from friends, family, church, libraries, schools, etc.
- Are less likely to be aware of their community's emergency management plan
- Are more likely to feel as though their needs are not being served by their town's emergency services

Recommendations

Both our interviews with Emergency Management Directors and the resident survey data found a lack of sufficient communication systems, support for emergency management, and community engagement especially with the state's most vulnerable populations. In order to address the state's preparedness disparities, we have prepared the following recommendations:

- Disaster management policies and planning should **focus on recognizing the influence of extended families and social networks.**
- **Crisis communication should initiate at the community level and be dispersed through trusted community institutions** (libraries, schools, community centers, senior centers, and churches).
- **Risk awareness and preparedness education should be presented through trusted community institutions** (libraries, schools, community centers, public health facilities, senior centers, and churches).
- Crisis responders would be wise to **build relationships with community leaders** at trusted institutions to inform more effectively those who may be in harm's way.
- Risk education on preparedness strategies and municipal policies (parking restrictions, alert notification schedules, etc.) should be provided in **multimedia forms** (radio, mailings, emails, bulletins) and **available for English as a Second Language and non-English-speaking residents.**
- **The diversity of Emergency Management Directors and emergency response personnel should be enhanced** by actively including women and racially minoritized groups. **This can be achieved by expanding outreach of position advertising** to schools, community colleges, public health facilities, and churches.
- **Further state funding** is needed for part-time positions, updated emergency communications systems, emergency plan development, and resident risk and preparedness education programming.