Community resilience in Vermont after the 2023 flooding event

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COMMUNITY RESILIENCE IN VERMONT
AFTER THE 2023 FLOODING EVENT

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UVM Family Medicine Clerkship, July - August 2023
Central Vermont Medical Center, Waterbury Family Medicine
Preceptor: Dr. Christine Payne, MD

1. A UH-72 Lakota Helicopter assigned to the 1st Battalion, 224th Aviation Battalion, Vermont National Guard, flies over the Capital of Vermont in Montpelier, Vermont, July 11, 2023. This unit’s mission was to survey heavy rain damage and report if there were stranded people that needed rescuing due to the recent storm that caused flooding throughout Vermont. Aerial photo of Montpelier by Senior Master Sgt. Michael Davis, 158th Fighter Wing, Vermont Air National Guard.
https://www.dvidshub.net/image/7904870/vermont-guard-responds-flooding-vermont
THE PROBLEM

• Between July 10th-11th 2023 Vermont experienced catastrophic flooding after receiving prolonged heavy rainfall of up to 9” over 48 hrs.

• The Winooski River at Montpelier rose around 15 ft to a height of 21.35 ft, inundating the capital city. Many other rivers across the state also flooded.

• Damage from the 2023 event rivals the historic destruction of Hurricane Irene in 2011. They are exceeded only by the Great Vermont Flood of 1927, an event predating modern flood controls.

• “They call these 100-year floods, but now they seem to happen every 10 years or so.”

1. Collected oral histories from Vermonters to better understand their lived experience of the flood and its impacts.

2. Analyzed interview data to identify key themes related to community and individual resilience.

3. Preserved firsthand accounts from flood survivors and relief workers as publicly available audio recordings uploaded to the Library of Congress through the StoryCorps program.

METHODOLOGY:

**In-person semi-structured interviews**
- **PROS:** egalitarian and engaging dynamic; builds rapport; can be therapeutic/cathartic/empowering; permits exploration of complex and incompletely defined topics; limits interviewer a priori bias and interviewee social desirability bias; avoids “form fatigue;” narrative data is accessible and relatable
- **CONS:** time consuming and geographically limiting; unstructured data requires more complex analysis; possibility of transference, countertransference, and inter-/post-interview cognitive biases.

**Narrative inquiry and thematic analysis**
- **PROS:** well-suited for understanding subjective experiences of phenomena; allows meaning to be communicated rather than inferred or deduced
- **CONS:** requires complex hermeneutic coding and interpretation of data; subjective accounts may have equivocal external validity; limited applicability for direct study of phenomena

These stories can be easily shared as a resource for people affected by flooding in the future to listen to and hear words of support and guidance from people who survived flooding in the past.
13 Vermonters were interviewed July 23rd – August 10th.

- All either directly impacted by the flood (2), volunteering in the relief effort (4), or both (7).
- One participant, Liz Schlegel, was interviewed twice on July 23rd and August 10th to gain longitudinal perspective on their role as emergency volunteer coordinator for the town of Waterbury.

Participants lived in Waterbury (10 homeowners), Montpelier (1 homeowner), and Barre (2 renters).

Interviews lasted 15-120 minutes each and generated 46 total pages of handwritten notes.

5 participants agreed to contribute oral histories to StoryCorps, producing 67 total minutes of audio.

- Kane Sweeny, July 23rd, 5m:12s ← follow the link!
- Alison McHugh and Patrick McHugh, July 23rd, 39m:12s ← follow the link!
- Ann Commo and Matt Commo, July 31st, 21m:58s ← follow the link!

5 additional interviews are slated for the future, pending scheduling.
“It happened slowly, but once it did my street wasn’t just flooded – it became a river sweeping away trees, cars, everything in its path. My power, gas, water all went out and I was trapped on the second floor alone in the dark… I could feel the rain pounding on the roof, the house shaking whenever the water threw debris against it, wondering if I was going to be swept away next…” – Chris, Barre

“Earlier that day we met with our 35 residents [Kirby House is an assisted living facility] to discuss the possibility of evacuating. The water levels were rising slowly but the rain showed no sign of stopping, so we pre-emptively decided to take our most vulnerable residents with mobility needs to the church [a designated flood shelter]. By that time, a lot of the roads were closed so we drove back and forth all night in the storm through detours and flooded streets.” – Sharon, Waterbury

“Driving back home with the radio blaring listening to the weather warnings, I heard that the flood banks broke in Barre and Montpelier and thought to myself, ‘It’s coming…’ It was heart wrenching watching the water come up, and then Tuesday came and I could see all the damage… It was a lake. I went out trying to figure out what to do, but I wasn’t sure because the waters were rising again. We heard all this chatter that the [Wrightsville] dam might break…” – Kane, Waterbury

“We call it PTSD – post traumatic storm disorder. Now whenever it rains everyone loses their minds… We want to cry.” – Laurie, Montpelier

“It’s been weeks, and nobody’s come to help me. I’ve been cleaning the mold but whenever I clean one room the next day it spreads from the other and grows back the next day. I need to clean it all at once and I can’t do it all by myself. I need help.” – Rebecca, Barre

“We’re surrounded by mud all the time.” – Malachi, Waterbury

6. Vermont Agency of Natural Resources [https://anrmaps.Vermont.gov/]
7. Google Maps [https://maps.google.com/]
STRENGTHS

**Community solidarity, organization, and coordination**

- “People dug themselves out, then brought the shovel to their neighbor.” – Kane, Waterbury
- “There’s a lot of camaraderie and solidarity here, and we’re lucky to have a well-organized effort to help in.” – Malachi, Waterbury
- “High ability by community organizers to effectively rally people’s enthusiasm into a coordinated response.” – Carly, Waterbury
- “I have gratitude that we have people to call on, and people who’ve called on us in the past have reciprocated in ways that I can’t even put into words yet. The generosity and the support… it’s been an intense experience.” – Alison, Waterbury
- **Waterbury Good Neighbor Fund** – follow the link!
  - Run by the Community Action Service Team nonprofit, which also operates the Waterbury Food Shelf.
  - Has given away $10,000 - $12,000 for vital needs such as emergency repairs. Funds are paid directly to the vendor.
  - “No red tape, no paperwork, no waiting.” Relies on trust and understanding of community needs.
  - Average donation of $25 - $100, ranging from $160 “from a kid waiting tables” to anonymous $1000.

**Experience from Hurricane Irene**

- “You can look to the lowered fields, the widened river, the dug trenches, the raised foundations, the berms— all of these efforts after hurricane Irene helped. We can’t change mother nature, but we can change our built environment.” – Kane, Waterbury
- “Back in [hurricane] Irene we had to evacuate Kirby house 100%. Now we have an emergency protocol including where to go, how to get there, and how to bring everything we need like meals, medications, and treatment plans. And just having cots and blankets leftover from Irene at the church… that was huge. Back then we had none of that, nothing.” – Sharon, Waterbury
- “The state complex renovations after hurricane Irene definitely helped.” – Malachi, Waterbury

**Mutual aid between municipalities**

- “I called Stowe for help, and they sent us a pump truck. I called Burlington Department of Public Works and told them Randall street was flooded. The person on the other line said “My sister lives on Randall street...” They sent us three pump trucks. The town of Saint Albans sent us a vacuum truck. And it’s a point of pride for us that even though we got hit, we’re still helping the folks in Barre and Montpelier who got hit worse than us.” – Kane, Waterbury
CHALLENGES

Employing the Incident Command System (ICS)

- “There needs to be better communication between the incident command system at the state level, the ‘boots on the ground’ [first responders], and the ‘sneakers on the ground’ [‘next’ responders].” – Liz, Waterbury
- “I was talking to the fire chief about when to evacuate because I didn’t know what was happening, and honestly it didn’t seem like they knew either. There wasn’t any state emergency communication at that time.” – Anonymous, Waterbury
- “Nobody told us to evacuate. Nobody came to our door, nothing on our phone. We heard a siren in the distance but at first we didn’t even know what it was.” – Rebecca, Barre
- “FEMA folks don’t know the area and have been knocking on doors in the wrong neighborhoods and didn’t talk to local relief coordinators at first.” – Anonymous, Waterbury

Culture of preparation

- “The drive to prepare is there after the disaster, but that’s when there’s no time. The time is there before the disaster, but that’s when there’s no drive.” – Liz, Waterbury
- “After hurricane Irene the Red Cross told us to run a drill every year. And for the first four years we did… Then every two years… Then we stopped.” – Anonymous, Waterbury
- “Some homeowners and business owners didn’t get flood insurance. Some knew they needed it but decided not to, some knew they needed it but didn’t know how to, and other didn’t know about it at all.” – Caroly, Waterbury

Red tape

- “The FEMA intake process alone takes an hour. There’s an enormous list of things to accomplish, forms to fill, boxes to check… Just endless calls, visits, paperwork. I wish there was someone to help with all that.” – Sharon, Waterbury

Allocation of resources

- “There’s so much money in the budget for helping people, but not enough is going to the checkpoints of building affordable housing and lowering the caseloads of social workers. There are some existing projects but not enough to meet the need.” – Liz, Waterbury

Housing

- “We have a rental vacancy rate of nearly 0%, and that’s negative now with everyone who’s been displaced. And these working-class people can’t afford $2,500 a month for a 2-bedroom apartment, let alone a $200k-$300k house. There’s just not enough affordable housing here. I hope landlords will lower rent out of the goodness of their hearts, but somehow I doubt that will happen. Instead, I’ve seen landlords trying to use the flooding to condemn their properties, evict the tenants, remodel, and turn them into AirBnBs. And it certainly doesn’t help that all these vacation properties, second homes, and short-term rentals aren’t available to house these people.” – Anonymous, Waterbury
- “My landlord lives in Florida. She doesn’t know what happened here, what we’re going through.” – Rebecca, Barre
FUTURE DIRECTIONS

**Improve coordination between different levels of emergency management**
- Build trust and working relationships within a lean hub and spoke model.
  - Responses at the federal, state, and local levels appear to have lacked good communication and coordination with each other. The ability to coordinate and share authority within the hierarchical and centralized Incident Command System (ICS) becomes difficult as the number and range of responding organizations grows and is further strained by the complex and chaotic nature of crisis response. This is a known limitation of the ICS understood through after-action-reports from fires, terrorist attacks, disease outbreaks, and hurricanes. These reports also show the importance of trust and familiar working relationships in overcoming these limitations by minimizing conflict, sharing resources, fostering coordination, facilitating problem-solving and role allocation, and incorporating emergent actors.

**Create special municipal roles**
- Needs support, funding, and full-time staffing to be sustainable.
- Addresses the administrative tasks that underpin every coordinated disaster response.
- Coordinates volunteers.
  - Volunteers have been the backbone of the recovery effort. However, volunteer coordinators are typically volunteers themselves. Without full-time coordinators the response falters as volunteer coordinators return to their regular jobs and the productive pattern of trust and working relationships is disrupted.
- Facilitates communication between and within communities and relief organizations.
- Creates standards and protocols.
  - “When I first started volunteering it was intimidating and hard to know how to help. There was no onboarding process.” – Carly, Waterbury

**Develop a preparedness culture**
- Local and statewide emergency response drills and simulations to improve readiness and build trust and working relationships between key actors.
- Training for local emergency managers, volunteer coordinators, fire chiefs, shelter operators, etc.
- Weave resilience and disaster preparedness into local identity and culture through art, music, and storytelling.

**Ongoing community engagement**
- Build trust and working relationships between the community and local government through enduring long-term support.
  - “Waterbury gained a lot of trust in local government because of what it did for them, both now and in hurricane Irene. We need to keep that level of trust, because that is how changes get made as we live along this strip of river.” – Liz, Waterbury
  - “It needs to be a continuous thing. We learned a lot after hurricane Irene, but over the years many people who lived through it left Waterbury and were replaced by folks without that experience.” – Anonymous, Waterbury

WORDS OF MORAL SUPPORT

“It’s ok to ask for support, you don’t have to go through it alone. And if you’re able to help, help.”

“You need to have a good humor about it.”

“Do what you can to help, be useful, chip in. There’s some gross and mucky tasks but put on some tall boots and clothes that you don’t mind getting messy and it’ll be fine. Dig in, be active.”

“People elsewhere get it, even if they’re not living it. They care.”

“The primary thing is to reach out if you need help, because everyone wants to help.”

“In times of crisis you throw your soapbox out the window and make sure people have what they need.”

“Once you start helping out, your sadness and fear gives way to excitement and pride in the community.”

“A few moments of fear and doubt, sure, but it doesn’t really enter my mind. You keep going for the people who are counting on you.”

“Access the resources that are there for you. I’ve always strived to be self-sufficient always struggled to ask for help, but if someone offers help it’s ok to take it. It’s ok. Now’s the time. Let them help.”

“Don’t give up. Don’t let giving up be an option. You need to push forward. As long as you’re alive, everything else is just stuff.”

“It’s not easy to ask for help, often easier to give than to receive. But you need to ask if you need it.”

“Focus on the value of life and making sure none is lost, focus on health and safety. The material is replaceable. I know it might not seem like that right now, but in Hurricane Irene I had three babies, we lost our house, our car… But the community kept us whole and got us back on our feet. You’ll see, the support of others replaces the material.”

“Sometimes leaders arise in a crisis, and sometimes you need to make them. Find someone you trust and put your faith in them.”

“Continue the camaraderie, the hard work, and keep pushing. You’ll dig yourself out before you know it, and you and your neighbors will be better off because of everything you survived together and they ways you helped each other.”

“Find the positive in everything. The joke here is that I hated my floors before this… now I can get new floors!”

“Find someone, talk to them. It doesn’t matter if they lived through it too or not, just start talking. They’ll listen.”

AUDIO RECORDINGS OF STORIES FROM FLOOD SURVIVORS AND VOLUNTEERS CAN BE ACCESSED BY USING THE FOLLOWING OR CODE OR THE LINK BELOW. PLEASE SHARE THEM WITH ANYONE WHO MIGHT BENEFIT FROM HEARING STORIES OF SURVIVAL, COMMUNITY, RESILIENCE, AND HOPE.

https://archive.storycorps.org/user/alex-poniz/
REFERENCES


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DISCLOSURES

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