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Equity in Emergency Management

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On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans and many other surrounding cities, killing over 1,800 people, displacing more than one million, and causing immeasurable property damage. (1) The magnitude of destruction and the disproportionate effects on people of color, people with low incomes, and those with physical or mental disabilities attracted global attention to the disaster. These groups were systemically unprepared to withstand the disaster, and their communities suffered the most loss and received the least emergency support. (2) The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and local emergency management entities received sharp national criticism for their failure to plan for the needs of people with systemic barriers and for their slow response to resource requests. (3)

In the decade following Hurricane Katrina, advocates fighting for the rights of people with disabilities changed the field of emergency management. Their pressure on FEMA led to the establishment of legal and planning precedents to include the needs of the whole community in emergency management.(4) There is now a national, legal requirement to plan for people with disabilities and access and functional needs. Despite this important victory for people with disabilities, there have been no direct legal or policy actions that address the disproportionate response along racial and socio-economic lines. (5)

The theory of social equity has its roots in social justice, health care, and education. (6) The fields of urban and

regional planning and community development have begun to integrate these theories into their work, but progress has been confined to pockets of change in grassroots organizations and within departments in regional and local governments. The Portland metropolitan region is an exception—in the last eight years, equity has become an institutionalized planning principle within much of the City of Portland and Multnomah County. (7)

There is still limited understanding of equity among people who work in emergency management at the local, regional, and national levels. There is particular confusion about how planning for equity differs from FEMA's requirement for planning for people who have disabilities or access and function — al needs. Hesitancy by emergency manage — ment professionals to address equity in their work may be linked to the lack of a clear definition of equity, an uneasy understanding of how to incorporate equity into on-theground programs, and the militaristic ethos of the field of emergency management.

Failing to address equity has serious consequences; the needs of the most vulnerable people may be unmet if those people do not fit into FEMA's definition of people with disabilities and access and functional needs. The projected increase in frequency and intensity of natural disasters means this situation is becoming dire. Fully integrating equity planning principles into all phases of emergency management will help emergency managers better understand the needs of the whole community and how to create pro — grams, policies, and procedures that fulfill those needs.

In this article, we synthesize current discussions of equity to create a working definition. We go on to discuss why equity

is difficult to incorporate into emergency management, and how it is different from FEMA's definition of access and functional needs. We discuss why equity principles should be incorporated in all aspects of emergency management planning. Lastly, we use the example of the Community Emergency Response Team effort in Portland, locally named Neighborhood Emergency Teams, to demonstrate successes and gaps in integrating equity into local emergency management.

Defining Equity

The vision of social equity as the best way to incorporate a community's needs into decision making has gained broader acceptance across the nation in the last eight years, including in the Portland Metro region. Despite growing attention on the topic, there is no single, clear definition of equity to work from. We believe this is partly because of the community-specific and subject specific nature of equity, and partly because the theory evolved from grassroots efforts, instead of from top-down, coordinated national policy.

In our attempt to give a working definition of equity, we synthesized concepts from literature in the social justice, health, education, and planning fields; equity frameworks and policy documents from the city of Portland and Multnomah County; presentations from the 2018 PolicyLink Equity Summit in Chicago; and interviews with academics and regional professionals working in the field of emergency management. Our key understandings are that equity is:

1) Both a process and an outcome. Equity is a way for people to be involved in deciding what they need to achieve, as well as the determined outcomes, whether those out — comes are

support, resources, or decision making control.

2) Enriched by people. The slogan "nothing about us without us," championed by American disability advocates in the 1990s, encapsulates how those with pertinent experience need to be valued as experts.

3) Different than equality. Equality focuses on equal access to resources. Equity focuses on creating a process that ensures everyone gets what they need to achieve the stated outcome.

4) Community and place specific. An equity approach considers the demographic make – up of the community as well as the physical attributes of an area.

5) Composed of structural and physical elements. An equity approach strives to address all barriers that a person or community might face, from structural and institutional racism to physical infrastructure.

6) Confusing by nature. There is no universal way to "achieve equity," because its success is based on the outcomes of specific communities, the involvement of people within those communities, and the specific barriers they face.

Angela Glover Blackwell, founder and former director of PolicyLink, a national think tank for equity policy, describes how their organization defined equity at their start.

"We saw equity as the antidote to structural racism and social and economic disparities across the nation….Equity is different from the formal legal equality conferred by landmark laws such as the Civil Rights Act. Equality gives everyone the right to ride on the bus, in any seat they choose. Equity ensures there are bus lines where people need them so they can get to school or the doctor or work…. It means policies that dismantle destructive barriers to economic inclusion and civic participation, and build healthy communities of opportunity for all." (8)

Blackwell highlights a significant piece of equity: that an equity approach is key to addressing structural racism and economic disparities. This concept is important in emergency management, because the field is inextricably intertwined with systemic issues faced by communities across the country. In the example of Hurricane Katrina, the hurricane exposed the racial and economic inequities already present in the city, from the racialized opportunity structure that favored white people's access to education and high paying jobs to prioritizing maintenance and upgrades of roads in upper class, white neighborhoods, to the racial disparity between homeowners and renters, which affected people's ability to rebuild their lives in their own communities. (9)

Just as understanding of the definition of equity varies, concepts of what equity looks like when operationalized vary. The City of Portland and Multnomah County, whose jurisdictions and operations often over – lap, each have a department that monitors equity and develops equity policy. Because the departments are separate, their work may not sync. This problem is amplified within emergency management when FEMA requirements that tie emergency management entities to disability-specific language do not match language used by county and city jurisdictions that are also held to local

equity standards. In the next section we look more in depth at some of the barriers to incorporating equity into emergency management.

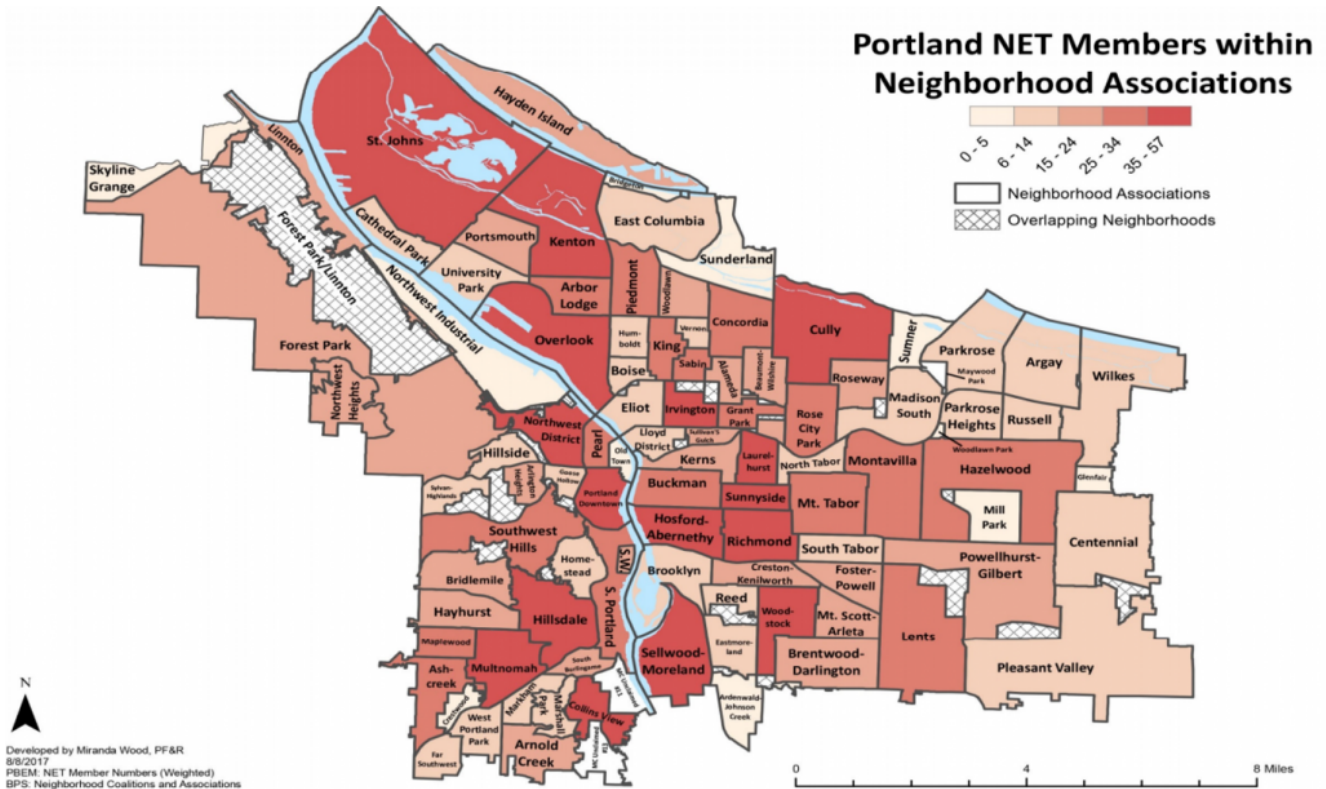**Barriers to Incorporating Equity in Emergency Management**

Incorporating equity into emergency management is difficult for several reasons. One of the most impactful is that the grassroots development of social equity theory, and its requirement of a collaborative, community-based structure to implement solutions does not integrate well with the militaristic background, ethos, and structure of FEMA. FEMA was created in 1970 to centralize emergency response efforts and improve coordination of responders. (10) In the wake of 9/11, the newly created Department of Homeland Security absorbed FEMA, where it is currently housed along with Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the Coast Guard, and the Secret Service. Because of its beginnings as a relief agency, FEMA traditionally concentrated on post-disaster aid and resource dispersal.

The primary goal in emergency management plans, policies, and procedures is to ensure life safety, and FEMA relies upon hierarchy and standardized coordination through systems like the National Incident Management System (NIMS) to ensure that all emergencies are handled in the same way. Because of this hierarchy, emergency management does not appear to immediately mesh well with a community and collaboration-based equity approach.

Disability-Focused Definition of Equity

Another challenge is that FEMA has not yet broadly embraced the term equity, and uses, instead, disability-centric language, such as the term "people with disabilities and access and functional needs." FEMA describes addressing access and functional needs as "including individuals who need assistance due to any condition (temporary or permanent) that limits their ability to take action." (11) The term was developed to address the whole community by shifting from a "list-based" understanding of people's needs, where emergency managers made a list of disabilities based on their own knowledge, to a "function-based" approach to planning for disability, which looks at what people need to accomplish functions like walking, eating, and getting from one place to another.

While the focus on people with disabilities and access and functional needs does place people's needs at the center of disaster planning, it does not address race as a systemic barrier that impacts every aspect of a person's life. A comprehensive equity approach accounts for barriers on all levels, individual, institutional, and systemic. Planning for equity means also addressing structural racism and intergenerational poverty.

Portland NET Members within Neighborhood Associations

Developed by Miranda Wood, PF&R
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PBEM: NET Member Numbers (Weighted)
BPS: Neighborhood Coalitions and Associations

Broadening Equity Considerations

The realities of more frequent and more intense natural disasters, along with high profile emergency management shortcomings, such as in the case of Hurricane Katrina, have now brought urgency and diversity into the field. Professions not previously involved in emergency management, such as urban planning, community development, and education have started to consider the need for an emergency management plan. Schools and office buildings now have active-shooter protocols, and senior care facilities and hospitals are legally required to have emergency response plans.

The broadening of emergency management elevates the question: when recovering from disasters, what are we recovering to? The traditional model of emergency management is complicated by the consideration of diverse needs and the realization that re-establishing pre-disaster norms often perpetuates

inequities. Examination of what we are recovering to suggests that emergency managers need to do more to build resiliency within communities. A national focus on cultivating equity in emergency management programs could help communities recover to something better than they were before.

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