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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: DISASTER RESISTANT  
COMMUNITIES INITIATIVE: EVALUATION OF  
THE PILOT PHASE YEAR 2

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**DISASTER RESISTANT COMMUNITIES INITIATIVE:  
EVALUATION OF THE PILOT PHASE, YEAR 2**

**PROJECT #EMW-97-CA-0519**

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This report summarizes findings from the second year of an ongoing Disaster Research Center study focusing on the implementation of Project Impact in the seven communities that were chosen a pilot sites for the initiative. In 1999, approximately one year after its initial visits to the seven pilot communities, DRC conducted telephone interviews with key PI personnel, visited each community to gain a better understanding of activities that were being undertaken in the seven PI sites, and collected documentary materials that could help shed light on progress that was being made in carrying out PI plans. This second-year evaluation sought data on the following topics:

- status of program activities in the areas of mitigation, partnerships, public education, and program management structure;
- partnering arrangements and strategies;
- the ways in which recent disasters and local political and economic changes have affected PI implementation;
- the nature and extent of leveraging activities in the pilot communities;
- strategies communities have used to build and maintain momentum;
- innovative activities that have been initiated with PI support; and
- lessons learned by communities that have applicability for wider implementation efforts

With respect to communitywide **mitigation activities**, the data gathered by DRC indicate that there has been an increase in the types of mitigation activities that are being undertaken. Improvement is particularly marked among communities that initially had not been as actively involved in mitigation projects. Structural and non-structural mitigation programs that are being undertaken include improving land use management, removing nonstructural hazards from buildings, developing and implementing tool lending programs, elevating structures, protecting lifeline facilities, and acquiring flood-damaged property. While program participants are generally optimistic about the PI process as a vehicle for encouraging mitigation, they have also called attention to the existence of a number of barriers that still need to be overcome, both at the local community level and with respect to relationships between PI communities and FEMA.

Across the seven communities, a total of 40 activities centering on **risk assessment** have either been completed or are currently in progress. These activities include work to identify hazards associated with critical facilities and determine the vulnerability of both community residents and public infrastructural elements, as well as the use of GIS mapping and other approaches to assessing risk and vulnerability. An impressive number of new risk assessment activities are taking place, and smaller communities that had previously done little to assess their risks are showing significant improvement.

DRC's evaluation of **partnership-building** centered on activities that were undertaken to establish public-private linkages and broaden support for programs aimed at enhancing community disaster resistance. Such measures include forging links between governmental agencies and the private sector, establishing business coalitions to support PI, involving non-local governmental partners (e.g., state and federal agencies) in PI activities, and setting up coordinating groups in which private-sector partners can have a say in providing direction to the program.

DRC found that PI communities are making significant strides toward this critical program goal. Both the overall number of partners and the number of partners that are actively involved in PI is increasing across the seven pilot communities. This increase is especially pronounced for local-level partnerships. Partnership activities are also expanding to include a broader range of state and federal partners, and communities are learning how to better identify potential program participants, recruit partners, and keep them actively involved in PI. It should be noted that while the situation is clearly improving, partnership-building activities still lag behind other PI program areas, such as public education. What is encouraging, however, is that communities recognize that partnering should be viewed as part of a long-term capacity-building strategy. That is, they rightly see the development and maintenance of partnership relationships as an ongoing process, rather than an activity with a discrete end-point.

With respect to **public education** activities in the seven pilot sites, the data indicate that educational and information-dissemination activities continue to be a major component of PI program activities. DRC identified thirty-one public education initiatives are currently under way in the seven communities, as well as four that have already been completed. These include public awareness programs focusing on the need to adopt mitigation and preparedness measures, as well as training aimed at helping community residents develop the skills necessary to carry out specific mitigation activities. Several other public education activities are in the planning stage. Larger communities are carrying out more of these kinds of activities than smaller ones.

Looking across the four major PI program areas, while the pace of activity is accelerating, communities also recognize that much remains to be done to integrate the concept of disaster resistance into community life. Interviewees indicate that they understand that PI messages about the importance of mitigation need to be continually reinforced and that institutionalizing PI will require a shift in both community priorities and individual attitudes.

DRC's research also indicates that PI pilot sites differ in terms of **organizational structure and the way in which decisions are made**. Using a simple four-fold typology, local PI organizations can be classified as either hierarchical or flat, and modes of decisionmaking local PI organizations use can be conceptualized as either centralized or decentralized. The most common form of organization, used in four of the PI pilot sites, consists of a hierarchical organizational structure in which decisionmaking is decentralized. PI pilot sites appear to prefer hierarchical forms of organization over flatter ones; only two sites have flatter organizational structures--that is, organizational arrangements that have very few levels or layers.

The study also focused on the extent to which PI involvement may have helped communities deal with subsequent **disaster events**. Since the communities included in this study were chosen as PI pilot sites in part because of their disaster vulnerability, it is not surprising that three of the seven pilot communities experienced disaster threats, near misses, or direct hits in the period since they joined PI. These communities reported that lessons learned as a result of their involvement with PI did help them cope more effectively with the problems these events posed. Communities also concur that experiencing a disaster event or a serious threat helps maintain program momentum. At the same time, they also point out that when disasters do occur, they create new problems and can divert attention away from longer-term loss-reduction goals. Thus,

while a disaster event can become a “teachable moment” for those seeking to encourage mitigation, it can also consume time and money that would otherwise have been available for mitigation projects.

Like any other community program, PI is not immune to changes that occur in the broader **political and economic environment**. Because PI is essentially a grass-roots program that has not yet been institutionalized locally, and because disasters typically rank low on local political agendas, the program is especially dependent on strong local political support. Several of the pilot PI programs experienced political and economic shifts that informants saw as having the potential for adversely affecting PI activities. These experiences suggest that support for PI may decline when a new political party assumes power, when personnel change, when government reorganizations take place, or when the local economy experiences a downturn..

**Leveraging** is important not only for sustaining and expanding PI in the near term, but also for the achievement of the program’s ultimate goals. DRC’s research identified a number of leveraging strategies that are being used in pilot communities, including efforts to leverage funds to obtain higher levels of funding; strategies designed to leverage partnerships in order to increase the number of partners involved in the program and also to obtain higher funding levels; and efforts to leverage PI into the future--that is, to ensure the continued survival of local initiatives after PI-specific funds have been expended.

Initial concerns about creating **momentum** for PI-related activities during the program’s start-up year have transformed in the second year into concerns about how to sustain momentum. Increasing the visibility of PI and increasing the involvement of key community sectors are two general strategies that are being used to build and sustain momentum in the pilot communities. Media attention is also recognized a very important ingredient in maintaining program momentum. The role of the local PI coordinator is perhaps the most pivotal factor in sustaining program momentum. Momentum has been lost in situations in which coordinators have been less active, the position has been filled by a succession of people or allowed to remain vacant, or when PI activities were simply added on to other duties the coordinator was still required to perform.

Early community involvement and the rapid initiation of projects are seen by interviewees as vital for creating and sustaining momentum. It is also crucial that private partners believe that their involvement in PI activities will yield concrete benefits. PI programs can also gain momentum by establishing linkages with local initiatives that are already under way. For example, in 1999, local PI programs took advantage of concern about Y2K to advance their own loss-reduction agendas.

When asked to reflect on their experiences with the program, interviewees pointed to a number of **lessons** they had learned. These lessons centered broadly on three areas: goal-setting, program structure, and community participation. With respect to *goal-setting*, those contacted for this study stressed the importance of developing clear program priorities and pursuing both broad, long-term goals and more limited objectives that can be achieved in a relatively short period of time. Program participants indicate that it is better to pursue a number of smaller

programs, some of which can be completed relatively quickly, than to focus on one very large project that might take years to finish. While establishing goals and priorities is essential, goals must also be flexible enough to accommodate changes in the political climate or in resource levels.

With respect to *program structure and organization*, some informants believe that PI programs function more effectively when they are housed within the office of the local executive (e.g., the city or county manager), rather than in the local emergency management office. The office of emergency management tends to focus most on activities related to disaster response, and often heads of these offices lack access to local decision makers. Local PI programs may have a better chance of succeeding if they are structurally located closer to those who have governmental decision-making authority and if they have opportunities to establish linkages with other key local agencies, such as planning and building and safety departments.

Interviewees also stressed the importance of having some form of management structure in place when program activities are initiated. Those involved in PI management should not underestimate the amount of time that is required to plan and build momentum.

Those contacted for this study concur that *community participation* is essential for PI success and that the best way of encouraging community involvement is through a grass-roots, bottom-up strategy that first engages local agencies, the private sector, and neighborhood and volunteer groups. Mechanisms must be created to enable community participants to generate ideas and provide program direction. PI coordinators should pay attention to suggestions developed by local community groups and should act on those suggestions. At the same time, while directing their efforts toward maximizing local community involvement, PI program personnel should also concentrate on establishing and maintaining productive linkages with state and federal partners.

Finally, DRC's research points to a continuing need to address three problems that were identified in the first year of this study. First, some pilot communities continue to have strained relationships with state emergency management organizations. More generally, the expectations local, state, regional, and federal governmental agencies have for the program often differ. The various parties in the PI process appear to be paying insufficient attention to the importance of fostering positive and productive intergovernmental relationships.

Second, there continues to be confusion concerning what kinds of projects or activities communities can undertake under the auspices of PI. Again, this is often a problem of communication, coordination, and inconsistent priorities among different governmental levels.

Third, local communities express concern about feeling pressure to spend PI funds quickly. On the one hand, communities know that they must commit funds in order to initiate and sustain mitigation programs. On the other hand, they also recognize that the funding they have received to enhance their disaster resistance is substantial, and they do not want to use those non-recurring funds irresponsibly or precipitously. Clearly, the challenge is to balance the need to demonstrate tangible results in the short term with the need to choose projects wisely and fund only those that have the best chance of reducing future disaster losses.