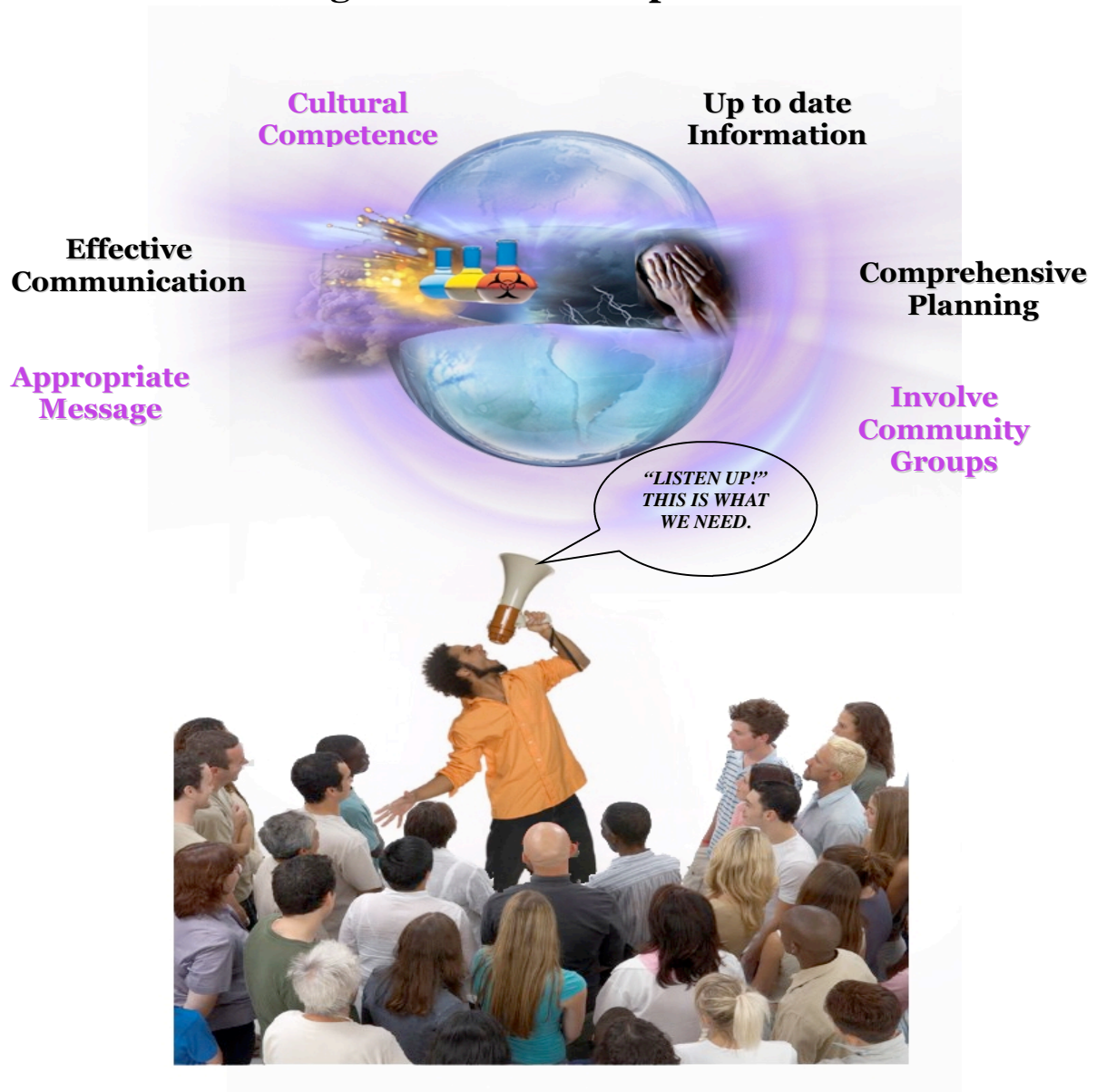


A Guide to Enhance Grassroots Risk Communication Among Low-Income Populations



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“Be Prepared for the Unexpected”

A Guide to Enhance Grassroots Risk Communication Among Low-Income Populations

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A Guide to Enhance Grassroots Risk Communication Among Low-Income Populations

Introduction

The events surrounding Hurricane Katrina serve as a reminder of the importance of reaching out to meet the needs of vulnerable groups such as low-income and minority populations. These groups most often have fewer resources, lower literacy levels, and less communication with response groups before and during a disaster. Current risk communication materials may be written at a literacy level above that for many low-income people, thus it may be difficult for some of them to understand. Poverty, as the root cause of numerous other problems, may influence the low-income populations' perception of the risk, trust in the system, and personal motivation to obtain information. These factors, in addition to various other contextual situations, usually result in low-income individuals experiencing serious consequences during and after an emergency situation. Fortunately, most of the consequences can be prevented by having an effective risk communication system designed to address the unique situation that exists in low-income communities.

Before defining a grassroots risk communication system an examination of the terms "grassroots organization" and "risk communication" are warranted. Smith (1997) defines grassroots associations (organizations) as locally based, volunteer nonprofit associations that foster social support and mutual helping, stimulation and self-expression, happiness and health, sociopolitical activation, and economic and other outcomes among members. Grassroots organizations are constituent driven and often use a bottom-up approach which allows those affected by a problem or potential problem to be part of the solution. Research indicates that grassroots organizations, such as faith-based organizations and nongovernmental organizations, are effective in addressing community needs during a disaster (Homeland Security Institute, 2006; Smith, 1997). A study by the Homeland Security Institute (2006) also noted that these organizations were shown to be effective in providing services to the community that the government was unable or unwilling to provide. However, grassroots organizations have largely remained

an untapped resource for state and local health departments and emergency management agencies.

According to the Commission on Risk Perception and Communication (1989), risk communication is defined as “an interactive process of exchange of information and opinion among individuals, groups, and institutions. It involves multiple messages about the nature of risk and other messages, not strictly about risk, that express concerns, opinions, or reactions to risk messages or to legal and institutional arrangements for risk management” (p. 322).

Authors of this guide define a “grassroots risk communication system” as a partnership which enables public health and emergency preparedness practitioners to involve grassroots organizations such as faith-based, community-based, and business organizations serving low-income populations, in risk communication activities during imminent danger (warning), response and recovery phases of disaster. A grassroots risk communication system that continuously delivers important messages to the community, particularly vulnerable populations, may overcome many of the communication problems that exist among this group. However, developing a grassroots risk communication system requires emergency management planners to initiate different activities at each disaster phase including pre-disaster, imminent danger, response, and recovery. For example, grassroots organizations such as faith-based, business, and community-based organizations are the institutions that have ongoing relationships with vulnerable populations. Thus, public health and emergency management practitioners can communicate more effectively with vulnerable populations by utilizing these organizations. However, relationships with grassroots organizations must be built in a systematic way at the pre-disaster phase to maximize the power of the collaboration. At the imminent danger and response phases, grassroots organizations can communicate valid information and distribute materials more quickly and effectively, which may lead to better outcomes. An effective grassroots communication system can also facilitate the flow of necessary information to the affected populations within the recovery phase by providing information about the availability of resources to repair their homes or by identifying temporary and permanent housing sources. This grassroots approach is further supported by a recent study conducted to assess current risk communication

practices focused on at-risk populations (Meredith, L.S., Shugarman, A.C., Chandra, A., et. al, 2008). A key finding noted in this study was that community-based participation strengthens emergency preparedness, response, and recovery for at-risk populations.

Purpose

This guide is intended to enhance current risk communication systems at the local and state levels by helping these systems to become more proficient in addressing the needs of low-income populations. The guide serves as a resource for public health and emergency management practitioners who plan and implement emergency and disaster preparedness activities that entail collaborating with grassroots organizations serving low-income populations. Although the primary focus of this guide is to provide practical, step-by-step instructions on how to work with grassroots organizations in order to deliver critical information to low-income populations before, during, and after a disaster, suggestions on how to engage these groups in other activities are also provided. Lastly, this guide will serve as an additional tool to help emergency management and public health practitioners upgrade their risk communication efforts by incorporating a grassroots risk communication system.

The guide addresses four different topics:

- ◆ **Chapter 1:** Introduction to the issues facing low-income populations as the end recipients of information in emergency and disaster situations and the need for a grassroots risk communication system
- ◆ **Chapter 2:** Sharing lessons learned from past disasters to help provide a better understanding of its implications for the development of a grassroots risk communication system in Maryland.
- ◆ **Chapter 3:** The roles of grassroots organizations and a Grassroots Outreach Worker (GOW) in establishing relationships with the public and designing a grassroots risk communication system.

- ◆ **Chapter 4:** Overview of the important factors necessary for the operation of a grassroots risk communication system and relevant strategies for establishing and sustaining relationships with grassroots organizations before, during, and after a disaster.

In addition, samples of documents for use in developing partnerships with grassroots organizations and a culturally sensitive swine flu risk communication brochure are provided in the appendices of the guide.

Chapter 1

The Need for a Grassroots Risk Communication System

Issues Facing Low-Income Populations

Generally, disadvantaged populations, such as minorities and low-income individuals, have fewer resources and face a number of daily challenges that affect their ability to respond to and recover from an emergency (Fothergill and Peek, 2004). However, there are steps that emergency management and public health practitioners can take in advance of an emergency to better prepare communities, risk managers, government spokespersons, public health practitioners, the news media, physicians, and hospital personnel to respond to the challenges of managing such crises (O'Toole, 2001; DHHS, 2002). Researchers also note that “sound and thoughtful risk communication can assist public emergency management and public health practitioners in preventing ineffective, fear-driven, and potentially damaging public responses to serious crises such as unusual disease outbreaks and bioterrorism” (DHHS, 2002, p. 3). Figure 1 depicts the unstable information environment that risk communication systems are designed to minimize. This unstable information environment is prevalent among all populations. However, a traditional risk communication system is more geared towards the general population, thus it can be ineffective in addressing the unstable information environment that often exists among low-income populations.

Appropriate risk communication procedures cultivate the trust and confidence that is imperative in a crisis situation (Covello et al., 2001; Maxwell, 1999; U.S. DHHS, 2002). Recent studies report a lack of confidence in public health systems among low-income ethnic minority groups. In a study of low-income African Americans in Maryland, when asked if the system would do a good job in protecting the public's health, 50% of respondents reported that they were “not too confident” or “not at all confident” and 32% were “very confident” (Rowel, 2006). Findings were similar when respondents were asked if the public health system would respond fairly to their health needs, regardless of race/ethnicity, income, or other personal characteristics (Rowel, 2006). Consistent with these findings was a study of low-income Spanish-speaking

Latinos in Baltimore, Maryland where 53% were “not too confident” or “not at all confident” and 32% were “confident” of fair treatment (Rowel, Zapata & Allen, 2009). In

Figure 1: The Role of Disaster Risk Communication Systems



addition, 47% of the survey participants indicated they were not confident that public health officials would do a good job during an emergency and 83% did not feel the same officials would treat them fairly regardless of race, ethnicity, or income (Rowel et al., 2009). Lack of trust among low-income populations may be a barrier to traditional risk communication systems and limit their effectiveness in reducing factors that lead to an unstable information environment.

Risk communication systems are used to deliver necessary messages to those who need them. Emergency management and public health practitioners usually produce several prevention and preparedness messages for different phases of emergencies which are targeted towards the general population. However, materials are not always designed in a culturally appropriate manner to persuade minorities and low-income populations to follow the recommendations. A content analysis of web-based emergency preparedness risk communication materials collected from the 26 county and municipal emergency management offices in Maryland was conducted to determine their appropriateness in reaching low-income African Americans and Latinos (James, Hawkins, and Rowel, 2007). The results illustrated a significant limitation in the amount of culturally tailored information available for these populations, as well as the need for improvement in developing and disseminating culturally appropriate emergency risk communication designed to reach low-income minorities. Because of limited tailored materials, these groups may not respond to risk communication messages or take full advantage of other materials and information provided. Consequently, these groups become marginalized in the preparedness phase and may remain marginalized during the response and recovery phases.

Traditional risk communication systems are often designed for the general population. As a result, marginalized communities who fall below the average literacy level may have difficulty understanding the information and/or trusting the messenger. This population is also hard to reach through a traditional risk communication system due to the lack of a systematic relationship between government and the grassroots organizations from which marginalized communities most often receive their services. In addition, many low-income individuals live in substandard environments with fewer resources which in turn, also serve to make communication even more difficult. Finally,

low-income individuals are seldom sufficiently involved in the process of developing information materials, which leads to the development of products that do not reflect the cultural and social values of low-income populations (Meredith, L.S., Shugarman, A.C., Chandra, A., et. al, 2008).

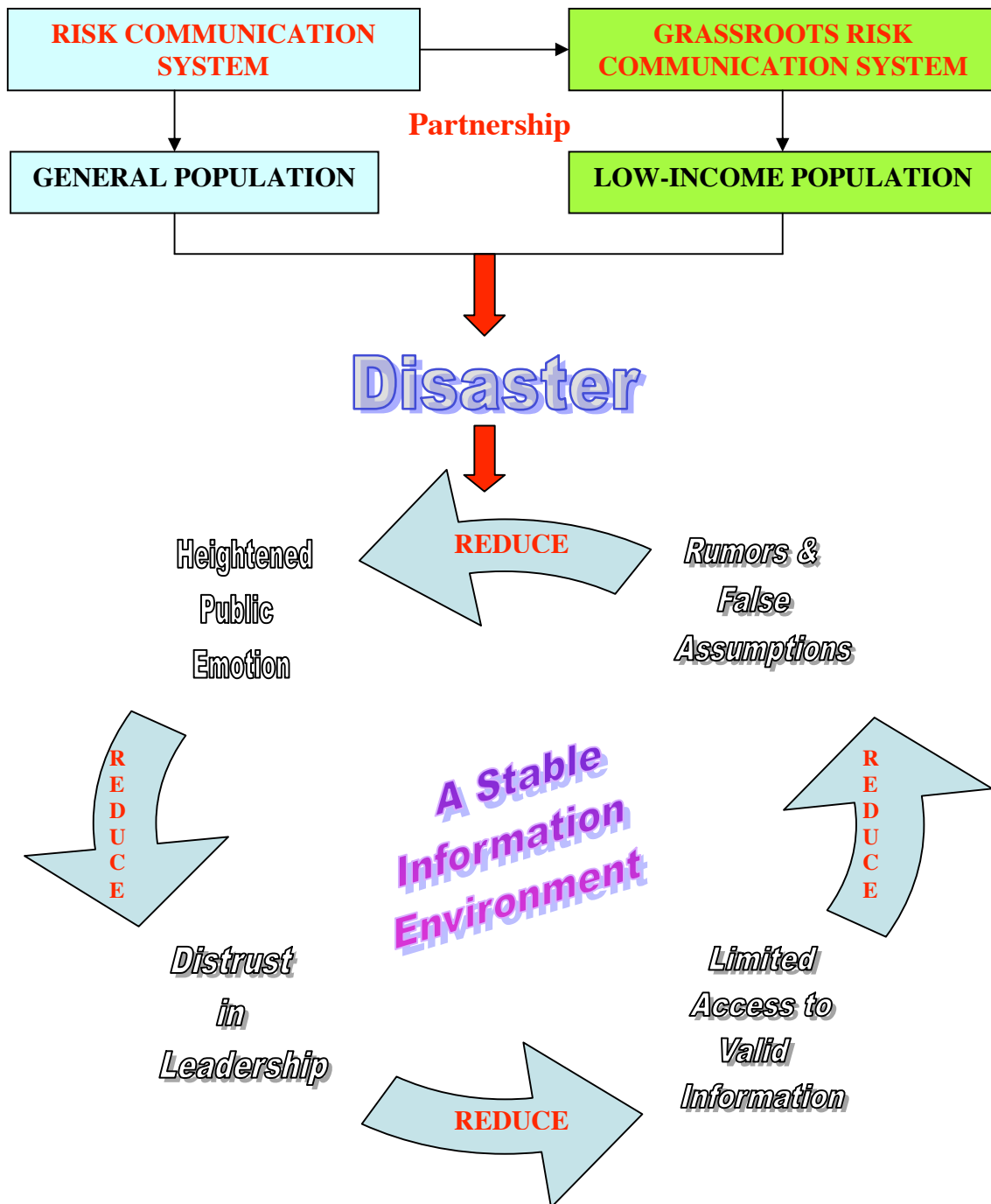
To enhance current risk communication systems, emergency management and public health practitioners must develop a comprehensive risk communication system for low-income populations that encompasses working with grassroots stakeholders to develop relationships with different groups of people before an emergency occurs (Figure 2). Working with grassroots stakeholders can serve to counter any marginalization that may occur among low-income populations. A grassroots risk communication system can help emergency management and public health practitioners establish ongoing communication channels that ensure the continuous flow of information to low-income communities. As a result, this will also serve to decrease the time needed to deliver critical messages to this population. The content of these messages should be tailored to the literacy level of the target population and should also take into account the resources, perceived risk, and lack of trust in the system that exists in low-income communities. Finally, an effective risk communication system should also build capacity within a community by including information to link people to the places where they can go to get help.

How a Grassroots Risk Communication System Can Help

A grassroots risk communication system is a partnership which enables emergency preparedness officers to involve grassroots organizations and businesses that serve low-income populations to participate in risk communication activities. Risk communication in poor and public housing neighborhoods require effective risk consultation with local stakeholders who are trusted by the populations they serve. Through effective communications, people will be both informed on current policies and use their input in the formation of the messages and materials. Public health officials can then enhance existing social networks and utilize numerous potentials to reach out to the needs of the most vulnerable groups. This approach can prevent the creation of unstable

information environments and help people get reliable information. As depicted in Figure 2, this enhanced model, which encompasses the traditional risk communication system

Figure 2: Enhancing Disaster Risk Communication Systems to Serve Low-Income Populations



along with a grassroots risk communication system, reflects efforts to reach beyond just the general population to address the unstable information environment that exists among all populations. It will also help emergency management and public health practitioners identify serious complaints from those that receive less attention. Lessons from past incidents, especially those from Hurricane Katrina and September 11, should encourage state and local public health officials to update government risk communication systems by incorporating grassroots organizations in efforts to connect all disjointed activities and create an efficient and comprehensive grassroots risk communication system.

Grassroots Risk Communication in Action: A Swine Flu Scenario

On June 11, 2009 the World Health Organization (WHO) raised the worldwide pandemic alert level to Phase 6 in response to the ongoing global spread of the influenza virus H1N1 (Swine flu). A Phase 6 designation indicates that a global pandemic is underway. This designation also reflects the fact that there are ongoing community level outbreaks in multiple parts of the world. The decision to raise the pandemic alert level was based on the spread of the virus not the severity of the illness caused by the virus. CDC is taking aggressive action to respond to the outbreak and has asked public health officials and providers to prepare our communities for this public health threat. It is well documented that low-income populations will be disproportionately affected by this virus due to poor health, access to care and a number of socioeconomic factors. Your public health officer is very concerned about this threat. In preparing for the upcoming flu season this fall, your agency is to inform and warn the general population about this public health threat, particularly low-income and other groups that are more vulnerable.

As a result of the Grassroots Risk Communication partnerships, 20 faith and community-based organizations and businesses that serve low-income populations in the county are identified in the database of agencies that signed agreements to help with risk communication activities targeting this population. In signing these agreements grassroots partners indicated they would serve as points of distribution for risk communication materials in the event of a disaster or other public health threats. Grassroots Risk Communication partners also identify one contact person and two alternate persons to assist with this effort.

The Grassroots Outreach Worker (GOW) initially contracted to identify organizations serving low-income populations is a part of the emergency management team and will be housed in the Incident Command Center throughout the response and recovery phases of this event to assist on matters concerning low-income populations where necessary. Through his or her social network of community residents and organizations, rumors and other misinformation will be monitored and validated if necessary.

As soon as the decision was made to inform and warn the community, officials notified these organizations and made arrangements for them to pick up or have risk communication materials delivered to them. Specifically, your agency will disseminate information about swine flu, preventive actions to stop the spread of the virus (i.e., frequent hand washing, social distancing, etc.) and guidance on what to do if they become sick with flu-like symptoms, taking care of a sick person at home, plan for use of antiviral, and. Once they receive the materials, grassroots risk communication partners will disseminate materials or have materials on site in locations where low-income populations can easily access them.

Public health and emergency management agencies expect this effort to go well because months prior to the public health threat some of the representatives from partnering organizations agreed to participate in training as well as exercises, drills or table tops in preparation for such a disaster.

Following the event, partners will be asked to participate in debriefing meetings to assess lessons learned. *Note:* For their participation in events during pre-disaster, response and/or recovery phases, agencies will be recognized at an awards event for their community participation.

Chapter 2

Lessons Learned From Past Disasters and Their Implication for Grassroots Risk Communication Strategies in Maryland

Overview of the Grassroots Risk Communication Project

Using the Hurricane Katrina experience as a backdrop, the Grassroots Risk Communication (GRC) Project was developed as a continuation of the 2005 Special Population Bioterrorism Initiative between Maryland's Department of Health and Mental Hygiene and Morgan State University's School of Community Health and Policy (MSU SCHP). The GRC Project was designed to assist in upgrading state and local public health jurisdictions' preparedness for and response to bioterrorism, outbreaks of infectious diseases, and other public health threats and emergencies. The GRC Project was conducted from June 2006 through August 2006.

In this first phase of the project, the study population was comprised of African Americans. With the assistance of community-based organizations and the public housing authority in areas that provided access to low-income African American populations, study participants were recruited from Somerset County (Princess Anne), Baltimore City, Anne Arundel County (Annapolis), and Charles County (LaPlata). Both quantitative and qualitative data collection measures were used for this project to collect information from low-income African American populations to further assess disaster service needs, perceptions about pandemic and avian flu, and the impact Hurricane Katrina had on their perceptions about disaster preparedness, response, and recovery.

A total of 250 surveys were collected in the target communities. The survey explored the following areas: 1) how Hurricane Katrina impacted perceptions of disaster preparedness, response, and recovery; and 2) knowledge, attitudes, and behavior intent about pandemic flu preparedness, response, and recovery. Four focus group sessions were conducted which included a total of 43 participants from the target communities. The focus groups addressed five topical areas: 1) impressions of Hurricane Katrina; 2) identifying who was at fault for failure after Hurricane Katrina; 3) influence of Hurricane Katrina on personal preparedness; 4) expectation of social support when there is imminent danger of a disaster; and 5) impact of media coverage.

Results from the Grassroots Risk Communication Project

The Grassroots Risk Communication Project for Low-Income Populations final report details the full findings of the project. The following is an overview of the findings from the GRC Project.

- ◆ **Impressions of Hurricane Katrina:** Participants have negative perceptions of Hurricane Katrina disaster relief efforts which primarily centered on the evacuation, rescue and delivery of services. Participants believed that both racism and classism played a role in how the relief efforts were carried out.
- ◆ **Media Coverage:** Participants felt that the media perpetuated the negative images and delayed in showing any positive aspects of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. These negative media images resulted in participants feeling that first responders, hospitals, nursing homes, and clinics all performed fair or poorly during and after Hurricane Katrina.
- ◆ **Perception of Government:** Participants expressed an overall lack of trust and confidence in the government. Participants noted that the government's response to Hurricane Katrina led them to believe that the government would not be fair and would not provide the same level of assistance to all victims in future relief efforts. The majority of participants also expressed a lack of confidence in their local public health system's ability to do a good job in protecting the health of the public, responding fairly to health needs, and providing honest information to the public.
- ◆ **Personal Knowledge, Attitudes and Behavior:** Since Hurricane Katrina, participants worry more and have less of a sense of safety about the possibility of another hurricane/tornado or flood hitting their community or a future terrorist attack. The possibility of a pandemic flu outbreak is a concern expressed by the majority of participants. Their level of concern, however, is not reflected in the actions many participants would take if asked to stay in their homes. Nearly a

third indicated that shelter in place is not a viable option during a pandemic flu outbreak. Participants who indicated that they would not shelter in place, noted that they would leave their home for survival needs or to check on family and friends.

- ◆ **Personal and Community Preparedness:** Participants indicated a mixed level of personal preparedness with most participants indicating that they were prepared and about a third feeling that they were not at all prepared. Since Hurricane Katrina, the majority of participants reported having a stockpile of common disaster necessities while less than half reported having a family emergency plan in place. Focus group participants indicated that lack of money and poverty are factors that hinder their ability to prepare and evacuate. Participants also indicated that their own communities were not prepared to deal with emergencies.
- ◆ **Social Support:** In terms of support networks during an emergency, participants indicated that family is the primary source of support followed by religious or other voluntary organizations, the government, and other people.

During the one-month grassroots risk communication system planning period, 25 agreements were signed. The majority of agreements were signed by faith-based organizations (48%), followed by community-based organizations (32%) and city agencies serving low-income populations (20%). Of the five options listed on the agreement, most agencies (84%) agreed to disseminate awareness materials (i.e., flyers and brochures) before a disaster occurs and 84% agreed to disseminate materials during the imminent danger phase (approximately 1 week before a disaster). In addition to these activities, participating organizations also indicated that they were willing to:

- Display posters or other printed material (96%)
- Add disaster awareness information to their website (16%)
- Participate in radio talk shows (28%)

On average, each of these organizations has the capacity to reach approximately 500 low-income residents on any given day.

Chapter 3

Designing a Grassroots Risk Communication System

Objectives of a grassroots risk communication system

Risk communication is an important component of individual, preparedness, response, and recovery (Commission on Risk Perception and Communication, 1989). Due to more diversity in our communities, preparing for emergency and disaster situations now are becoming more complex, thus, better and more extensive communications with stakeholders are required for a successful risk analysis. The Commission (1989) also indicates that material distribution is one of the simplest risk communication strategies while persuasion, defined as convincing and inducing someone to believe, falls short of being an effective risk communication system. A grassroots risk communication system encompasses both ends of the spectrum in order to improve communications with vulnerable populations. This ongoing exchange is designed to influence personal knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions around risk issues, and to gather information for incorporation into the design of risk communication programs. Consequently, the objectives of a grassroots risk communication system are to:

- ◆ Establish and maintain channels for the ongoing exchange of information with trusted institutions in the community; and
- ◆ Help emergency management and public health practitioners communicate critical information to vulnerable populations in a timely fashion before, during, and after an emergency.

The grassroots risk communication approach was developed by the Morgan State University School of Community Health and Policy Why Culture Matters Disaster Studies Project with input from emergency management and public health practitioners, including city, county, and community stakeholders in Anne Arundel County Maryland.

The remainder of this section will discuss:

- ◆ Principles of grassroots risk communication;
- ◆ How to establish a grassroots risk communication system; and
- ◆ Types of organizations that can serve as a grassroots risk communication partner.

Principles of grassroots risk communication

Using concepts outlined by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (2001) as a guide, several principles for grassroots risk communication were developed. Based upon meetings with local health department and emergency management partners and findings from the GRC Project, it was determined that designing a grassroots risk communication system must incorporate the following principles:

1. **Trust in the grassroots leadership:** Working with grassroots organizations can be a slow process that encompasses numerous efforts and activities. Public health and emergency managers should have a genuine belief in the importance of involving stakeholders in all steps of the risk communication process, particularly vulnerable populations. Sometimes grassroots organizations may have different opinions. However, it is critical that emergency management and public health practitioners trust the leadership of the grassroots organizations and work to resolve challenges through mutual understanding.
2. **Have appropriate and strong messages:** Good risk communication techniques should not communicate poorly constructed messages. Thus, the messages communicated must be important and significant. Further, the messages should be relevant to the needs of the target audience and communicated in accordance with the literacy level of the target audience.
3. **Make risk communications interactive and ongoing:** Good risk communication is interactive and continuous. Fair and effective risk communications are based on a mutual understanding that seeks input from all participants. As such, it is important to establish risk communication links with vulnerable populations during the pre-disaster phase of an emergency.
4. **Initiate good planning and organization:** It is essential for effective risk communications to have well developed and comprehensive plans. In

addition, the structure should be flexible so as to allow for a quick and effective response to unexpected situations that may arise.

5. **Communicate both internally and externally:** It is important to recognize that internal communications within a particular group is equally as important as external communications among a number of different groups. Thus, a grassroots risk communication system should encompass both internal and external communication among key stakeholders.
6. **Recognize diversity:** Effective risk communication requires recognition of the various opinions of all team members. Each partner may frame the facts in a different way however, it is important to consider such differences as an asset.
7. **Have current information:** Information should be current and include data gathered about the key players, available communications materials and tools, and available channels of communications.
8. **Anticipate some complaints:** It is important to establish a balance between considering every complaint and not making a major issue out of negative feedback that may be received.

How to establish a grassroots risk communication system

The grassroots risk communication approach assumes public health and emergency management agencies have included public sector offices that work with low-income populations as part of their overall planning (i.e., government operated social service, criminal justice system, substance abuse treatment agencies). Recognizing the need to form partnerships with grassroots organizations in advance is the cornerstone of an effective grassroots risk communication system. The following activities are suggested to formalize and sustain relationships with target organizations: 1) identify a Grassroots Outreach Worker (GOW); 2) establish relationships with grassroots organizations; and 3) make risk communication materials available.

IDENTIFY A GRASSROOTS OUTREACH WORKER

Within the risk communication system, the grassroots outreach worker (GOW) serves as a liaison between emergency management agencies and the grassroots organizations. Emergency preparedness officers develop partnerships with grassroots organizations as a result of the GOW's interaction with these groups. In addition, throughout the partnership development process the GOW provides updated information to both emergency management agencies and grassroots organizations on a regular basis. Thus, special attention must be given to finding the right GOW. Since the GOW serves as the primary contact with the grassroots organization, it is important to have an individual who is familiar with working with organizations serving low-income populations and who is skilled in forming partnerships.

It should be noted that due to budgetary constraints, some agencies may be unable to contract someone to serve as the GOW and will have to look within. While many public health and emergency management agencies already have a staff person responsible for providing and/or coordinating education and outreach efforts, the individual in this position may have little hands-on experience in dealing with low-income communities and grassroots organizations that serve them. In this situation, it is important to identify people in other areas of the agency that may possess the necessary experience and qualifications to serve as the grassroots outreach worker. An example includes individuals providing cancer screening, HIV/AIDS, substance abuse treatment, and other outreach services as this work may often entail working in low-income communities and developing relationships with grassroots organizations.

ESTABLISH RELATIONSHIPS WITH GRASSROOTS ORGANIZATIONS

The GOW plays an integral role in developing and maintaining the grassroots risk communication system. This is accomplished by building on existing relationships with grassroots organizations as well as establishing new relationships. The GOW must identify grassroots organizations as well as local businesses that are willing to participate in the system. Additionally, the GOW should acquire and regularly update profile data for each grassroots organization and execute a signed agreement contract for each organization. The agreement serves to document the activities that each grassroots

organization agrees to undertake. At a minimum, each organization must agree to supply three (3) contact persons from the organization and make a commitment to distribute risk communication information developed by local emergency management agencies to low-income populations served by their organization during the imminent danger phase of a disaster. It should be noted that the specific tasks assigned to each grassroots organization can be tailored to fit the needs, skills, and resources of each grassroots organization. Thus, some grassroots organizations may agree to engage in additional activities beyond that of providing contact persons and distributing information. It is also important for the GOW to review all organizational contact information on a regular basis. This is necessary in order to ensure the accuracy of the information given the staff turnover that may occur in community organizations.

MAKE RISK COMMUNICATION MATERIALS AVAILABLE

By completing the agreement contract, grassroots organizations become points of distribution for risk communication information materials before and during emergencies, especially during the imminent danger period. Although the primary responsibilities of the GOW are to identify partners and to develop a database of agreements delineating what agencies are willing to do, some public health or emergency management agencies may choose to also have the GOW available to coordinate material distribution activities among the grassroots organizations before, during, and after a disaster occurs. If not, public health and emergency management agencies will have to make arrangements with grassroots risk communication partners to pick up risk communication materials or have them delivered to their respective locations. Samples of the various risk communication information materials and letters of agreement are provided in Appendices A and B, respectively.

Grassroots Risk Communication in Action: Profile of a Grassroots Outreach Worker

Born in Annapolis, Maryland, Larry has been on both sides of the street. At one point in his life, Larry was rendered homeless due to his drug problem. After recovering from his addiction, Larry went on to establish We Care and Friends, a non-profit agency devoted to serving low-income and disenfranchised members of the community. For the past 15 years, his organization has sponsored a Thanksgiving Homeless Dinner which serves up to 2,000 people from communities throughout Annapolis. This event is recognized as one of few events where people from all walks of life come together to “eat and be merry.”

Contracting We Care and Friends was the ideal grassroots organization to access the services of Larry. As part of his work with We Care and Friends, Larry interacts with social service, law enforcement, criminal justice, health, and recreational agencies, as well as local businesses, entertainers, and politicians. His primary reason for interacting with these groups and leaders is to access services or to advocate for low-income populations to help them to deal with daily crisis and other community stressors.

It is not unusual to see Larry talking with the Mayor or City Alderman, someone just released from jail or in jail, someone who is homeless, youth or senior citizen service providers, public defenders, leaders of faith-based organizations, and more. As a result of his role in the community and his work with low-income populations, a level of trust exists that increases the likelihood that leaders of grassroots organizations or local businesses will agree to participate in a grassroots risk communication system. Furthermore, the assistance requested of Larry for this initiative was in line with the mission of his organization, that is, to meet the basic survival needs of disenfranchised groups throughout the county.

Some of the relationships he has with individuals and organizations took years to develop and no amount of money could pay for it. The work it takes to develop and maintain such relationships is simply “priceless.” In order to identify the “Larrys” in communities you wish to address, find out what organizations provide these services, and ask key informants to name passionate leaders within those organizations who can identify and solicit the involvement of organizations to provide grassroots risk communication services for low-income populations in their community.

What type of organization can serve as a grassroots organization?

Grassroots organizations include community-based, faith-based, and business organizations that serve the low-income population in any given neighborhood. These organizations have established relationships with the community and may serve as trusted sources of information in the community. To maximize grassroots risk communication activities, it is important to establish relationships with organizations from each category. Limiting partnerships to one particular category of grassroots organizations may serve to limit outreach opportunities, which may result in some low-income individuals not receiving the necessary information.

Examples of each type of grassroots or business organization serving low-income populations include:

COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS

- ◆ Organizations providing social services outreach
- ◆ Job training centers
- ◆ Shelters
- ◆ Health centers
- ◆ Group homes, transition houses, etc.

FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS

- ◆ Churches
- ◆ Synagogues
- ◆ Mosques

BUSINESS ORGANIZATIONS

- ◆ Beauty Salons & Barber Shops
- ◆ Convenience Stores
- ◆ Drug Stores & Pharmacies
- ◆ Retail Stores
- ◆ Carry-outs and Restaurants
- ◆ Child Care Centers
- ◆ Laundromats

Chapter 4

Operation of a Grassroots Risk Communication System

Operation of a grassroots risk communication system during different phases of emergency and disaster situations

A traditional risk communication system usually encompasses materials development, material distribution, and outreach through community events. In a grassroots risk communication system, collaboration with grassroots organizations is also included in order to enhance the ability of emergency management and public health practitioners to utilize their risk communication system to reach out to and meet the needs of the most vulnerable and easily missed populations. . Developing a grassroots risk communication system requires different priorities during different phases of disasters. There are four (4) phases in which of risk communication activities should occur: 1) pre-disaster; 2) imminent danger/warning; 3) response; and 4) recovery. An overview of the grassroots risk communication system during each phase follows.

PRE-DISASTER PHASE

To establish a grassroots risk communication system, the pre-disaster period is the best time for prevention and preparation, particularly for organizations working with low-income populations. Thus, relationships with grassroots organizations should be established prior to the occurrence of an incident. The GOW can identify potential collaborators and collect data about community partners. During this stage, the GOW's primary responsibility is to identify organizations willing to convey risk information to low-income populations by serving as points of distribution during pre-disaster, imminent danger, response and recovery phases of disaster. Grassroots organizations can accomplish this by disseminating disaster awareness materials to those who utilize their services. For example, faith-based organizations can distribute materials to their congregations, community-based organizations can give materials to those who receive services, and grocery stores can have information on display for those who shop at their stores. As reflected in the analysis of agency agreements findings for the GRC Project

(see end of Chapter 2), grassroots organizations are willing to engage in this task as 84% of grassroots organizations signing an agency agreement for this project were willing to disseminate awareness materials before a disaster occurs and 96% were also willing to display posters or other printed materials.

However, for grassroots organizations willing to do more, the GOW can also use this period to link these organizations to government agencies by including them in relevant activities. For example, grassroots organizations can attend and/or participate in various government-sponsored events, such as community health fairs and festivals, where they might assist with distributing materials with emergency preparedness messages. Agency agreement findings also indicated that 28% of the grassroots organizations were willing to participate on radio talk shows. In addition, grassroots organizations can be included on various government list serve groups so as to stay abreast of necessary information and enhance their relationships with government agencies. Ways in which government agencies can enhance communication during the pre-disaster phase by working with grassroots organizations are provided in Table 1.

For many low-income populations, a disaster is considered a low probability event with high consequences. Thus, other pressing issues such as, paying bills, family drug abuse, and heavy drug trafficking in their communities may take precedence over becoming aware of disasters or creating an emergency preparedness kit. Working with grassroots organizations could lead to new strategies for preparing low-income populations for disasters and other daily crisis. Effective preparation during the pre-disaster period could serve to lessen the impact of an incident if government agencies work with grassroots organizations to: identify threats and plan to minimize their effects; determine vulnerabilities and give higher priorities to the appropriate interventions; and identify required resources and use available techniques to ensure that the resources are in place during the incident.

Table 1: Ways to Enhance Government Agency Communication During the Pre-Disaster Phase By Working With Grassroots Organizations

Current Government Risk Communication Task	Role of Grassroots Organization
Produce information and materials for minority and low-income populations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✚ Provide input and feedback on the information and materials ✚ Conduct pilot tests of the information and materials
Use of “siren system” for the imminent danger or warning period which includes translation and distribution of different messages for different groups of people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✚ Assess the clarity of messages, provide feedback, and disseminate the messages among hard-to-reach populations ✚ Make sure sirens can be heard in areas where low-income populations reside
Disseminate risk communication messages using the Internet, email lists, radio, television, local reporters, etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✚ Provide input and feedback on the messages ✚ Form a partnership with public health and emergency management agencies to begin the trust building process among populations served by grassroots organizations and to introduce the emergency management and public health agencies as a source of reliable information.
Organize special events and health fairs on emergency preparedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✚ Participate in the special event ✚ Serve as a partner for special events

IMMINENT DANGER PHASE

One of the major challenges during the imminent danger or warning phase is the need to take immediate action to disseminate critical information to vulnerable groups, especially low-income and minority populations. People who are more prepared during the pre-disaster phase are probably more likely to protect themselves during the imminent danger phase of an emergency. The problem arises in that the likelihood of preparedness

at the pre-disaster phase appears to be low among all Americans, particularly low-income and other vulnerable populations. Therefore, it is critical that grassroots organizations reach out to these populations during the imminent danger phase. The grassroots organization can obtain reliable information from the government agencies and disseminate the government materials and information to the populations they serve. According to analysis of agency agreement data, 84% of grassroots organizations were willing to disseminate risk communication materials during the imminent danger period. Since members of the community usually trust grassroots organizations, the participation of grassroots organizations at this phase can serve to prevent many potentially harmful rumors and speculations that may develop throughout the community. The GOW or representatives of grassroots organizations can also provide feedback about problems they encounter when implementing the grassroots risk communication system to emergency management and public health agencies.

RESPONSE AND RECOVERY PHASES

Events such as Hurricanes Katrina and Rita show that low-income and other vulnerable groups are more likely to be adversely affected by a disaster (Associated Press, 2005). However, effective interventions during the response and recovery phases may reduce, or even prevent, many of the adverse effects following a disaster. Although it is important to identify and engage organizations in preparedness activities during the pre-disaster phase and to distribute risk information during the imminent danger phase, the grassroots risk communication system is also designed to have grassroots organizations disseminate risk messages to low-income populations during the response and recovery periods. Examples of information to disseminate during the response and recovery phases are: where to find temporary housing, food, and clothing; locating lost family members or pets; how to avoid hazardous materials; and precautions to take while cleaning buildings damaged by the disaster. In addition, collaboration with the grassroots organizations' established network of stakeholders during the pre-disaster phase may create other opportunities that could be utilized during response and recovery periods. During the response and recovery period, grassroots organizations could serve as support

to victims and facilitate short and long term restoration activities. Some of the grassroots organizations may have resources such as shelters, food, clothing, etc, which could serve as additional community resources during the response or recovery periods. Also, these organizations may be willing to assist in organizing evacuation plans by communicating messages and taking leadership roles within the community. As with other grassroots risk communication activities discussed in this section, the degree to which organizations serving low-income populations are involved will vary based on available resources, interest, and other factors.

Expected benefits of a grassroots risk communication system

A grassroots risk communication system can help government agencies reach out to the most vulnerable and hard to reach segments of the population. The system also serves to prevent some of the potentially harmful rumors and assumptions that often develop in the community by providing a venue for government agencies to disseminate reliable information through trusted organizations. This system is not a substitute for existing governmental risk communication systems. Rather, a grassroots risk communication system serves as a complement to existing systems by making them more effective. A grassroots risk communication system also serves to diversify sources of information for those who traditionally lack trust in government agencies. In addition, establishing and maintaining relationships with organizations that work closely with low-income groups will provide additional opportunities for government agencies to assess the impact of their messages and materials and improve their quality by making the messages and materials more culturally sensitive.

Barriers to implementation of a grassroots risk communication system

In interviews with grassroots organizations, most indicated enthusiasm about doing public activities. Distribution of the materials to the people they usually meet was mentioned as an easy and feasible activity, especially during the imminent danger phase. However, one of the major concerns when working with grassroots organizations is the sustainability of their services. As such, powerful incentives and ongoing relationships

with these organizations should be established so as to ensure sustainability of these voluntary services. The grassroots organizations indicated that such incentives from government agencies would prove beneficial in keeping the organizations motivated to provide the promised services. Some of the incentives mentioned included being recognized at special events, in newsletters, or on websites. In this regard, regular updating of organizational profile data and communicating the organizations' expectations or concerns with government agencies is essential.

In addition, it will be helpful for government agencies to establish relationships with additional grassroots organizations that could serve as backup partners when the main grassroots organizations are not available or are not performing as expected. Finally, establishing strong relationships with grassroots organization during the pre-disaster period could serve to ensure better services from these organizations. While government agencies are likely to face some common challenges when working with community stakeholders, these challenges can be prevented by taking proper action. Examples of actions that can prevent common challenges are outlined in Table 2.

Table 2: Common Challenges and Solutions When Working With Grassroots Organizations

Common Challenges	Possible Solutions
Community leaders and government officials have different perspectives and ideas on the issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✚ Analyze issues with cultural sensitivity and determine shared values through equitable partnership and co-learning
Lack of high levels of diversity among stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✚ Develop specific ethical principles and communication strategies
Government agency is limited in its ability to collaborate with grassroots organizations and maintain the relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✚ Define the community and key leaders within the community prior to initiating a collaboration ✚ Maintain contractual relationship with the Grassroots Outreach Worker
Community distrust of government leadership and programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✚ Build and maintain relationship with the community through trusted channels (i.e. existing grassroots organization, grassroots outreach worker from the community) ✚ Engage in extensive consultation with the grassroots organization to establish mutual openness and accountability
Limited technical knowledge of community organization leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✚ Ensure that technical information is explained in a manner that can be understood by all the stakeholders involved
Need to balance the interests of various groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✚ Ensure that the power and responsibilities are shared among the stakeholders
The demands of the community groups are perceived as unrealistically simple and technically infeasible	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✚ Work to prevent misunderstandings by reviewing information carefully and explaining the options

Conclusion

The results from the Grassroots Risk Communication (GRC) Project serve to provide helpful insight into useful grassroots risk communication strategies in Maryland. The findings from the GRC Project exemplify the potential unstable information environment that can develop in low-income communities. The heightened public emotion created by past disasters, coupled with the existing distrust in national and local government, can serve to limit access to emergency preparedness information for low-income populations. This can result in misconceptions being held by low-income individuals which creates the exact environment that a grassroots risk communication system is designed to combat.

Low-income and ethnic and racial minority populations are two of many populations who are vulnerable during a disaster. Other vulnerable groups include:

- ◆ Mentally Ill Population
- ◆ Those living in rural communities
- ◆ Older Adults
- ◆ Pediatric Population
- ◆ Individuals with Disabilities
- ◆ Low-English Proficiency Populations

The grassroots risk communication approach can be adapted for use with any vulnerable population. The principles noted in Chapter 3 are equally applicable to working with these groups as well. The steps to formalize and sustain partnerships with target audiences would entail contracting a GOW, establishing relationships with the grassroots organizations and businesses that serve the population of interest, and making culturally appropriate risk communication materials available during pre-disaster, imminent danger, response and recovery phases.

It is imperative that public health and emergency management practitioners integrate a grassroots risk communication system into existing local and state disaster preparedness efforts. Low-income and other vulnerable populations are often left out of emergency planning efforts. However, developing partnerships with the grassroots organizations that already have established relationships with these target populations

could prove beneficial to everyone involved. Incorporating grassroots organizations will serve to include these disenfranchised populations at the planning level thereby allowing for the development of culturally-appropriate risk communication materials to counter the unstable information environment that often exists among vulnerable populations. Implementing a grassroots risk communication system can also lead to increased preparedness among vulnerable populations which in turn, results in better community outcomes during all phases of a disaster. It should be noted that work with grassroots organizations is not limited to risk communication activities. Once partnerships are established with grassroots organizations, public health and emergency management practitioners are encouraged to continue to explore opportunities to strengthen these partnerships throughout all phases of disasters.

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APPENDICES

- Appendix A: Sample Organization Contact Letter
- Appendix B: Organizational Profile
- Appendix C: Sample Agreement Contract with Grassroots Organizations
- Appendix D: Sample Culturally Appropriate Hurricane Warning Brochure

APPENDIX A

Sample Organization Contact Letter

Date

Community-Based Organization

Address

City, State Zip Code

Dear _____:

The _____ Health Department is working together to improve communications with _____ populations during a disaster. The purpose of this effort is to help local emergency preparedness agencies to communicate effectively with the _____ population by decreasing the time it takes to get information to them in the event of a pandemic influenza or other public health emergencies.

We are looking for organizations to work with this population on this project. We value the work that you are currently doing in the community and believe that your participation will help this project become successful. If you are interested taking part in this project, please complete the enclosed partnership agreement and profile. By signing the agreement, you are agreeing to participate in one or more activities where you will be responsible for distributing information to the _____ individuals you serve. You may be required to distribute this information before, during, and after a disaster.

We hope that you will support this effort by agreeing to be a point of distribution. Should you have any questions, please contact _____, Grassroots Outreach Worker, at xxx-xxx-xxxx, or me, _____ at xxx-xxx-xxxx. We look forward to working with you.

Sincerely,

Name

APPENDIX B
Organizational Profile

Name of Organization: _____
Address: _____
County: _____
City, State, ZIP: _____

Type of Organization:
 Community Organization
 Retail business
 Faith based organization
 Other (Specify) _____

Purpose of Organization: _____

Role in Community: _____

In the event of an emergency, how many people are you able to reach daily? _____

How do you plan to reach them? _____

Contact Persons: Name, title, two phone numbers, and e-mail address.

	<u>Primary</u>	<u>Secondary</u>	<u>Alternate</u>
Name:	_____	_____	_____
Title:	_____	_____	_____
Phone:	_____	_____	_____
Phone:	_____	_____	_____
E-mail:	_____	_____	_____

Would you like an opportunity to have your information included on our website?

Yes ___ No ___

APPENDIX C

Sample Agreement Contracts with Grassroots Organizations

I, _____, representing _____, agree to serve as a **Grassroots Emergency Point of Distribution (GE-POD)** to reach vulnerable populations, especially low-income and Spanish speaking persons, before, during or after a disastrous event. In this capacity, I agree to work with the local health department and emergency management agencies to minimize the risk posed to this population during natural, man-made and technological disasters. I understand that all materials are designed to provide information during critical periods of an emergency; and that this is a community outreach activity with no monetary incentive or gain.

In this regard, I agree minimally to identify a dedicated person(s) to do one or more of the following: (Check all that apply)

- Disseminate awareness materials (flyers and brochures) before a disaster occurs
- Disseminate materials during the imminent danger phase (approximately 1 week before a disaster)
- Disseminate materials during response (right after the event occurs) and recovery phases (up to one year after the disaster)

I am also willing to:

- Display posters or other printed material.
- Identify a dedicated person within my organization to participate in emergency preparedness training events.
- Add disaster awareness information to our website.
- Distribute emergency kits to low-income English and Spanish speaking populations.
- Participate in radio talk shows.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX D

Sample Culturally Appropriate Hurricane Warning Brochure

Through extensive outreach with low-income populations in Maryland, the Morgan State University School of Community Health and Policy (formerly called the School of Public Health and Policy) developed a draft of a culturally appropriate risk communication brochure. The brochure is designed to provide low-income individuals with information needed during the warning phase of a possible swine flu pandemic. The brochure has a section on frequently asked questions, suggestions about what can be done, and where more information can be obtained.

Remember this is a sample brochure designed for this guide. Agencies are encouraged to develop or modify culturally appropriate materials that meet the needs and characteristics of the target population they wish to reach for a successful grassroots risk communication effort. In addition, the article by James et al. (2007), "An Assessment of the Cultural Appropriateness of Emergency Preparedness Communication for Low Income Minorities" provides some useful insight on what to address while developing materials for ethnic and racial minorities and low-income populations.

Frequently asked questions

What is the swine flu?

Swine flu is a virus that usually spreads from pig to pig. This type of swine flu virus, however, can spread from person to person. When it does it is a common respiratory disease.

How serious is the swine flu?

At the present time very, very few people are sick with the flu virus in this country. Health officials are being especially careful to make sure as few people as possible get sick.

How is the swine flu different from seasonal flu?

Viruses from most seasonal flu have been seen in humans before and up until now the swine flu virus was not seen in humans. Which means your body may not be able to fight off the swine flu as well as seasonal flu.

Can you catch swine flu by eating pork?

No. Like seasonal flu, the swine flu spreads to others through coughing or sneezing of people infected with the virus.

Is there a vaccine against swine flu?

No, but the government is working with drug manufacturers to create a vaccine. It is expected to be available in the fall.

What can I do now?

Remain calm and stay informed

Listen to latest updates but don't over do it. Constantly watching updates on the status of the flu virus may cause you and others in your family to worry.

Know the symptoms of swine flu

Symptoms of Swine flu include fever, sore throat, and cough. Some people also have a runny nose, fatigue, body aches, nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea.

Are some groups at greater risk than others?

Yes. For those who are 65 years or older, under 5 years old, pregnant, or have a chronic illness such as diabetes, asthma, heart lung, or kidney disease, or weakened immune system, the virus could be more harmful.

Protect yourself and others by:

- Washing your hands often (or using an alcohol-based hand sanitizer if soap and water aren't available)
- Avoiding touching your eyes, nose or mouth with your hands – germs spread this way
- Trying to avoid close contact with sick people

For more information

To be sure you are prepared call or visit the following websites:

Anne Arundel County Health
Department Office of Emergency
Preparedness and Response

410-222-4115

www.aahealth.org/emergency.asp

Annapolis Office of Emergency
Management:

410-216-9167

www.ci.annapolis.md.us

Maryland Department of Health
and Mental Hygiene

(410) 767-6500 or 1-877-463-3464

<http://www.dhmd.state.md.us/swineflu/index.html>

Sample

SWINE FLU Warning: Are You Ready?



Prepared by:

**XXX County Health
Department**

Distributed by:

WE CARE AND FRIENDS