

Community Voices in Natural Hazard Mitigation Planning

Introduction

A primary goal for updating the Mitigation Action Plan was to reflect the needs and priorities of frontline and underserved communities. This goal is intended to build on the equity and community work done as part of the 2016 MAP, and to build on community-based work that the Portland Bureau of Emergency Management has done over the past five years. This part of the plan is intended to provide a voice to communities who are often left out of natural hazard planning yet are often impacted the most by the hazards described in the plan and the projects and policies included in the MAP.

Our approach to engaging these community members and identifying their priorities was impacted significantly by the planning context—the Covid-19 pandemic, the racial justice and police reform movements, and other natural hazards that impacted our community during the planning process. Although the effects of Covid-19 were felt throughout Portland, its health and economic consequences disproportionately impacted frontline communities. Communities of color and low-income populations were more at risk of getting sick and dying from Covid-19, as well as losing their jobs or housing as a result of the pandemic. These communities and the organizations that support them were simultaneously traumatized by police killings that made the national news and engaged in a historical racial justice movement during this time, and responding to unprecedented wildfire smoke, winter storms and heat disasters during our planning period.

This context made it difficult for us to connect directly with the community organizations and people we wanted to hear from directly about the plan; but also presented an opportunity to understand the real challenges and priorities for building community resilience. Likewise, while the context presented challenges for building trust and relationships in frontline and underserved communities—especially communities of color—it presented an opportunity for us to build on relationships that developed as a result of direct aid provided by the City of Portland during these crises. Our outreach approach took into account these challenges and opportunities and was focused on three areas of work described below:

- Reviewing and summarizing what we have already heard from frontline and underserved communities about how their priorities and needs are related to building resilience to natural hazards.
- Collaborating with City employees to develop community priorities based on the relationships and work with community-based organizations that were already taking place during this period.
- Direct outreach to the community at community-gathering places over the summer when Covid-19 cases were lower, and some economic stabilization had taken place.

Summary of Previous Feedback

The Portland Bureau of Emergency Management has been committed to furthering engagement into frontline and underserved communities—with many concerted outreach efforts related to emergency preparedness, hazard mitigation, disaster response, continuity of operations planning for businesses and NGOs, and overall community resilience. Our first step in including the voices of these communities in our plan was to look to the work that had already been done since 2016 and derive relevant experiences and priorities from these efforts. For this purpose we reviewed the following reports:

**Insert list and description of each of the reports here

2016 Natural Hazard Mitigation Plan (NHMP) Public Survey: The public survey was distributed to the Portland area to obtain community input during the development of the Natural Hazard Mitigation Plan. The survey was launched on Monday February 1, 2016 with initial results compiled on April 3, 2016 to inform the development of mitigation projects and programs, plan content, and outreach strategies. To achieve its equity objectives, the survey sought to reach a broad cross-section of the Portland population, particularly communities who are often left out of the planning process. It was primarily distributed through online platforms in English, Spanish, Chinese, Russian, Ukrainian, and Vietnamese translations and included questions pertaining to disaster preparedness and risk reduction.

Black Barbershop Surveys: In April 2018, PBEM surveyed two different barber shops that serve the Black community with the goal of improving community outreach and preparedness. The survey, which was given to 75 community members, consisted of ten questions pertaining to community strengths, household emergency concerns, preferred communication sources, and barriers to disaster preparedness.

APANO Chinese Focus Group on Disaster Resilience: The Asian Pacific American Network of Oregon (APANO) conducted a focus group interview in August 2018 with 12 Chinese immigrants to measure and improve their knowledge on disaster preparedness and emergencies. The focus group was conducted entirely in Chinese to accommodate participants, all of whom identified as Cantonese-speaking women with limited English-language proficiency. Participants shared their personal experiences with disasters, such as earthquakes and flash floods, and pinpointed areas government entities should focus on to improve disaster response.

Latino Network – Communities of Color Insights Report: Latino Network, an education and capacity-building organization for Latinx youth and families, conducted focus group sessions on emergency and disaster preparedness with Latinx adults and youth on August 29, 2018 and September 12, 2018. The group sessions used educational resources such as chart papers, discussion themes, and images to measure the community's experiences with emergency and disaster preparedness. This mixed-

method approach helped the City determine the community's culturally-specific needs while maintaining a sense of comfort throughout the discussion.

Voz Workers' Rights Education Project – Disaster Resilience Workshop: Staff and interns from Portland Voz, an organization dedicated to leadership and economic development of day laborers in Oregon, conducted an emergency preparedness and disaster resilience workshop with 10 Spanish speaking day laborers on May 15, 2019. As part of the Voz Workers' Rights Education Project, this event asked participants about their knowledge and lived experiences with disaster preparedness and were given culturally specific resources created with input from local CBOs.

Joint Volunteer Information Center (JVIC) Progress Report: The Joint Volunteer Information Center was established in March 2020 to provide direct support to over 80 community-based organizations (CBOs) through a community advocate model. After identifying personal hygiene items and cleaning supplies as essential resources that are lacking in frontline communities, JVIC advocates and CBOs established a distribution process for these supplies. In December 2020, the City conducted 30-minute focus group interviews via Zoom or phone call with JVIC community-based organizations to collect feedback on the project and pinpoint areas of the distribution process that could be improved.

A review of these efforts provided a few key takeaways for the 2021 Mitigation Action Plan Update:

- **Assess Community Specific Needs:** Participants showed interest in learning about emergencies and disaster preparedness, but to adequately meet the needs of underserved communities, the city must determine what works best for them. This requires assessing community values, priorities, and existing or missing resources, and adopting a flexible disaster response strategy. Listening to and incorporating communities' lived experiences into the mitigation strategy is another critical part of this process.
- **Strengthen Existing Community Partnerships:** Partnerships such as JVIC supported communities by creating a zero-entry barrier for city services and resources and encouraging trust building opportunities. Efforts should continue to nurture collaborations with CBOs and increase their capacities as they are an essential component to achieving community resilience.
- **Bridge the Language Divide:** Several non-English speaking communities expressed interest in disaster preparedness education but felt a disconnect with city agencies due to lack of multilingual communications. Building trust and confidence within immigrant communities should include language accessible resources and education opportunities as well as culturally specific government responses to natural hazards.

Additional information on PBEM's past outreach efforts as well as in-depth descriptions of key takeaways for the 2021 Mitigation Action Plan can be found in the Appendix (page number, appendix number).

2021 Building on Current Engagements

In March 2020, the City of Portland established The Joint Volunteer Information Center (JVIC), a partnership with 80 community-based organizations (CBOs) to provide material support necessary for building resilience within communities. The JVIC provided robust infrastructure for helping us achieve the outreach and equity goals of the 2021 Mitigation Action Plan update. The JVIC relies on a community advocate model to build the City's capacity to adequately serve frontline and underserved communities. After focus group discussions were conducted with CBOs in December 2020, JVIC community advocates were also interviewed via Zoom or phone calls in early spring and summer 2021 to gain better insight on how the city could best serve frontline communities. To do so, the interview for both CBOs and JVIC advocates centered on understanding how this model could continue to support communities before, during and after disasters.

These interviews provided a few key takeaways for the 2021 Mitigation Action Plan Update:

- The JVIC Program was instrumental to enhancing partnerships between the City of Portland and community-based organizations. **Maintaining the trust of participating organizations and building on these relationships**—either through the JVIC or another similarly focused engagement—can help us prepare communities for disasters and encourage community-based mitigation.
- By collaborating with JVIC advocates, CBOs receive meaningful support from the City in the form of services, material goods, and information through a zero-entry barrier. Sidestepping the bureaucratic process is a critical advantage of the JVIC model and empowers community based organizations to serve their community members in direct ways and act as sources of safety and health resources. **Maintaining a low-barrier to entry opportunity for engaging with the City** is important for reaching the communities we are most concerned about.
- The JVIC model also exemplifies the efficacy and adaptability of cross-bureau connections and collaborations. Taking an interdisciplinary approach reduced outreach exhaustion for community based organizations due to a streamlined distribution process of resources and services. **Creating a single-point of entry and opportunity for bureaus to work together with the community is an essential part of successful collaborations** with the City.
- These interviews also allowed community advocates to provide specific recommendations for mitigation projects. Community advocates often noted the **need for mitigation and resilience planning to address endemic issues of race and poverty** that intensify the impacts of natural hazards on the communities they serve.

Many of these recommendations don't translate to the type of strategies that fit within a Mitigation Action Strategy, but they do emphasize the circumstances needed to build community resilience and maintain ongoing community feedback on our mitigation work. These recommendations should be pursued in conjunction with the Mitigation Action Strategy. Maintaining a JVIC-like program will be an essential component of incorporating equity and the

needs of frontline communities into any resilience work the City does in the future, as it can provide a trusting forum for authentic community engagement.

Direct Outreach to Community Portland Parks Outreach Summer 2021

In order to reach the community directly while keeping to COVID-19 protocols, we collaborated with Portland Parks and Recreation to collect surveys outside at existing parks events. We distributed surveys from July 20, 2021 to August 9, 2021 at five East Portland parks: Gateway Discovery Park, Montavilla Park, Luuwit View Park, Wilkes City Park, and Essex Park. We selected parks in the East Portland area with the intent to collect surveys from a more diverse group of respondents and coincided outreach events with Portland Parks' Free Lunch and Play events to ensure that there would be enough participants.

The survey consisted of 5 questions pertaining to natural hazard prioritization, community safety planning, disaster preparedness and its barriers, and demographic information. The first question asked respondents to choose two locations they would go to, if they could not return home, during a natural disaster. Most respondents reported that they would go to another person's home, followed by a hospital or clinic, neighborhood school, or a place of worship. Other common responses that people or families wrote-in included: library, community center, local park, and a chain store or restaurant they frequented.

The second question asked participants to rank natural hazards from 1 to 5, with 1 being the hazard that warranted the most concern. Earthquakes, Wildfires/Smoke, and Extreme Heat received the most 1s and 2s which is in line with Portland's record-breaking summer temperatures. Additionally, drought and winter storms were regarded as mid-range concerns for most survey participants while volcanoes and landslides were top concerns amongst children.

For the third question, participants noted which emergency supplies they had at home. More than 90% of our respondents reported having shelf stable food, a flashlight or lantern, and hand sanitizer on hand. Around 84% of respondents also reported having a basic first aid kit and some bottled water on hand (though we did not confirm whether or not they had the recommended volume for their household size). 65% of those we surveyed also reported having extra blankets, a tent or a tarp, and a safety knife at home. People were least likely to have a battery or hand-crank radio (36%) or body warmers (33%) at home.

After noting which emergency supplies they had on hand, the last question asked participants to reflect on barriers to disaster preparedness. The most common responses were that residents had no knowledge of what is needed (36%), lacked financial resources to buy supplies (31%), and had insufficient storage space (25%), resulting in many individuals and families feeling unprepared for a natural hazard.

The effort to engage and connect with 102 East Portland individuals or families demonstrates that people are aware of, and concerned about, natural hazards, but continue to lack some information and material resources in order to feel better prepared. There may be a gap in

children's understanding of natural disasters, indicated by volcanoes and landslides as their primary concerns, and suggests opportunities to include the entire family in emergency planning. Overall, the direct in-person community engagement was mostly well-received and suggests that additional investments in in-person outreach and education may be important aspects of natural hazard mitigation and resiliency efforts.

Future Work for Including Community in Natural Hazard Mitigation

Implementing recommendations from previous outreach work is necessary for building community resilience and strengthening Portland's natural hazard mitigation efforts. Frontline communities are eager to learn about disaster preparedness, but the city must adequately assess communities' priorities and resource gaps to determine what is needed. Doing so will show communities that they are being listened to and encourage community-specific means to increase resilience. Drawing from people's lived experiences through continuous outreach is another way to inform city agencies on how to best assist underserved populations. In addition to fulfilling community-specific needs, it is pertinent that government response includes multilingual communication channels for immigrant populations. Chinese and Latinx participants expressed little confidence in government response due to the lack of language-accessible information and low fluency amongst city employees. By integrating more culturally-specific and translated resources, city agencies could increase public confidence in their abilities. Investing time and resources into these relationships increases government trust which is essential to creating resilient communities.

Continuing to invest and grow the JVIC model is also essential to natural hazard mitigation efforts in Portland. Significant time, energy and resources have helped to establish a community engagement model that is embedded in the community in real and meaningful ways. If the JVIC lapses due to lack of city effort and intentionality, it will not be the responsive collaborative coalition that it currently is. As natural hazards become increasingly prevalent in the Pacific Northwest, the JVIC model offers an important approach that can get resources and services into the hands of those most impacted by disasters in an expedient and thoughtful manner.

JVIC advocates and CBOs recommended targeted investments to strengthen the JVIC model. Integrating an economic recovery program that centers on community needs is a stepping stone to developing a resiliency plan created by, and for, BIPOC communities. Similar to previous outreach efforts, relationship building is a key factor in resilience. Accessibility to city services with opportunities for cross collaboration and appropriate funding sources are meaningful investments for CBOs. A relationship-management system could even further the capacity of CBOs to track community interactions and engagements, ultimately reducing outreach fatigue. Although the model can be improved with additional time and investment of resources, the basic framework for a city-wide, anti-racist community response mechanism is one of the greatest successes of the pandemic-era.

Lastly, the Portland Parks outreach events highlighted hazard concerns and barriers to disaster preparedness which can inform the city on how best to serve communities and determine which investments to prioritize. Earthquakes, Wildfires/Smoke, and Extreme heat were participants' top concerns, an expected sentiment during Portland's hottest summer. Volcanoes were a popular choice amongst young children, possibly indicating a gap in their understanding of natural disasters. This suggests that disaster planning and preparedness should begin to incorporate family-friendly education. Outreach efforts underscored the importance of increasing natural hazard education and community support as many Portland residents reported that they did not feel ready for an emergency. Participants noted that they did not know what emergency supplies they needed to prepare for a disaster. Others said that the costs to buy supplies and finding a place to store them were another set of challenges. City agencies have the opportunity to provide multilingual and accessible disaster information to Portland residents. Participants, for example, appreciated PBEM's "Weekly Steps for Emergency Preparedness" handout and the guide to the city's BEECN locations. A more thorough distribution of disaster information is advantageous to building resilience.

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