

BUILDING RESPONSIVE COMMUNITIES

Community policing offers the model for neighborhood emergency response planning

by Bonnie Bucqueroux, Policing.com

Helping neighbors help neighbors when disaster strikes

The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina should remind conservatives and liberals alike that community – not government - is our best first line of defense if disaster strikes. Whether the catastrophe is a hurricane, a tornado or an earthquake – or a pandemic like bird flu or a terrorist attack, we all want and need neighbors who can offer a helping hand when the bad times hit.

Yet for many of us, our neighbors are little more than strangers. Rich or poor, we find ourselves living among people we barely acknowledge beyond a friendly wave. The challenge we all face is how to develop realistic and effective community-based plans for our neighborhoods before calamity strikes.

A comprehensive Neighborhood Emergency Response Plan would identify the person who will check on Mrs. Smith, the elderly woman who is blind and has diabetes. Then there's the single mom whose baby needs formula and diapers, the person who is deaf or the young boy who has seizures. As Hurricane Katrina also reminds us, we shouldn't wait until disaster is looming before developing a plan to make sure that everyone who needs help get it.

The plan should also include an asset map of community strengths. Of vital importance are the people with potentially life-saving skills – active and retired doctors, nurses, military medics and emergency medical personnel. Is there a dentist in the neighborhood who can at least offer temporary relief for that painful broken tooth? Is there a police officer to help maintain security?

Then there are the practical skills. Who can help put a temporary patch on the hole in the roof? Who knows how to shut off the water before the pipes freeze? Is there an electrician who can shut off the power to the downed power line?

An asset map would also pinpoint people who can help with the basics of food, clothing and shelter. Maybe someone with emergency rations left over from Y2K would be willing to share with others. Should we create and maintain a neighborhood emergency pantry? Is there someone with a generator who would be willing to take in the man in the wheelchair for a few days during an ice storm? Who can be relied on to share warm clothing and blankets? Who makes sure that every resident that needs help is checked each day?

Sadly, few of us live in neighborhoods that have such a plan already in place. But the good news is that there is a growing realization we all need one. Better yet, we have a model in place with community policing that can be easily and effectively harnessed to the task.

Building a Neighborhood Emergency Response Plan

The cornerstone of community policing is that nothing can outperform dedicated people working together to solve neighborhood problems. In most cases, crime has been the catalyst to bring the police, community leaders and neighborhood residents together as partners. Community policing's collaborative problem-solving approach also offers long-term solutions because it not only addresses the immediate crisis but the underlying dynamics that allow problems to persist. As this suggests, community policing provides a proven framework for new proactive efforts to build a Neighborhood Emergency Response Plan.

Why police? First, the majority of American communities already claim to have some form of community policing and it has proven its merit. Second, the police remain the only government social service agency open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, holidays included. People will turn to them first in an emergency, so they are also the best candidates to offer assistance in planning. As first responders, they know what it takes to help manage catastrophes and they can help communities build the infrastructure they need to do a good job.

Perhaps the real question is, if not the police, then who?

This is not to say that the police alone should do the heavy lifting. They can be particularly helpful in recruiting other community partners who can help – the schools, the churches, other government agencies and non-profit organizations. However, the bottom line is that a Neighborhood Emergency Response Plan is a plan built by and for the neighbors themselves. (And don't forget to keep the media informed so that they can tell others.)

A process as well as a plan

Armed with examples from community policing's proactive approach to crime, it is possible to outline the steps each community could take in developing its own Neighborhood Emergency Response Plan:

- **Building the commitment** – Ideally, a neighborhood resident should take the lead in bringing people together to discuss the threat and what neighbors can do to save themselves, their families and their community if calamity strikes. Local police agencies with community officers in place can then supply neighborhood leaders with guidance and information on developing the Neighborhood Emergency Response Plan. Many already have partnerships with the community, ranging from Neighborhood Watch to school liaison programs, that can serve as the foundation for identifying community leaders who care about these issues.

In many neighborhoods, a formal or informal community leader can host an organizing meeting. In some places, this meeting can be in someone's home. It could also be held in a neighborhood or apartment community center or recreation center. While the goal is to engage as high a percentage of community residents as possible, it only takes a few dedicated neighbors to get the project started.

One immediate challenge is to find an issue that galvanizes people into action. In some communities, it could mean a flyer or an e-mail that says: *How would you and your family survive an ice storm (tornado, terrorist attack, bird flu)? Come to our meeting to talk about how neighbors can help neighbors by working together to develop a Neighborhood Emergency Response Plan.* The goal is to pick an issue that resonate with the community and find a way to use that to leverage participation.

Make it easy for people to attend. Offer food as a lure. Provide babysitting. Set up a system where people who need transportation or an escort to feel safe receive assistance.

Facilitating the initial meeting is crucial. If the session is hosted by an existing group such as a Neighborhood Watch Group, adding this to the agenda should be easy. If not, identify whether it is the police or the neighborhood leader or both together who should facilitate the session. Just remember to give people an opportunity to talk about their fears and concerns. The best plans provide a sense of renewed sense of security and build trust among participants, even if disaster never strikes.

How many people to include? The logistics depend on the place. In densely populated urban areas, it may make sense to develop a plan for each high-rise. In rural areas, perhaps the best rule of thumb would be to bring together neighbors who can reach each other in an emergency within a realistic period of time, since the goal is to provide face-to-face response.

- **Building the plan** – The plan itself will always be a work in progress, so the sooner you get started, the sooner everyone feels safe. The goal is to build an actual plan that is written down, on paper and in pixels to share electronically. (Just remember not to rely exclusively on hard drives, CD-ROMs and Web sites that cannot be accessed if the power goes out.)
 - **Identify key stakeholders** – Leave plenty of spaces on your contact list to capture relevant information about each resident. (Make sure to develop and honor your privacy policies as well.) The master list should include each person’s assets and vulnerabilities, as well as their contact information and where to find them in emergencies (for example, are they often away on travel and who would know if they are safe?). Identify leaders with relevant skills who are willing to take the project forward. In addition to people to organize and facilitate meetings, you will need people to publicize the meetings, keep accurate records and recruit others to help, as well as volunteers with the time to make things happen.
 - **Prioritize the threats** – Would your apartment complex be quarantined if bird flu becomes a pandemic? Is it realistic to fear a “dirty bomb” attack in your city? A realistic understanding of the challenges you are most likely to face will keep your response planning on track. There have been earthquakes in the Midwest, but a tornado or ice storm is much more likely. Threat assessment requires balancing both the likelihood of the risk and the potential severity of the situation if the threat becomes reality.

The higher on both scales, the more it should become the primary focus of your response.

- **Map community strengths** – As discussed above, this means identifying people with life-saving and practical skills so necessary in emergencies. It also means identify resources and the people willing to share them – money, time, food, shelter, clothing. In urban areas in particular, make sure to identify local businesses that may be able to contribute both prior to and during a crisis. In rural areas, the person with the tractor or snowplow should go on the list. Are there any home-use defibrillators available in the community and how wide an area could they serve? In addition to making a list of community strengths, considering identifying all or some of them on a physical map of the neighborhood, perhaps using icons for various categories of contributions.
- **Identify residents with special needs** – The goal is to identify each and every person with a special need. Of immediate concern are people with disabilities or medical issues. However, this can also mean identifying households with young children or elderly members, whose age may make them more vulnerable, depending on the emergency. A door-to-door outreach is essential in Again, negotiating privacy issues with people about the capturing, storing, and sharing of information is essential.
- **Engage young people** – Young people should be part of the process, not only because of the contribution that they can make to the plan, but to ensure their special needs are met. Young people may be ideal candidates to assist with community mapping, because of their energy and eagerness to help.
- **Develop and share family plans** – Each family should consider developing a family emergency response plan as well. (Fire departments have been urging families to develop individualized plans for how to respond if a smoke alarm goes off, so they might be a good partner to provide information and assistance to families and the community.) Families may also want to file their plans with the community, so that people would know where to find them, for example, if the family has a plan to meet elsewhere if their home is destroyed.
- **Problem solve ways to address barriers and obstacles** – As the community meets to discuss the plan, various impediments to its success may well emerge. For example, a plan to open the local elementary school or church to families as emergency shelter in certain situations may require dealing with liability issues in advance. Or it could require developing a protocol to ensure access if the emergency occurs outside the organization's normal hours of operation. Also of concern is how to access supplies of prescription medicines for people if transportation is an issue or if the local pharmacy fails to open. Remember also that a neighborhood plan means being specific about specific local concerns. For example, your plan might take into account the street that always floods in a downpour, since it could require devising a way to respond to

the people who live nearby. So your plan would list alternate routes and strategies.

- **Outline implementation** – If the tornado hits, what happens? Who checks on whom and how often? In a terrorist attack, where are the potential traffic bottlenecks if people are ordered to flee and how do we avoid them? In the case of lingering threats, such as bird flu, who brings food and water to the people who need to remain quarantined? Who provides them medical help? A basic plan with specifics for different kinds of emergencies often makes the best sense.
- **Identify training needs and opportunities** – Some people will recognize the need to learn CPR and basic first-aid. Others will want to discuss organizing neighborhood security patrols. The police can act as the clearinghouse to access existing training opportunities and develop needed new ones.
- **Test the plan** – Conduct periodic training exercises, even if it only means testing the “telephone tree” to see how long it takes to notify everyone of an emergency. You cannot anticipate all the obstacles and barriers until you try out your plan under real-world conditions.
- **Revise the plan** – Again, the plan is always a work in progress. We live in a transient society, which means the person your plan relies on for medical help could move tomorrow, so always be on the lookout for new backup and new resources. If testing shows a major flaw, don’t be afraid to rip up that part of the plan and start over.
- **File plans with the police department** – The police can act as the clearinghouse to gather and coordinate neighborhood plans into a seamless whole. Neighborhood plans (with names and personal information deleted) can serve as templates for other communities to follow.
- **Build consensus, collaboration and trust** – Concerns about privacy and liability can derail the best-laid plans. But the virtue in a neighborhood plan is that the number of people is small enough and dependent enough on each other that such concerns can be overcome through effort and goodwill.
- **Harness the energy for long-term positive change** – The experience of coming together to build a Neighborhood Emergency Response Plan can serve as the foundation for tackling other neighborhood problems, from crime to blight and disorder to specific concerns such as a lack of activities for youth. We all hope that the emergency plans never need to be used. But the effort is worthwhile, not only to maintain preparedness, but to develop the infrastructure that strengthens neighborhoods so that they can deal with any problem that emerges.

Neighborhood emergency preparedness and Homeland Security

Another crucial reason for the police to be the catalyst in neighborhood emergency planning is that building trust and sharing information between people and police are integral to Homeland Security. Community policing is effective in dealing with crime because people not only trust their police well enough to share information but the process of working with the community allows residents to share their concerns informally without being singled out for retribution.

In this era, preventing terrorism requires that various strands of information and intelligence must come together quickly, so that appropriate authorities can identify and assess threats within our communities. So strategies that build mutual trust and collaboration between people and their police are essential.

As the late Robert Trojanowicz often said when he was urging communities to adopt community policing, "Until we are all safe, no one is truly safe." Policing for the 21st century means providing people the tools they need to make themselves safe from all the threats and problems we face.

Bonnie Bucqueroux was associate director of the National Center for Community Policing at Michigan State University during the tenure of the late Dr. Robert Trojanowicz. She continues to provide consulting services to police through her consulting firm, **Policing.com**.