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## Disaster Preparedness and the Cooperative Extension Service

Lynette Black

Oregon State University Extension Service, [lynette.black@oregonstate.edu](mailto:lynette.black@oregonstate.edu)



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## **Disaster Preparedness and the Cooperative Extension Service**

**Lynette Black**

4-H Youth Educator

Oregon State University Extension Service

Wasco County

The Dalles, Oregon

[lynette.black@oregonstate.edu](mailto:lynette.black@oregonstate.edu)

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**Abstract:** *This past decade has recorded an increase in catastrophic events that have led to dramatic changes for Americans. The wake of these disasters has resulted in many lessons being learned. These lessons have been captured by Homeland Security in the First Edition of the National Preparedness Goal. Extension is uniquely positioned to assist with community disaster preparedness, mitigation, and response efforts as outlined in the National Preparedness Goal. This article captures examples of Extension's involvement in the disaster realm and encourages additional work in the many aspects of community emergency preparedness.*

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### **Introduction**

According to Save the Children, an independent children's advocacy organization, the catastrophic events of the last 10 years have changed the United States of America forever. They have declared the years between 2000 and 2010 the "Disaster Decade" (Save the Children, 2009). Then in 2011 the United States experienced a surge in disasters, including historical levels of flooding, numerous sizable tornadoes, and extreme wildfires. These events have brought into further focus the need for community disaster planning, including a special emphasis on vulnerable populations. In September 2011, Homeland Security released the first National Preparedness Goal. This goal is defined by five mission areas: Prevention, Protection, Mitigation, Response, and Recovery, and includes a focus on previously underserved populations, including youth (United States Department of Homeland Security, 2011). The Cooperative Extension Service, including 4-H, the largest youth organization in the United States, is a strong candidate to assist our nation in preparing for disasters.

### **What We Know**

The New York City terror attacks in 2001 ushered in a renewed interest in disaster preparedness for local, state, and federal government and American citizens. The federal government mandated all state and local governments to create a disaster response plan. Then, just 4 years later, these plans were tested by the worst natural disaster in the history of the United States. Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast and virtually destroyed an entire region, leaving a lasting impact on the affected families and children. In anticipation of the storm, 1.2 million Gulf Coast residents evacuated; 163,105 children were displaced following the storm; and 50,000 children in the region did not attend school during the 2005-2006 school year. Six months after the storm, the last of the 5,192 children were united with their family (Save the Children, 2010). As a result of the 2005-06 hurricane years, the importance of community emergency preparedness came to light. "Community preparedness for disasters is a key factor in community response when an event occurs, as poor preparation can slow response, leads to confusion about what the roles of different agencies are in the response, and possibly even increase total damage" (Evans & Wiens, 2004).

The long-term effects of this disaster also pointed to the importance of preparedness efforts being focused not only on physical safety and recovery, but also on mental well-being. Studies indicate just how vulnerable children are to the mental health side effects of a disaster (Pynoos,

Goenjian, & Steinberg, 1995; Hizli, Taskintuna, Isikli, Kilic, & Zileli, 2009). These studies also reveal opportunities for youth professionals to mitigate these outcomes both before and after a disaster.

Additional lessons learned from this disastrous event led to the National Commission on Children and Disasters' 2010 report to the President and Congress. This report outlines specific recommendations designed to close the gaps in existing disaster plans in an effort to make them more responsive to the needs of children (National Commission on Children and Disasters, 2010). Their 32 recommendations include suggestions in 11 topic areas including child care and education. Extension can and should help the government with the implementation of many of these recommendations.

## **How Extension Is and Can Be Involved**

In September of 2010, the first National Summit on Youth Preparedness was held in Washington, DC. This summit brought representatives from non-profits, government, faith-based organizations, business, and academia together to discuss youth preparedness. Extension was represented through the 4-H Youth Development program. Interestingly, the feedback survey found that 74% of respondents felt youth preparedness education was a "useful way of getting crucial information into households and making the entire household safer and more prepared" (United States Department of Homeland Security, 2010)—the 4-H way!

The 4-H Youth Development program is also involved in preparing our youth through the Teen Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) program. The CERT program trains youth/adults to prepare for, stay safe during, and respond following a disaster. CERT members work to educate the community and can provide critical support before the first responders arrive. 4-H offers the Teen CERT program in several states. Expansion of this 4-H program would prove to be a valuable resource to the communities in which they operate. Evaluations of the 4-H Teen CERT program indicate participants have increased the preparedness levels in their families through the development of survival kits, communication plans, and family disaster plans. They also indicate an increase in the knowledge and skills needed to stay safe during and respond following a disaster.

Another successful youth/adult program involved a group of Extension personnel from across the United States who developed the Alert, Evacuate and Shelter (AES) program. Youth and adult teams from 46 counties were trained to use geospatial technology to map shelter locations and evacuation routes. Following the training, youth and adult teams returned home to work with local government and community agencies to ascertain community-mapping needs for improved emergency preparedness, and many became involved in local CERT program. Evaluation of the AES Program revealed a major shift in thinking about the positive potential level of involvement of youth in emergencies. Teens have proven to be valuable resources in emergency preparedness, not only as ways to reach their families and communities, but also through geospatial technology (Powell, Smith, & Black, 2009).

The Extension Disaster Education Network (EDEN), created in 1994, is a collaborative multi-state effort by Extension Services across the country to help Extension personnel facilitate preparedness and response services for citizens. Land-grant institutions across the United States and its territories are members of this organization, with each institution appointing EDEN representatives. The EDEN website <<http://eden.lsu.edu>> is a portal to disaster-related resources for Extension personnel to share with their clientele that will help them prepare for, stay safe during, and recover from disasters. Several disaster-related educational programs are available through EDEN. One example is the Family Preparedness training, a classroom program developed to teach families and individuals how to make family disaster kits, develop a family disaster plan, and be informed about and prepared for various disasters. These resources should be used to help organizations and government fill some of the family and child oriented gaps in state and local disaster plans.

The newly released National Preparedness Goal is defined by five mission areas: Prevention, Protection, Mitigation, Response, and Recovery. Homeland Security clearly states attainment of the goal requires all levels of government, all types of organizations, and all individuals and communities to be actively seeking the necessary education and participating in activities

supporting national preparedness (United States Department of Homeland Security, 2011). Extension has been most active in the recovery mission of the goal and is in the position to expand involvement into additional mission areas.

## Where Do We Go from Here?

As mentioned in the *JOE* article "True Colors Shining Through: Cooperative Extension Strengths in Time of Disaster" (Cathey, Coreil, Schexnayder, & White, 2007), major strengths of Extension are the dedicated Extension personnel and the Extension model that includes partnerships, statewide networks of offices, and a unique focus on assessing human and community needs. In addition, in a *JOE* article author, Carolyn Washburn, urges Extension staff to become members of the local emergency preparedness teams and work toward establishing Extension as a valuable resource before, during, and after a disaster (Washburn, 2006). These points remain relevant today.

The Extension Disaster Education Network links land-grant institutions with disaster management. The efforts of EDEN representatives have provided the "foot in the door" needed to work in the field and serves as a portal for disaster focused resources. The EDEN coordinator for Louisiana was part of disaster response personnel at the state Emergency Operations Center following Katrina. She served as liaison between Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service and other agencies in coordinating collaborative efforts (Cathey, Coreil, Schexnayder, & White, 2007). The August 1999 *JOE* article "Extension Disaster Education Network Helps CES Prepare, Communicate" explains how Extension through the resources available from EDEN can serve their stakeholders in their time of need (Koch, 1999).

Extension has gained ground in helping communities prepare and recover from disasters, yet more work needs to be done. Reports including the 2011 National Preparedness Goal and the National Commission on Children and Disasters' 2010 Report to the President and Congress have outlined areas where this organization can provide valuable input for state and local emergency response plans. In addition, EDEN has opened the door for Extension personnel to work in the emergency management field. Now it is up to each Extension Service to make a pledge to help our communities emerge from the next disaster in good physical, mental, and financial health.

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