

Weaving Community Connectedness

A Case Study in Mobilizing Partnerships, Promoting
Collaboration, and Building Capacity

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Abstract

As the oldest county in Illinois, Himstedt County will celebrate its bicentennial in 2010. The first item on the County Board meeting agenda is the celebration and Board members debate event plans for 40 minutes. Meanwhile Doris Davis, Director of Himstedt County Health Department (HCHD), ponders how she will redirect Board members' attention to the county's disaster plan when her turn to report comes up. When Doris' turn arrives, Chairperson Becca Bonifield asks Doris if she would circulate a written report and defer her oral presentation and questions for next month's meeting. Doris agrees, thinking to herself "Thankfully, a reprieve!"

Out of the corner of her eye, Doris catches her colleague Al Williams, coordinator of county 911, shaking his head in disgust. After the meeting, Al says, "If we have another ice storm like last winter, we won't have one red cent to spend on that Bicentennial Celebration!"

Being an optimist, Doris says, "Al, I'm glad we've got another month to work on the plan. Yesterday I spoke to Max Schmidt at Rotary and I got a couple of ideas from him that might apply to our county plan. You remember Max don't you? He's president of the Roosevelt Neighborhood Association (RNA). Right after the ice storm, RNA volunteers canvassed the neighborhood within 12 hours of the power outages. They identified homes with generators that could take in neighbors and got emergency generators out to the homes where people with special medical needs had to have electricity."

"Come on Doris! Do you think the independent souls in this county would go for anything like that?"

"Al, don't be so negative. I'm glad we have some extra time. You and I both know we have some serious holes in our plan. This will give us some extra time. I'd like to get together with Max and pick his brain. Are you in?"

This case study describes one Health Department's policy development efforts in revising the county's disaster plan. The Health Department director uses leadership skills to mobilize partnerships, promote collaboration, and build capacity resulting in a comprehensive, responsive, disaster plan.

Background of Planning Efforts . . .

To understand the challenge facing Doris and her colleague Al, some background information is in order. Himstedt County has faced disasters before; what 200-year-old entity hasn't? During WWII and the industrial period following the war, coal mining peaked. Ellis, the largest town and county seat had four active coal mines. Many of the senior citizens in Ellis and the rest of Himstedt County remember the mining disaster of 1953, when fire swept through the northwestern shaft of the old Clovis Mine. One hundred thirty men lost their lives that day. When the word disaster is mentioned, people in Himstedt County think of Clovis. How can you plan for something like that? All but one of the county's mines are now closed. Most people can't even remember where they are.

Then there was 9/11. Like the rest of the country, folks in Himstedt County, clustered around television sets in those terrible days after 9/11. On the heels of 9/11 came anthrax and bioterrorism. Board chairperson Becca Bonified asked Darryl Friederich, president of the county fire chiefs' association, to organize a HAZ-MAT team, "just in case." During the months that followed, Darryl's all volunteer HAZ-MAT team would be called out on average three times a week responding to cruel hoaxes. Nonetheless, the team has been active ever since, responding to real emergencies like a tanker truck leaking anhydrous ammonia and a railroad card derailment where a phosphorus compound ignited. People in surrounding areas were evacuated, the chemicals cleaned up.

Doris has been with Himstedt County Health Department (HCHD) for 15 years, serving as director for 10 years. After 9/11, Doris and HCHD Director of Environmental Services, Carol Menendez, developed a disaster plan in-line with expectations articulated by the Center of Disease Control (CDC). This planning process was painful. Although there was extra funding for local Health Departments to plan, there was never enough money to cover the staff time needed for careful planning of multiple scenarios. Doris was always glad she had grown up in Himstedt County, because she knew many of the county officials and first responders. She and Al, the county's 911 coordinator, played softball together for years on a co-ed league. Doris felt that because of these relationships, she and Carol developed a well-networked plan that exceeded CDC benchmarks. Although disaster planning wasn't in Doris or Carol's original job descriptions when they were hired, after 9/11, these responsibilities were added.

Doris, Carol, and Al tested out their disaster plan at a simulated scenario three summers ago with staff from the CDC on-site to supervise. A major flaw surfaced during the drill when important agencies were unable to communicate. Radios used by coordinators didn't prove to be reliable, and, for a short time, there was no ability to communicate with incident command. Doris had nightmares two weeks after that drill. She couldn't get the idea out of her head, "What if that had been real?" Fortunately, the CDC staff directed Doris and Al to a funding source to upgrade communications. Together Al and Doris approached County Board Chair Becca Bonifield with a plan to write a grant to upgrade the communication tower at the 911 office and to buy more powerful, digital two-way radios for fire departments, police departments, and ambulance services throughout the county. The grant was funded and the new system was installed May 1, 2006.

Doris, Carol, Al, and Darryl met at a local establishment after work to celebrate the evening of May 1. They had worked hard on that grant and it was rewarding to see the fruits of their labor. During their celebration, Doris chatted with one of the old-timers sitting at the bar, “What you young folks celebrating here?”

Al responded, “We just installed our new emergency communication system today. We got a \$1 million grant and now we have some great equipment to communicate in emergencies. This is really important if we ever have a disaster.”

The old man exclaims, “Disaster! Nothing like that happens around here anymore. I worked for Clovis, I can tell you about disasters. I just don’t understand all this talk of disasters. Here we sit in the middle of the country, what are they going to do, fly a plane into the courthouse? Million dollars of taxpayers’ money! No wonder we have such deficits.”

The old man’s comments dampened the celebration, and the party wraps up quickly. Doris goes to bed that night and has one of her recurring nightmares. Something terrible is about to happen. She’s trying to warn everyone and no one will listen. She wakes up feeling exhausted. At lunch the next day Carol says, “Well Doris, you’ve got to be feeling pretty good. Don’t you think we pretty well have things covered here in the county?”

Doris replies, “No I don’t Carol. We have our disaster plans for bioterrorism, our new communications system, our HAZ-MAT team, but I can’t stop thinking about what that old guy said last night. In some ways he’s right; it’s very unlikely any of those things we’ve prepared for are going to happen. He can point to a disaster that happened years ago that no one will forget and it sure wasn’t a bioterrorism event. We don’t have coal mines to worry about anymore, but there sure are plenty of other things that could happen and I don’t think we’re prepared. I just don’t know how to get people’s attention, especially the Board. They’re happy about the new communications system, especially the part where no local tax dollars have to pay for it! But we need a better plan for all sorts of other possibilities.”

Carol sighs, “What I need is a break from this. I have to get back to my other duties. I’m about burnt out on disaster planning.”

Doris agrees, “I hear you there. We have plenty of other work to do. We’ll just see what happens.”

Then Comes the Wind, Then Comes the Ice . . .

Doris didn’t have to wait too long for her intuition to be confirmed. In July 2006, a fast moving cold front ripped through the region dropping temperatures 30 degrees in an hour. Along with the drop in temperatures come 75 mph straight-line winds. Thousands of trees were brought down leaving 60,000 Himstedt County citizens during peak outages without power. Temperatures skyrocketed again the next day to 95 and remained that high for a week. A week after the storm, there were still 10,000 people without power. While the new communication system worked well during this emergency, Doris began to get a clearer picture of what could happen. The Health Department had no power for three days. All services were cancelled. One of the freezers shorted out, causing some immunizations to thaw and be ruined. Cooling

shelters were opened, but there was no way to get the word out, since most people didn't have battery-operated radios. Furthermore, there weren't provisions for transportation to get the oldest, frailest and sickest people living in their homes to the shelters. Two elderly people died from hyperthermia the week after the storm.

A few weeks after the crisis ended Doris, Al, Carol, and Darryl got together and decided to draft a memo to the County Board, asking for special funds to hire a full-time disaster coordinator to work between all county agencies and all municipalities. Their request was placed on the County Board agenda for September agenda, but is deferred until October. After Doris' presentation, Board members vote against the request because Himstedt County is perilously close to a budget deficit. Chairperson Becca Bonifield appoints Doris to chair a taskforce charged with returning with a budget neutral proposal. The taskforce consists of Doris, Al, Carol and Darryl with two other community members, and a County Board member. The two community members and County Board member don't make it to any of the taskforce meetings, and so the same four players find themselves struggling with seemingly insurmountable tasks and no money. They come up with an outline that really, no one is happy with, and, once again, their topic isn't addressed during the November meeting. Looks like it might have to wait until after the holidays.

November 30, dawns dark and ominous. As the day progresses the rain begins to fall, slow at first then steady. Temperatures drop to below freezing, yet the rain continues. The next morning the skies clear to a beautiful blue, with a crisp air temperature of 12 degrees and 2 inches of ice on everything. Virtually no one in the county has power.

Doris huddles under her blankets and thinks, "This is the flip side of what happened this summer. Wonder if we can get the Board to pay attention now?" This time the power outages are much more severe and last much longer. Temperatures stay below freezing for two solid weeks. This time there's no spoilage of immunizations at the Health Department, but no services can be offered for four days because the emergency generators cannot keep the building warm enough. Once again, emergency shelters are opened, this time the shelters are at least half-full. No one dies of hypothermia, but Al's son-in-law, an emergency physician, tells him the hospital emergency department saw a 300% spike in trauma from falls, including broken hips, wrists, and concussions. Because the power outages are in the heart of Christmas shopping season, the economic impact may be the biggest toll, accountants predicting a 15% loss in local sales taxes.

Fast Forward to Here and Now . . .

One wonders how with all of this planning, and all of these warnings, Al, Doris, Darryl, and Carol can all still be struggling with a somewhat indifferent County Board. Fortunately, no other disasters have occurred in Himstedt County since November 2006. However, the plan is far from complete, and the Board's attention has now been turned to happier thoughts, like planning the Bicentennial Celebration. Al is dejected after the latest deferral by the Board. However, Doris holds onto some hope, as she thinks her acquaintance Max, CEO at the Roosevelt Neighborhood Association, might have some ideas that could be integrated into the countywide plan.

Doris was intrigued with the fact that Max's neighborhood seemed to weather the recent disasters without any major problems. She knew that she and Al could learn a lot from Max that would help the rest of the county be better prepared for the next disaster. Doris asked Max what he thought "the secret" to the Roosevelt Neighborhood Association (RNA) was.

Max proceeded to tell Doris and Al that members of the RNA work primarily with the families of the Roosevelt School throughout the year, not just when there is a disaster. There are family-centered activities held at the school and throughout the neighborhood all year, even during the summer months. That way the families and the RNA Board members know each other and are aware of each family's individual needs. The school principal and a RNA board member visit each family at home once a year. Because of these interactions, families view the school as the center of the neighborhood and the place to go during a disaster.

Max went on to say that over the years, there has been a long-term collaboration with area churches and community organizations, such as the Medical Society and the Rotary Club, as well. There was recently a non-denominational food pantry opened in the neighborhood, supported by five local churches. The RNA Board has also collaborated with the local Health Department through several programs involving after school activities. Max explained that although there is little interaction with formal emergency services, there is a close relationship with the local Police Department and the housing authority. Monthly safety committee meetings are held that address immediate and long-term concerns. Max feels that because of these ongoing collaborations, the RNA is able to respond quickly in the event of any disaster.

During the windstorm and the ice storm, Max and his RNA Board members were able to contact all families in the neighborhood. If they couldn't reach a family by phone, they dropped by the home. If a family was without power and had nowhere to go, they were partnered with a family that had power. Evening meals were served at the school for anyone who wanted to come. The RNA Board was able to respond quickly with financial resources because of a special discretionary fund, thereby cutting through red tape that would have delayed immediate assistance.

After power was restored and families were back in their homes, members of the RNA contacted each family, asking if they lost food and if they needed food. Once again, local churches were able to help and provided gift certificates and food baskets for the needy families. Max ended by saying that the grassroots movement in the Roosevelt neighborhood enabled everyone to be able to work together, helping each other and preventing anyone from falling through the cracks.

After talking with Max, Doris is inspired and thinks that many of Max's ideas can help the rest of the county to provide similar services for their communities. Al is still pessimistic, but now knows that it's possible to help communities and neighborhoods throughout the county develop a plan that would work for their specific areas. Doris realizes that because of the work of the task force, the new communications system and the formation of the HAZ-MAT team, the county is in a better position to handle major events than it has ever been. However, even with several bioterrorism drills, there are still some critical holes in the plan.

In order to get a better feel for problems that occurred during the past two disasters, Doris met with several community members, including representatives from the Health Department and the Red Cross. During these discussions, Doris learned that even though there were shelters in various communities, many people who needed the shelters didn't use them because they didn't know where they were or that they were open. In addition, there were very few elderly and sick residents at the shelters because they had no transportation. There were a few residents at the shelters who needed medical assistance, but no one was able to help them. Calls were made to the Health Department, but because of power outages and communication problems, no medical personnel were sent. Doris wondered who could have helped on such short notice.

Doris and the taskforce then met with several community organizations, such as the Rotary Club and the Lion's Club. From their perspective, it seemed that many households were totally unprepared for any kind of disaster. What if there was an earthquake or a tornado? Isn't there some way to get basic information to the members of these different communities about emergency preparedness? Shouldn't each family have the basic necessities?

Doris ponders these questions and realizes that each community and neighborhood is different but that the main problems and solutions are similar. Why not use the schools, churches, and community organizations to disseminate information about emergency supply kits and emergency shelters before the next disaster occurs? Fundraisers could help the lower-income families with supplies. Is it possible to set up transportation ahead of time? Can home health nurses assist at the shelters? The members of the taskforce realize that they must involve members from all the towns and communities in planning for the future safety of all residents.

Doris realizes that the entire community holds so many resources that could be used to develop and execute a disaster response. The question is how to engage such a variety of organizations and the diverse neighborhoods and community constituents?

As Doris ponders these questions, she attends the opening of a new banking institution in the community. She catches up with two friends from high school, Tonya, a businessperson who is very involved in women's business networking group, and Cheryl, a home health nurse. The conversation then turns to the last two disasters that affected the community. Cheryl tells Doris that there are seven home health agencies in the county. The agencies have a combined total of 260 nurses that stayed home during the crisis after making sure their patients were safe. As the women were talking about the needs that each had seen or heard about, Todd, the Vice President of the new Bank approaches.

Todd introduces himself and begins by saying that one of the tellers had overheard the conversation and told him that it might be helpful if the Bank volunteered in some way to respond to the emergencies. After all, who knows about people and their homebound status or support systems more than the Bank? Todd tells Doris to count on the Bank for any outreach or assistance in reaching people to plan or implement a disaster response team.

Doris is so excited and renewed with hope that the safety net for the community is still a viable program with what appears to be untapped assistance. Doris thinks about how the plan had previously been approached and decides that she needs to ask for an extension to the timeline for presenting a comprehensive and engaging plan. The RNA success story further cements the

need for a full court press and more outreach from community-based coalition of private and public sector participation.

The County Board meeting date arrives. Doris prepares a brief statement of the status of the project. As Doris enters the County Board meeting room, she is surprised to see the galley seats that are filled with people, some of who she recognizes and many that she does not know. She walks over to Todd from the Bank. Todd tells her that Tonya, Cheryl and he had met and put together a County Board meeting announcement that was mailed to the Bank's account holders and distributed to the neighborhoods surrounding the Bank. Doris cannot believe the turnout! She thanks Todd, Cheryl and Tonya, and sits for the meeting proceedings.

When the agenda item is Disaster Preparedness Program information, Doris addresses the County Board with a brief background statement and then asks for an extension of one month. Becca looks puzzled and asks why the delay? Doris replies that new information and resources have been identified and that with the additional support and collaboration, she knows that a comprehensive and stable infrastructure will create a viable plan for execution. Becca looks to the galley and sees that the seats are full (which is not usually the case) and that many heads are nodding during the delivery of Doris's request for additional planning time.

Becca pauses and looks at Doris. Becca begins by saying: "our emergency communication system is fully operational. This is just one step toward our community's safety...I can see that additional time, thought and collaboration will enrich our ability to provide a community connectedness that can serve as our safety net for whatever disaster presents. Time extension...granted. The Board looks forward to your report on a "Community Safety Network".

Charged with this new mandate from the Board, Doris invites the taskforce to attend the next meeting of the Health and Wellness Commission (HWC), a community-based group organized by the Health Department involving various community-based businesses, health agencies and health providers, to see if the HWC could help determine ways to develop this new Community Safety Network. During the course of the meeting, Al said, "what we need is a communications blitz. We should choose a particular week when all the local newspapers, suburban journals, radio and TV stations would be asked carry an in depth account of the success of the RNA during our last two crises."

"And," he adds, "rather than having a County government be the leader, the various cities, towns and rural communities should be challenged by the HWC to share how their community has addressed this "Community Safety Network." For those communities that do not now have a plan in place, they will be asked in the news blitz to see how much of the RNA's model they can replicate." Max said that he would be glad to assist any neighborhoods in the various steps necessary to start a neighborhood association that works throughout the year regardless if there are any emergencies.

Al was on fire. He continued saying, "Another thing our County can do is to honor Max and the RNA during our Centennial Celebration. That way the idea will constantly be in the eyes of the community."

Inspired by Al and Max, Carol suggests that as soon as each neighborhood develops their own Community Safety Net plan, the stores, gas stations and other places the public frequents could be supplied with flyers that the residents can pick-up or, better yet, that the business' can include in their bags, outlining the plan. These flyers would have a listing for that particular neighborhood's phone numbers, cooling stations, warm areas, transportation, etc. A map could also be printed on the reverse side, outlining street locations. On every flyer, the phone numbers of all County services could also be listed. As the cost for such flyers would be minimal, Carol thought the County would assist in printing of the flyers and would allow several key personnel to attend the various Community Safety Net plan meetings. In fact, Carol thought the County would really support this as the County could still keep focusing on what its mandate is regarding programs and services but at the same time could fully support this very successful community effort.

Doris is beaming, she thinks, "This group is really moving forward in a very positive way--not telling, but sharing what works and how. When a community works together, great things occur!" With that thought, Doris moves, "Let's go for it!" and the Commission responded with a resounding "yes!"

Focusing on the Future . . .

Doris knows she has much work ahead of her. Although the County has a great new communications system and a state-of-the-art HAZ-MAT team resulting in the County being in a better position to handle major events than it ever has been, the recent windstorm and ice storm showed Doris just how vulnerable the County's preparedness is in the area of natural disasters. However, Doris also saw what a success the Roosevelt Neighborhood Association was in caring for and providing services to its residents during those events and saw what could happen when community-based initiatives like the ones organized by Todd, Cheryl, and Tonya at the Bank or planned by the Health and Wellness Commission help the County prepare for any disaster. Doris knows she can help continue the process of disaster planning by utilizing Health Department resources to develop plans, strategies, policies, and trainings for community-based disaster preparedness and response and by continuing to help facilitate and organize initiatives like the ones currently underway by the Roosevelt Neighborhood Association and the Health and Wellness Commission. Doris knows that only by mobilizing community partnerships, promoting collaboration, and building countywide capacity can the County and the Health Department hope to achieve the desired Community Safety Net.

Resource List

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| Banks | Gyms |
| Churches | Hospitals |
| Grocery stores | News Paper |
| Convenience stores | Hardware stores |
| Pharmacies | Home improvement businesses |
| Home health agencies | Construction companies |
| Staffing agencies | Ice companies |
| Post office | Neighborhood associations |
| Transportation companies | Nursing Homes |
| Restaurants | NI groups |
| Red Cross | Chamber of Commerce |
| Reserve units | Boy and Girl Scout Troops |
| Big Brothers/Big Sisters | YMCA |
| Medical Society | Restaurants and Bars |
| Medical alliances | Transportation (Metro and Bus services) |
| Rotary | Police and Sheriff departments |
| Lions | Neighborhood Associations |
| Moose | |
| Elks | |