

Neighborhood Resilience Teams: Getting Ready for an Uncertain Future

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Over the past two decades resilience has become commonly associated with the concept of sustainability, especially as the impacts of climate change have become more widely experienced across the planet. Even in what had been thought to be the relatively safe Pacific Northwest, recurrent fires and extreme weather events like the 2021 ice storm and heat dome have made it abundantly clear that people in this region are not immune from the consequences of climate instability. Resilient communities are those able to react safely and effectively to such events in ways that sustain the well-being and health of their citizens.

Cities across the country have recognized the important role that volunteers at the neighborhood level must play in responding to unexpected events like earthquakes, floods, and wildfires in ways that contribute to community resilience; some have taken steps to prepare people willing to be trained to step in when other public service providers are either overwhelmed with massive need or unable to provide support because of damaged infrastructure. Portland's Bureau of Emergency Management, for example, has sponsored the creation of Neighborhood Emergency Teams throughout the city. Since the mid-1990s, over 4000 volunteers, 2100 of which are still active, have been trained to fight fires, provide basic first aid, organize teams to search for people in collapsed buildings, and teach neighbors about assembling emergency kits with adequate food, water, and medical supplies prior to an event like a major earthquake.

But resilience involves more than the ability to take action in response to a specific emergency, as important as this is. Resilient communities are also ones able to continue to provide for their members in the face of long-term events tied into economic disruptions like the 2008-2009 recession or the current pandemic. Climate change will bring its own unique long-term challenges as people adjust to a range of unforeseen consequences that could include diminished access to affordable food as once predictable weather patterns change, the influx of climate refugees, more expensive energy sources as oil and gas production costs increase and supplies inevitably diminish, and economic instability brought about by changing environmental and social conditions. Addressing the root causes of these problems will require action at national and international levels, but there is also much that people at the local level can do to support one another in the face of these uncertainties.

I first became alerted to how this might be done while visiting New Zealand in January, 2014. I'd been asked to give a keynote address at the New Zealand Environmental Education Association annual meeting in Christchurch. On the first afternoon of the conference, participants traveled to different sites around the region to see how residents were rebuilding after an earthquake and major aftershocks two years earlier had destroyed buildings throughout the urban core, suburbs, and neighboring towns. I traveled to the small community of Lyttelton that serves as the port for Christchurch, directly to the south of the city but across

the steep lip of an extinct volcano whose ocean-filled caldera serves as a perfect harbor. After the most serious of the earthquakes in February, 2011, Lyttleton was completely cut off from the rest of New Zealand's South Island for two weeks. The quake destroyed many of the town's historic buildings as well as damaging residential homes. With a population of approximately 3,000, the residents were dependent upon themselves for their own emergency response.

My group from the conference met with Margaret Jefferies who was at that time the director of Project Lyttleton, an organization supported by the Lyttleton Harbor Business Association. Prior to the earthquake, Margaret had been instrumental in organizing volunteer groups like the Lyttleton Timebank that facilitated non-monetized labor exchanges among local residents. Members of this group were central players in efforts to locate housing for people who had lost their homes and provide other needed services and support in the initial aftermath of the disaster. While in Lyttleton, we were shown a number of community-supported efforts aimed at advancing community resilience and sufficiency including community gardens, a cooperative grocery store, and a recently opened restaurant that also served as a site for small community gatherings. My more recent exploration of work that Margaret started--she passed away in 2020--revealed the extent to which residents of Lyttleton have taken steps to strengthen their own community. They support a weekly farmer's market, regular repair cafes, a clothing mending group, an annual walking festival held during the month of November (late spring in New Zealand), a summer music and film festival, the Lyttleton oral history project, and a learning exchange that encourages residents to share knowledge and skills with one another. A few years before she died, Margaret had organized a national meeting that brought people from throughout the country together to discuss ways they could strengthen local economies.

What I saw in Lyttleton is how one small community—the size of neighborhoods like Willamette or Bolton or Robinwood in West Linn—had been able to weave, through its own resources, some outside grants, and an abundance of local energy and good will, a network of relationships that allowed it to survive and rebuild after a major natural disaster and do so in ways that have enhanced its resilience. This has been largely thanks to the simple fact that people who might otherwise have been strangers now know how to work with one another in support of the common good. It seems like the sort of thing that could be done anywhere—and certainly in a place like West Linn where a variety of efforts have already laid a strong foundation for this kind of work: occasional repair clinics held at the Robinwood Station, a small collection of tools that can be checked out at the West Linn Public Library, the farmers' market held in the Willamette neighborhood, the community garden by Fields Bridge, city-sponsored films in neighborhood parks during the summer, and our active inclusion committee. The West Linn-Lake Oswego Village organization with its work to link elders with one another to provide mutual support is another citizen-led project that mirrors the kind of work that contributed to Lyttleton's resilience. At issue is extending these efforts to include more and more of the city's residents.

As mentioned earlier, when we think of emergency response, the events that generally gain our attention are associated with short-term disruptions. These are the focus of organizations like Portland's Neighborhood Emergency Teams. Although primarily aimed at preparing people to

provide rescue and medical support for trapped or injured neighbors, elements of this program also lay the foundation for forms of mutual aid that can be beneficial over the long-term, as well. One of these involves what is commonly called community mapping. This exercise invites people from approximately 15-25 nearby homes to identify their skills (practical, medical, technical), tools or equipment they are willing to lend (e.g., portable generators, chain saws), and individuals who may need special care including elders, people with disabilities, and young children. Neighbors are asked to label water, gas, and electricity shut-offs and indicate on a map distributed to others where these are located. When they meet with one another, they identify specific hazards and needs unique to their neighborhood and enumerate ways they can help those with special needs; an emergency contact list can also be created at this time. Finally, people can be provided with instruction in developing an emergency kit and set of supplies including enough food and water to get them through a two-week period or possibly longer. In 2015, volunteers in West Linn began this mapping process in numerous neighborhoods.

Completing a mapping exercise can go a long way toward overcoming the anonymity that often characterizes life in many suburban and urban communities and provide at least a foundation for support in the case of an emergency. That foundation can be strengthened and built upon if neighbors find ways to interact with one another without being motivated to do so because of a precipitating event. This is where the kinds of activities in a place like Lyttelton may provide a useful model. Although these emerged from a small town rather than a neighborhood, they can serve as a stimulus for imagining the possible. Neighbors, for example, could explore ways they might encourage more local gardening and food sharing. People with large lots and plenty of sun could invite people with smaller and shadier lots to grows vegetables with them on their property. One of my neighbors, for example, has established a community asparagus patch where people who help out with weeding get to pick what they want in the spring. Similarly, neighbors with fruit trees could make their produce available to others when often wasted apples, pears, or plums are ready to be harvested. Friends who live down the street from me hold an annual apple pressing event and then distribute the cider to family members and neighbors who have contributed to the bulk purchase of crates of fruit. Similar food growing and sharing practices are the focus of an organization in Anchorage, Alaska called Yarducochia that encourages yard and food sharing as well as offering instruction in vegetable gardening.

Neighbors could also plan events that bring them together over the course of a year. Annual block parties, for example, have become a feature of many neighborhoods. If people are willing, these get togethers can become more frequent. In West Linn's Willamette neighborhood, people have for years regularly gathered for major holidays like Easter, the Fourth of July, Labor Day, and New Year's Eve and Day for potlucks or progressive dinners. When we first moved to West Linn in the early 1990s, we got to know people thanks to regular Thursday night potlucks. We'd call one of three or four people, learn where the potluck was being held that week, gather our three boys and a dish to share, and spend a couple of hours being drawn into this new community. And when the 1996 flood happened, one of the neighbors we'd gotten to know at these events invited us into her home as the river rose while others advised us when it was time to load our furniture into a moving van and take it up the

hill. I feel blessed to have lived for nearly three decades in a place where this sort of neighborliness is so well rooted, but my impression in speaking with others is that my experience is not common. There is no reason this needs to be the case; all that's required to remedy it is the willingness of a half dozen people or so per neighborhood to take the lead and create the opportunities for these social interactions to occur.

In addition to advocating many of the practices described already, community-based organizations in Northern California encourage a variety of additional strategies for strengthening social ties and reciprocity at the neighborhood level. Cooperative Humboldt, for example, holds neighborhood work parties where people help one another complete projects that would otherwise be burdensome for an individual. They also encourage crop swaps, bulk buying programs, fruit tree planting in yards and parking strips; the formation of neighborhood book and tool libraries; and even the creation of neighborhood electrical power grids. With regard to this final initiative, the Oakland Ecoblock Project is currently working with the UC-Berkeley Institute for Energy and Environment to establish a micro-grid in which all households on a city block will share in the expense of installing solar panels and storage batteries then benefit from the power created by this system. Working closely as well with PG&E, the Ecoblock Project is experimenting with ways to sell excess power back to the utility to reduce the initial capital costs of installing a shared system.

In Marin County, Resilient Neighborhoods has since 2010 been focusing on educating residents to reduce their carbon emissions and build community resilience through the formation of teams trained to organize workshops for their families and neighbors where they explore how to live well and at the same time use less fossil fuel. In the fall of 2021, the organization reached a milestone when it documented that 10 million pounds of carbon had not been released into the atmosphere because of its participants' effort to conserve water, cut energy use and waste, make less carbon-intensive food choices, and select non-fossil fuel transportation options. More recently, the county government established Drawdown Marin which similarly makes available information on its website about ways to reduce carbon emissions through changes in the way people buy and use energy, get from one place to another, construct buildings, purchase food and dispose of food waste, make land-use decisions that foster more carbon sequestration, and enhance the resilience of their own communities through the creation of "resilience hubs" capable of supporting diverse residents in the event of climate-related or other natural disasters.

An organization called Bay Localize has been leading its own workshops since 2009 aimed at strengthening community resilience both from a standpoint of climate change but also people's ability to support themselves in the middle of an unstable economy. Believing that the healthiest and most effective solutions are likely to arise out of citizens' capacity to address these issues locally, they engage the public in extended planning conversations about ways they can support themselves in a more equitable and sustainable manner. In their workshops, they explore our common need for food, water, energy, transportation, jobs, and social support—central dimensions of any effort to increase resilience—and emphasize the importance of assuring that access to quality resources is both fair and sustainable. ct

Making West Linn more resilient neighborhood by neighborhood will not be something that can be accomplished overnight. Moving forward with efforts to enhance community resilience could potentially build on the good work already done by people involved with the Map Your Neighborhood project, extending it to more neighborhoods, and broadening its intention to include more far-reaching conceptions of resilience. The Sustainability Advisory Board will be sponsoring a session about Neighborhood Resilience Teams at one of its spring educational offerings. This event could serve as a starting point for conversations that could take place in the city's neighborhood associations as well as other organizations such as the Senior Center, Chamber of Commerce, Rotary, Kiwanas, and Lions clubs, as well as local churches. Collaborating with groups like the WLLC Village could also be potentially valuable given the degree to which this group is already reaching out to people to provide long- rather than short-term informal support to its participants. This period of moderate stability offers us the luxury of time and adequate resources. Making use of it before events become more difficult and disruptive could make a big difference in our and our children's ability to negotiate what appear to be the likely uncertainties of the future.