

Cultural Competence and Disaster Management: Flooding in Coastalville

Frances L. Edwards, MUP, PhD, CEM

The United States is a heterogeneous¹ nation, whose disaster-prone communities need emergency managers with a high degree of cultural competency to effectively meet community needs. (Edwards, 2012) Researchers have long noted that people of different ethnic groups and immigration statuses² respond to disaster events differently, often influenced by earlier experiences in their countries of origin. (Basolo, et al., 2009; Davidson, Price, McCauley & Ruggiero, 2013; Lachlan & Rainear, 2017; 1-5); Marlowe & Bogen, 2015; Wilson & Tiefenbacher, 2012.) Also, community members have varying degrees of English language competency. Some native English speakers are illiterate or have limited English reading competency. People for whom English is a second language (ESL) may have limited literacy in English, and or may be illiterate in any language.

Most disaster shelters in the United States are run by the local government in cooperation with a non-governmental organization (NGO), such as the American Red Cross or Salvation Army. These NGOs are typically run by volunteers who provide the food for the shelter residents based on nationwide menus that are designed to provide meals that will be acceptable to most Americans, but may not appeal to people of all backgrounds, ages and ethnicities. People whose origins are not in the United States or Europe may find some of the food unacceptable, such as cold cereal, peanut butter and mayonnaise-based salads. Food is an important factor in the psychological care of disaster survivors, so developing community specific menus can be an important part of community disaster preparedness.

Attaining a working knowledge of the cultural characteristics of stakeholders in the community will allow an emergency manager to anticipate community needs and concerns. By involving diverse community members in emergency planning, response challenges like language interpretation needs, appropriate food for shelter residents and anticipated access and functional needs accommodations can be arranged in advance. (Lloyd, Llorenz, & Schement, 2016; Storr & Haeffele-Balch, 2012; Nepal, Banerjee, Perry & Scott, 2012; Andrulis, Siddiqui, & Purtle, 2011).

In addition to ethnic diversity and literacy levels, immigration status divides many communities, influencing their responses to public programs and services. While citizens and green card holders may need assistance with post-disaster recovery paperwork (Edwards, 2012), people awaiting a decision on permanent residence status may be afraid that accepting any government assistance may make them a “public charge” and ruin their chances for permanent resident status or citizenship (Edwards & Wong, 2010). However, emergency assistance such as

¹ Heterogeneous means that people of many ethnicities and races live within the United States.

² Immigration status may include people who have become permanent residents and have a green card, people who have tourist visas, people who have student visas, people who have special work permit visas like H1-A or H1-B, and people who are in the country with no documentation through the Immigration and Naturalization Service, sometimes referred to as “undocumented” or “illegal”.