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DISASTER RESISTANT COMMUNITIES  
INITIATIVE: LOCAL COMMUNITY  
REPRESENTATIVES SHARE THEIR VIEWS: YEAR  
3 FOCUS

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***Disaster Resistant Communities  
Initiative: Local Community  
Representatives Share Their Views:  
Year 3 Focus Group  
Final Project Report***

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Report to the Federal Emergency Management Agency  
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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is one of a series of publications that summarize and synthesize information collected by the Disaster Research Center as part of its ongoing assessment of the Project Impact (PI) implementation process. The data presented here were gathered in four focus group discussions that were held during the 2000 Project Impact Summit. Twenty-six representatives from Project Impact communities around the U. S. took part in those discussions.

The data that were collected in 2000 complement other focus group data that were gathered using the same methodology in 1998 and 1999. All group members took part in the discussions with the understanding that the information they provided would be treated as confidential. Discussions were tape-recorded; the tapes were later transcribed to facilitate analysis.

The focus group discussions were designed to obtain Project Impact participants' views on the PI implementation process. Group members were asked to offer observations and insights on the following topics:

- Community-based strategies for achieving disaster resistance
- The organization of local Project Impact initiatives
- Strategies for building disaster mitigation partnerships with diverse segments of the community
- What communities would like FEMA to do to facilitate program implementation
- Expectations with respect to the future of Project Impact when initial funding comes to an end

More generally, group participants were asked to provide information on lessons learned over the course of organizing and implementing PI activities, advice for other communities, and insights on how to improve program quality and outcomes. Discussions generally centered less on what was being done in individual communities and more on how programs should be organized and carried out, what works, and what doesn't.

The most commonly-discussed *community-based loss reduction strategies* were educational programs and campaigns, mitigation projects, and partnership-building activities. Ongoing educational efforts identified by participants ranged from broadly-based public education campaigns focusing on what communities need to do to become more disaster resistant, to school-based programs and to efforts to educate government officials in local communities. Educational campaigns seek to promote loss reduction and encourage proactive planning and mitigation. Equally important, educational strategies focus more broadly on fighting apathy, institutionalizing mitigation as a community value, and changing public expectations with respect to disaster losses so that such losses are no longer viewed as inevitable.

Community-based mitigation-related activities discussed by focus group members included risk assessments designed to identify and prioritize hazards, the development of integrated mitigation plans, the mobilization of support for community projects from diverse governmental

sources, and other capacity-building activities, including efforts to establish multi-organizational collaborative networks and to identify indigenous sources of knowledge, resources, and organizing ability.

Group participants offered advice about *how best to organize local mitigation initiatives*. As in other years, discussants in the 2000 focus groups continued to emphasize leadership as a vital component in hazard-reduction programs. Individuals who assume leadership roles should have strong community and organizational ties and should be able to reach out to different sectors of the community and help reconcile different (and often conflicting) interests while moving the community toward program goals. Leadership responsibilities should be shared among representatives of important community constituencies, and those representatives should be involved as early in the program planning process as possible. Those who are willing to make an investment in PI should be encouraged to assume as much responsibility as they are able to take on, but at the same time there must be a system of accountability in place to ensure that commitments are fulfilled.

While lauding the efforts of community stakeholders who contribute funds, time, and other resources PI, group members strongly concurred that leadership responsibility for the initiative cannot rest solely with volunteers. Rather, they saw paid staff as important both for program continuity and for achieving project goals in a timely manner. Discussants stressed that the role of PI coordinator should be a full-time, paid position.

Discussions on program organization stressed the importance of developing interorganizational and interjurisdictional approaches to disaster mitigation. In order to effectively mitigate against future disasters, communities must work with other levels of government to establish effective mitigation networks and must recognize that disasters and hazards do not respect political boundaries. Community partnerships, regional alliances, hazard-based networks, and mentoring relationships were commonly-discussed approaches to broadening involvement in PI. Integrating community-based mitigation efforts into existing community networks was also seen as an important ingredient in program success.

*Mobilizing community constituencies and involving a wide range of community sectors* were other themes that were addressed in the focus group discussions. Effectively mobilizing businesses to support PI entails understanding what businesses want and expect to receive through their involvement, providing concrete benefits for businesses that choose to become involved, overcoming business resistance to programs that may be seen as threatening business interests, providing an appropriate mix of incentives for business participation, and publicly recognizing business contributions.

Project Impact began with a strong emphasis on public-private partnerships, and the formation of strong business-community collaborative relationships remains a major program goal. At the same time, communities are also beginning to recognize the importance of extending the partnership concept to community-based organizations and to especially vulnerable populations, such as the poor, the elderly, and racial/ethnic minority groups. An important first step in this

process is to establish linkages with groups that are already working with vulnerable segments of the population, particularly those whose goals already overlap with those of Project Impact, such as health and safety-oriented community organizations. Other community-based groups are more likely to want to join the initiative if they can be shown that working on loss-reduction measures will help them achieve their own goals. It is important to recognize that while vulnerable groups have significant needs and often require assistance with mitigation efforts, they also have skills, resources, and ideas that can benefit community-based mitigation initiatives. As is the case with businesses, groups serving vulnerable populations should become involved as early as possible in the program planning process.

Expanding partnerships with a wide range of government agencies is another key to program success. The communities represented in the 2000 focus groups had formed productive partnership relationships with a range of federal agencies, including the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers, the U. S. Geological Survey, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, as well as with various state-level agencies. These partnerships have made it possible to leverage the relatively small amount of money provided by FEMA into substantial sums that can be devoted to large-scale integrated loss reduction projects. Communities find these multi-organizational, multi-jurisdictional collaborations to be very useful and productive, but they also express a need for additional guidance on how to best to access external sources of funding.

Group participants identified a number of *ways in which FEMA can help local communities achieve their mitigation goals*. As in previous years, focus group discussants stressed the notion that FEMA should continue to provide guidance for local programs (and such guidance is greatly appreciated) but should not attempt to micromanage them. Group participants see some FEMA plans and goals as somewhat unrealistic, particularly with respect to the time it takes to initiate large mitigation projects and to actually see progress being made. Seen from the perspective of local program participants, federal timelines seem not to recognize the difficulties associated with launching and carrying out local efforts.

Local communities very much want FEMA to assist in the development of broader interactive networks among PI communities. National summits, regional summits, and other meetings are seen as providing excellent opportunities to share ideas and resources and to provide concrete information on strategy development. Communities look to FEMA to provide mechanisms for information and knowledge transfer.

Group participants also expressed the hope that FEMA will address issues related to its own intra-agency coordination, particularly with respect to the clarity and consistency of the guidance that is provided to communities. Some group participants pointed to understaffing and turnover, particularly in regional offices, as a contributor to the confusion and miscommunication that sometimes occurred over issues such as funding eligibility and other program details.



As noted earlier, communities also look to FEMA to facilitate coordination among various governmental agencies and to clarify and reconcile guidelines and regulations that are often either unclear or inconsistent. Overall, group participants pointed to the need for better coordination among the various federal and state programs whose funds support (or can potentially support) community-based mitigation activities.

Finally, community representatives expressed a need for clear information on long-term federal support for PI. Communities recognize that large mitigation projects will require more resources than they can mobilize alone. Many PI communities have already made a long-term commitment to reducing disaster losses through community-based mitigation programs, and they expect the federal government to maintain a similar commitment over time to disaster resistance nationwide.

Focus group members identified many ways in which Project Impact has already begun to result in significant changes in their communities. PI has provided new planning tools, stimulated risk assessment activities, and led to the adoption of stricter loss reduction measures at the local level. Group participants reported that the cultural changes Project Impact envisions have begun to take place. Communities are moving from a reactive approach to disasters – that is, an approach focused on response and recovery – to a perspective that instead emphasizes proactive mitigation-based strategies. PI has also helped create a new role for emergency managers, who now have more visible involvement in their communities on an everyday, routine basis.

Based on comments made by focus group members, it is clear that many communities have already begun to “graduate” from the initial phase of PI, in that they are beginning to institutionalize mitigation programs and practices at the community level. Some communities have achieved major successes in obtaining non-federal support for their PI-related activities. However, this is not yet the case for most communities, and even those that have begun the process of institutionalization still look to the federal government, and specifically to FEMA, for leadership in the area of pre-disaster hazard mitigation. Those who are closest to the process worry about the challenges inherent in trying to keep loss-reduction on the political agenda on a long term basis, and they wonder how it will be possible to achieve that goal in their communities without the resources and the visibility that a nationally-based federal initiative like Project Impact can provide.

Building coalitions and fostering a commitment to reducing disaster losses at the community level are difficult goals to achieve. Sustaining those efforts over time will be even more difficult. Based on the content of the focus group discussions, it is clear that communities across the United States see FEMA as a crucial source of continued leadership, guidance, and innovative loss-reduction strategies. Without an ongoing federal commitment, there is a very real possibility that community-based mitigation efforts will stagnate.

**Disaster Resistant Communities Initiative:  
Local Community Representatives Share Their Views:  
Year 3 Focus Group Final Project Report**

**INTRODUCTION**

In fall 1997, the Disaster Research Center (DRC) began an ongoing assessment of the development and implementation of Project Impact in the seven communities that were chosen as pilot sites for the program: Allegany County, Maryland; Deerfield Beach/Broward County, Florida; Oakland, California; Pascagoula, Mississippi; Seattle, Washington; Tucker County and Randolph County, West Virginia; and Wilmington/New Hanover County, North Carolina. These seven communities were each given \$1 million dollars to enhance their disaster resistance through mitigation projects, public education activities, and the development of public-private partnerships. A series of DRC reports and presentations on the lessons learned by these communities during the initial year of the new program provided the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) with feedback on the types of challenges the communities faced, the processes they had established to manage Project Impact, the types of activities they had undertaken, the benefits derived, and the opportunities developed from participation in the program. In late 1997, FEMA brought another fifty communities into Project Impact.

As FEMA began plans to provide funding to fifty additional communities in late 1998, several questions were raised concerning the applicability of the pilot communities' experiences for newer communities. For example, it was not clear whether experiences would be transferable, since pilot communities had received substantially more funding and attention from FEMA's national and regional staffs than would any of the newer communities. Moreover, regional offices often considered themselves understaffed to take on the responsibilities of providing guidance and technical assistance to communities in this newly-expanded program.

During the first Project Impact Summit in December, 1998, DRC conducted focus group interviews with knowledgeable representatives from the newer communities that had been added during the previous year. At the next Summit in December, 1999, focus group interviews were also conducted with representatives from communities that had been added to the program during the previous two years. These focus groups allowed for comparisons, both over time and across non-pilot communities, making it possible to determine whether new issues had emerged, whether old issues had been resolved, whether understandings of the Project Impact philosophy had changed, and whether new creative program activities were being undertaken.

The information gathered on non-pilot Project Impact communities during the 1998 and 1999 focus groups generated interesting findings, both with respect to the comparisons between pilot and non-pilot communities, and with respect to how the initiative had progressed over the year since the first focus groups were held (for specific findings from those focus group discussions see Wachtendorf, et al., 2000). During 2000, DRC continued to conduct follow-up interviews with knowledgeable community representatives in the seven pilot communities. At the same time, DRC also added an additional ten non-pilot communities to its assessment. Field studies

time, DRC also added an additional ten non-pilot communities to its assessment. Field studies were conducted in each of the ten new communities. Focus groups were again held with a new set of community representatives in November 2000 at the third annual Project Impact Summit. This third set of focus group sessions forms the basis for this report.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Overview of the Focus Group Concept and Process**

A focus group is a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perspectives on a defined area of interest in a non-threatening environment (Krueger, 1994; 1998). The intent of the focus group is to provide a candid depiction of participants' views on a specific topic. The interviewer (or discussion moderator) does not try to bring the group to consensus, but rather encourages comments of all types on the topic under discussion. The focus group does not attempt to problem-solve. Rather, the purpose of the group is to encourage participants to express their ideas, feelings, and assessments of the topical areas being considered. Focus groups can be used for various purposes, including program evaluation. For example, when a new program or project has been initiated, focus groups can play a role in the formative evaluation process by eliciting participants' views on program goals and strategies. The current study is an example of that evaluative approach.

Focus groups are designed to take advantage of group interaction processes in order to generate rich and detailed data on the topics under consideration. Focus groups are particularly useful when the goal of a research project is to elicit as wide a range of views as possible in an efficient manner. As Berg observes (1998:101):

When focus groups are administered properly, they are extremely dynamic. Interactions among and between group members stimulate discussions in which one group member reacts to comments made by another. This group dynamism has been described as a "synergistic group effect"...A far larger number of ideas, issues, topics, and even solutions to a problem can be generated through group discussion than through individual conversations. Indeed, it is this group energy that distinguishes focus group interviews from more conventional styles of one-on-one, face-to-face interviewing approaches.

A focus group typically is composed of strangers or of people who have minimal contact with one another in their daily lives. At the same time, groups should be composed of participants who share similar concerns and responsibilities that are considered relevant to the topic of interest. This commonality of interests is always stressed at the beginning of the group discussion, since perceived differences among participants (e.g., differences in status, knowledge, or authority) can result in hesitation to share ideas or opinions. Care needs to be taken to reassure participants that all group members as well as the views they express are of equal value.

Because groups differ in their composition and dynamics, it is common practice to organize multiple groups to discuss a topic. As a rule of thumb, a minimum of three focus groups is recommended in order to obtain broad coverage of topical areas. Groups are typically composed of six to ten participants; a group must be large enough to provide for a diversity of perceptions, but small enough for everyone to have an opportunity to speak. For the group to be successful, participant selection criteria must be specific, clearly identifying the population characteristics that the group members are expected to represent.

The focus groups carried out as a part of this study conform well to these methodological standards. Each year, multiple groups were conducted, groups were intentionally kept small, and as discussed in more detail below, care was taken to ensure both diversity and balance in each group. The discussions that took place were lively and extremely informative, yielding many views on the Project Impact process and numerous suggestions for how community-wide mitigation strategies should be carried out.

### **Purpose of the Project Impact Focus Group Study**

The focus groups constitute one component of a larger evaluation of Project Impact that is being conducted by DRC. This larger evaluation involves interviews, site visits, and analysis of documentary materials in a total of seventeen Project Impact communities: seven pilot communities as well as a non-pilot community from each of the ten FEMA regions. For more information on these studies and a detailed analysis of the pilot community evaluations, see Nigg, et al. (1998); Nigg, et al. (2000); Tierney (2000).

The objectives of the focus group interviews conducted in November 2000 were: 1) to provide suggestions for future changes to the Project Impact (PI) program; 2) to examine more closely issues that emerged during the in-depth interviews that had been conducted with key stakeholders in the seventeen assessment communities; and 3) to compare the current state of the initiative with findings from the earlier focus groups held in 1998 and 1999.

### **Data Collection Strategy**

#### **Participant Selection**

On November 12<sup>th</sup>, 2000, DRC conducted four focus groups with representatives of Project Impact communities who were attending the Project Impact Summit in Washington, D.C. The DRC selected focus group participants from a list of Summit participants made available by the FEMA contractor organizing the annual event. A stratified sampling procedure was used. The respondents were stratified on the following dimensions: their functional position in the community; the length of time their community had been involved in Project Impact; the FEMA regional location of their community; and whether their communities were urban or rural. The selected representatives were then faxed letters of invitation by DRC explaining the purpose of the focus groups. The invitation letter was followed up by a telephone call from a DRC staff member. When a respondent agreed to be part of a focus group, DRC staff faxed a letter of

confirmation (see Appendix A), along with a copy of the questions that would be discussed during the focus group interview (see Appendix B). Summit attendees who were approached to participate in the focus groups but who were unable to attend because of scheduling conflicts were substituted with other names that DRC had been previously identified in the sample. This strategy was similar to the approach used in 1998 and 1999. To put the 2000 focus groups into context, this report first provides a brief overview of how the groups were organized in the earlier Summit discussions.

### Participants in Year One

Three focus groups with a total of fifteen community representatives were conducted in 1998, the first year of the study. An additional thirty-five representatives were asked to participate but could not change their travel reservations or were unable to attend the Summit. The first focus group consisted of two emergency managers, two building officials, an assistant director of public works, and a chief storm water engineer. The second focus group was composed of a city manager, a deputy emergency manager, a city/county building commissioner, and a community affairs manager/Project Impact coordinator. The third focus group consisted of a non-profit representative, a city administrator, an environmental planner, an assistant director of engineering and building standards, and a contingency manager of a large private industry.

These participants represented eleven cities, three counties, and a county that considered itself a regional community and spanned nine of the ten FEMA regions; seven of the communities were urban, and eight were rural. Nine of the respondents were from communities that had already signed Memoranda of Agreement, while six were from communities that were in the process of being introduced to Project Impact goals and activities.

### Participants in Year Two

Four groups comprising a total of thirty community representatives were conducted in 1991. An additional four representatives who agreed to participate did not come to the group session. Fifteen of the participants represented cities, seven represented counties (two of whom were from city/county joint designations), five were from regional areas (that is, more than one county), and three participants represented organizations. The first focus group consisted of one emergency manager, one PI coordinator, one building official, a director of public works, a planner, a representative of a non-profit agency, and a university administrator involved in Project Impact. The second focus consisted of an assistant city manager, an emergency management director, a county commissioner, an administrative assistant to a PI coordinator, a PI coordinator, a county building official, a public works director, and two business representatives. The third group was made up of a county manager, an emergency management director, a county commissioner, a PI coordinator, a planner, a county building official, a superintendent of a school system, a public works planner, and a representative of the business community. The fourth group was comprised of two PI coordinators, an assistant city manager, a non-profit representative, and a business representative.

All ten FEMA regions were represented, and participants were evenly split between urban and rural communities. Twenty-one of the respondents were from communities that had already signed Memoranda of Agreement (MOA), while nine either had not yet signed an MOA, did not know whether such a document had been signed, or were unaware of the MOA status at the time the discussions were held. Some of the participants represented more than one position within their communities. For example, the Project Impact coordinator sometimes also filled the role of community emergency manager or planner.

### Participants in Year Three

Four groups with a total of twenty-six members were conducted in 2000. An additional seven representatives who had agreed to participate were later unable to participate in the group discussions. As a result of greater activity taking place during the annual Summit than in past years, several other informal meetings and pre-Summit sessions conflicted with the focus group meeting times. At least two of the people who had initially agreed to participate in the focus groups but who did not attend indicated that they had been unable to participate because of conflicts with other Project Impact meetings.

The first group consisted of a mayor, an emergency manager, a representative from a faith-based non-profit, a large business representative, and three Project Impact coordinators. One Project Impact coordinator was also the community's city manager, while another was also a fire commissioner. Both the representative from the non-profit and the large business did not work strictly with one Project Impact community, but instead interacted with multiple designated communities. The second group was made up of a county commissioner, a public works official, a building official, a business representative, a representative from a large non-profit organization, and three Project Impact coordinators – one of whom was also a planning commissioner. The third group was comprised of a Chamber of Commerce/community advisory committee representative, a representative from a large non-profit organization, a representative from the historic preservation community, and three Project Impact coordinators – each of whom was also an emergency manager. The fourth group consisted of a deputy mayor, a municipal manager, a planner, a representative from a community-based non-profit organization, and a Project Impact coordinator/building official.

Although it would have been desirable to conduct many more focus groups, involving larger numbers of people, the eleven groups that were conducted between 1998 and 2000 do represent a good cross-section of Project Impact participants around the country. Looking first at who participated in DRC's focus groups, Table 1 presents summary information on the composition of Project Impact focus groups over the three-year period. Appropriately, Project Impact coordinators were the largest group represented in the discussion groups. Local elected and appointed officials also had significant representation, as did local building and safety departments, the non-profit sector, the business sector, and emergency management organizations.

**Table 1. Participants in Project Impact Focus Groups, 1998-2000<sup>1</sup>**

Position	1998	1999	2000	Totals
PI Coordinating Office	1	6	10	17
Emergency Management	3	3	1 (4)	7
Building and Safety/Engineering	4	3	1 (2)	8
Public Works	1	3	1	5
City and County Management	2 (3)	3	1 (2)	6
Non-Profit Sector	1	2	4	7
Planning/Community Development	1	2	1 (2)	4
Business Sector	1	4	3	8
Education/Historic Preservation	0	2	1	3
Elected Officials	1	2	3 (4)	6
Totals	15	30	26	71

In addition to having well-balanced organizational representation, the 2000 groups exhibited diversity in other ways. Twelve participants were from communities with city designations, eleven were from county-designated communities, one represented a regional community, and two participants were involved with multiple communities across the country. (When the designation scope of Project Impact included both a major city and the county, we classified the community as a county designation.)

All ten FEMA regions were represented, and participants came from communities ranging in size from small towns and rural areas to major metropolitan centers. There were seven small communities represented, all with populations under forty thousand. Six of the communities that were represented were medium-sized, with populations between fifty and one hundred fifty thousand. Eight communities had populations between two hundred and fifty and five hundred thousand residents. These were classified as large communities. Three communities, classified as very large, had populations over seven hundred thousand. All participants were from communities that had been designated a Project Impact community in 1999 or earlier, although some had received FEMA seed funding or held their signing ceremonies only recently.

#### Data Collection

In preparation for the focus group discussions, members of the DRC team were given training in the skills necessary for successfully conducting focus groups, including observing and recording participants' actions during the group sessions (e.g., body language, the tone of the interactions

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<sup>1</sup> If a participant held the role of a PI coordinator as well as another position in the community, that person is listed in the PI Coordinating Office category. The bracketed numbers in some categories reflect the PI Coordinators that perform other additional roles. For example, the Emergency Management category in 2000 includes one emergency manager who is not a PI coordinator and three emergency managers who also act as PI coordinators. Only one focus group representative in Year Three worked exclusively as an emergency manager. However, as the bracketed number indicates, there were a total of four individuals that held emergency management positions.

among group members), keeping notes while discussions were in progress, identifying prominent themes, and keeping track of particularly salient points made by group members. Prior to the initiation of group discussions, all group participants were briefed on DRC's confidentiality policies, and all were asked to sign consent forms. Participants were reassured that no statements made in the course of group discussions would be attributed to them, and they were also asked to keep the comments made by other group members confidential. All focus group discussions were taped and later transcribed verbatim in their entirety.

Each focus group had a moderator and an assistant moderator. During the focus groups, which lasted approximately two and one half hours, the moderator kept the discussion on track and made sure that everyone was comfortable with the flow of communication. Moderators also had responsibility for ensuring that particular individuals did not dominate the discussion and that all participants had an equal opportunity to speak.<sup>2</sup> The assistant moderator greeted and integrated late arrivals into the on-going group discussion, monitored the ten minute time allotment for each question, took notes, and generally observed participants' behavior for any indication of uneasiness or hesitancy. There were no problems in these areas. Group participants were at ease and engaged throughout the discussion sessions. They frequently took written notes of what others were saying and after the discussions many expressed that they had learned a lot of valuable information from other community representatives who had shared their experiences.

### **Analysis of Focus Group Interviews and Identification of Themes**

In the 1998 and 1999 focus group discussions, the questions asked of participants focused primarily on each community's experience during the initiative's start-up process. Topics discussed included their overall involvement in Project Impact, the problems of sustaining momentum, each community's goals and objectives for Project Impact, the initial benefits of participation, the help FEMA needed to provide to communities that were getting started in the program, and what challenges communities faced in moving Project Impact forward. DRC shared information provided by communities already participating in initiatives with other communities that recently had received their designations. Based on the focus group discussions, DRC also provided feedback to FEMA about how to improve Project Impact and to highlight the aspects that the communities found valuable in the early stages of implementation.

In 2000, participants were again asked to discuss the successes and challenges they faced while trying to make their communities more disaster resistant. At this stage, DRC also structured the discussion to take advantage of their longer experience in the initiative, asking questions that elicited information about specific strategies they used to successfully overcome the challenges they faced. Participants were better able to describe the approaches they had employed to

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<sup>2</sup> Although moderators did their best to encourage all participants to give their views on all the questions discussed during the group session, following general procedures for conducting focus groups, each participant was also free not to take part in the discussion if he or she so chose. Reasons for not offering views on particular topics are always difficult to discern, and lack of interest in speaking on an issue can indicate many things, including not having a sufficiently well formed opinion to feel comfortable about talking on the issue and feelings of not having anything additional to add to what has already been said.



enhance mitigation; how their communities organized to implement disaster-resistant objectives; which community members and organizations became involved and how; what Project Impact had contributed to each community's mitigation efforts; and what they saw as the future of Project Impact in their local communities.

This report analyzes and summarizes participants' responses to the specific questions posed during the focus group discussions. Group members' comments were collapsed into categories in order to provide an overview of the general themes that emerged. Whenever possible, comparisons were made between this year's findings and the 1998 and 1999 focus groups. The major issues discussed in this report include the following:

- Strategies for Building Disaster Resistant Communities
- Organization of Project Impact Initiatives
- Building Disaster Mitigation Partnerships with Different Segments of the Community
- Suggestions for FEMA Regarding Oversight and Management of Project Impact
- The Future of Project Impact in Local Communities

The report closes with an overall summary and assessment of key lessons learned from the focus group interviews.

## **STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING DISASTER RESISTANT COMMUNITIES**

In the focus groups conducted by DRC at the 1998 and 1999 Summits, participants were asked to outline their communities' Project Impact goals. Education and mitigation were the most commonly reported activities, followed by partnership-building efforts. Planning was highlighted as an objective in 1998, while in 1999 risk assessments were more likely to be reported as accomplished or future goals. In 2000, the DRC instead asked participants to talk about the strategies they found successful in helping them create disaster resistant communities. The strategies they discussed did not include specific substantive activities such as home retrofits, river dikes, roof tie-downs, tornado safe rooms, and flood buy-out programs. While such activities are clearly important, participants chose to concentrate instead on the *processes* that they believed needed to occur in order to move forward with mitigation programs.

### **Education**

Because education had been identified as one of the major objectives of communities in past years, it is not surprising that education was one of the most commonly mentioned strategies that community representatives thought was crucial to bringing about disaster resistance. Discussions on the role of education centered on a variety of topics, including the need for education regarding what communities need to do to achieve higher levels of disaster resistance, the need to educate government officials, and the linkages that need to be established between education and proactive planning. The discussions below summarize group participants' views on community educational needs and strategies.

## Education Regarding What Needs To Be Done In The Community

In some areas, particularly those with high-consequence but infrequent disaster threats, Project Impact organizers found through their contact with the schools, hospitals, nursing homes, and other sectors of the community that many people were unaware of the hazards their communities faced. Even citizens who were knowledgeable about community risks often did not devote much time to considering the potential consequences of disasters. Focus group participants who confronted the challenge of encouraging uninformed citizens to support mitigation activities saw the first step toward becoming disaster resistant as educating different groups in the community about community hazards.

Participants stressed the need to educate the public about what has been accomplished and what still needs to be done in the community. Frequently, even those community members who were somewhat educated about the need to mitigate against disasters seemed to mistakenly believe that, if there were any additional steps that could have been taken to make the community safer, those steps would already have been taken by their local government officials. In other words, many community residents may think that if safety measures have not been undertaken, it is because such measures will not really make a difference. As one Project Impact coordinator put it:

*People think, 'Well if it's an important thing to do, certainly my city would require my builder to build my house better....' There's an assumption that government does that.... That [assumption] was a big surprise to us. We hadn't realized how entrenched that was [in the minds of community members.]*

One implication of this observation is that Project Impact programs need to take steps to reeducate a trusting public that much can be done to reduce disaster losses in the community, and that public pressure is needed to motivate government and the private sector to take such steps.

Along these lines, participants spoke of the desirability of partnering with visual artists, because they felt people could best learn about the risks they face through striking images. At the same time, the goal of such educational efforts should not be to frighten the public. As one participant noted, educational strategies that appeal to the public's fears are likely to backfire, in that they can lead to denial and inaction. Rather than being made to feel threatened, the public should be presented with accurate information about what the risks are and given strategies they can take to reduce those risks. As a representative from a non-profit in a medium-sized city observed:

*When you scare people, they shut off, they shut down because it's just too frightening to even consider that...they're going to have to be camping in their yard, or that they're going to have to move, or they're going to lose all of their things and their pets are going to die. I mean, just all these horrendous things that happen, you know, if family members are lost. I think it's okay to use that as a tactic as long as there's an empowerment component as well. So you can say,*

*'This is what's going to happen, but this is what you can do, and maybe it's not going to save your house, but these are the steps you can take,' and really empower people.*

Group members stressed that education campaigns must be targeted toward specific groups. A strategy that works with some sectors of the community may be totally ineffective with others. Generic, non-targeted approaches are unlikely to succeed. Thus, community members who can share information regarding how to target, influence, and mobilize business owners, youth groups, seniors, homeowners, renters and other groups are valuable information sources when developing educational strategies.

#### Education of Government Agencies

Businesses and the general public are not alone in their need for additional information. Focus group participants indicated that government agency employees and elected and appointed officials also need education on the local hazards facing the community, what other agencies are doing in the areas of disaster mitigation, response, and recovery, and how their agencies can contribute to loss reduction efforts. In short, an effort is needed to promote mitigation within the public sphere.

#### Promoting Loss Reduction

Another theme that emerged strongly in the focus group discussions was the notion that communities must promote their successes to both government officials and the general public. For example, one Project Impact coordinator kept decision-makers informed about Project Impact activities by forwarding to them a copy of the reports that were sent to FEMA:

*FEMA requires the coordinators to fill out quarterly reports, monthly reports, [and] what not. When I fax them or send them off to [FEMA] headquarters or my state point of contact, I just include the mayor and the city manager, and the deputy director, and heads of all the departments in there. Then they can see where we're going, which directions we're going [in] and how we're getting there.*

The Project Impact "brand name" and the publicity that accompanies Project Impact also have helped communities promote mitigation, educate community constituents, and call attention to mitigation concerns. Those implementing the initiative locally can promote their efforts by being able to point to a nation-wide effort supporting their own local strategies. As a Project Impact coordinator from a medium-sized county commented during the group session:

*They recognize the Project Impact logo now and they understand what it means through the education and awareness. They can see that on the ground things are starting to happen through the projects, identifications of hazards, mapping and those kinds of things. So it is an education and awareness thing for me [that is important].*

### Using Education to Encourage Proactive Planning and Mitigation

Focus group participants agreed that educational strategies should aim at changing how people think about disaster, its causes, and its prevention. Structural and non-structural mitigation activities are clearly fundamental to loss reduction efforts, yet without a public that is educated with respect to a community's risks and with respect to the strategies that are available to mitigate those hazards, it will be difficult to find the political and financial support to carry out those activities. More importantly, educational efforts must help people understand the relationship between making the decision to devote resources to mitigation and the reduction of future losses. People must understand that damage and loss are avoidable and that the mitigation activities they do decide to undertake can make a major difference when a disaster does occur. As a Project Impact coordinator who is also a building official observed:

*The average person [says], 'Well, my house was built as well as it could be; it's just an act of God [that] my neighbor's house didn't get destroyed and mine did. It's just pure chance,' or things like that. And that really is something I think that points out how important an educational effort is to change the way people think about natural disasters and the belief about what level of control they might actually have over the outcome.*

Representatives who participated in the focus group discussions had clearly embraced the idea that long-term loss-reduction cannot be achieved without changing cultural views. For example, they thought that helping people understand that losses are not inevitable and that they have the ability to protect themselves much more effectively against future disasters should be made a priority. Most also saw education as a critical component in changing their communities' belief sets.

Many group members emphasized the need to concentrate on educating the younger generation about community hazards and mitigation strategies. Participants described activities their communities had implemented, some targeting children in lower grades, others aiming at middle and high-school students, as well as college-based programs that educated future planners and practitioners about disaster mitigation. Education of the younger generation takes time, but participants expressed confidence that long-term benefits would accrue from such efforts.

Just as in 1998 and 1999, several communities reported that their biggest challenge was overcoming mitigation apathy, particularly in areas of the country that do not experience frequent triggering events. To overcome this barrier, education about what could happen and what has happened in other disaster-stricken areas was the most common strategy employed by

the communities represented in the 2000 focus groups. This was also one of the strategies discussed in 1999 groups. Clearly, communities must continue to be concerned about developing the strategies they use to keep disaster issues in the forefront of the minds of community members, particularly in the absence of dramatic disaster events.

### **Finding Incentives for Loss Reduction**

One of the challenges communities confront involves finding incentives that can motivate people to take mitigative actions – incentives that go beyond the more general notion of community-wide safety. Many group participants think that this general goal is insufficient to stimulate action, particularly when there appears to be no immanent threat. To address this need, participants believe that communities need to strike a balance between regulations that require mitigation measures to be undertaken and approaches that rely more on voluntary compliance. No clear consensus emerged on which approach is most likely to be effective or under which circumstances. For example, one Project Impact coordinator was concerned that programs perceived as over-regulatory could actually be counterproductive, and that more support could be garnered for mitigation if measures were not presented in a regulatory context.

Other participants were more skeptical about the benefits of strictly education-based and voluntary compliance programs. They felt strongly that laws, regulations, and incentives such as tax credits and permit fee waivers must accompany education campaigns to accelerate changes in beliefs and behavior. At some level, education must be combined with proper planning and regulation. They also believed that the groups that oppose regulation and stricter codes or zoning ordinances would not voluntarily comply with recommended mitigation measures either. These community representatives recognized that departments imposing regulations must also take into account the perspectives of all stakeholders in the regulatory process. At the same time, they continued to stress the notion that some form of regulation would still be needed to achieve mitigation goals and standardize mitigation compliance across the community.

### **Changing the Way People Think About Disasters**

As noted earlier, the idea appears to be taking hold firmly in communities across the United States that enhancing community disaster resistance necessarily involves a series of major cultural shifts in the way disasters are perceived. These shifts involve moving away from fatalism and the notion that disasters are “acts of God” that strike people and communities randomly – in other words, that disaster losses are beyond our control. They also involve recognition that disasters and their losses are social problems that, like other problems, need to be addressed through sound social policy. If people think that disasters are uncontrollable, that there is nothing they themselves can do to reduce disaster losses, or that enough has been done already, then advocates for loss-reduction will have difficulty getting their message heard. Even when citizens and organizations know what should be done to make a community safer, many still do not undertake those efforts. Group members often expressed the idea that changing the way community members think about disasters and how they actively deal with disaster issues is integral to all programs that attempt to reduce future losses.

Members of our discussion groups also noted that implementing large capital projects is not enough to achieve disaster resistance. Governments must find political supports within the community to move such projects forward. Risks are also not static. New risks develop or are discovered and previously minor risks can become a greater threat. The community must begin to understand how the decisions they and their governments make now will influence their well-being in the future.

The focus group discussions indicate that communities are attempting to reduce disaster losses by changing the focus in government agencies from solely response-driven approaches to approaches that consider mitigation whenever they consider disaster issues. As one Project Impact coordinator observed:

*I think what is successful in this approach to disaster resistance is pointing out that mitigation is the cornerstone...for the other [activities] we talk about, in recovery and response and preparedness.*

Several of the participants still placed an emphasis on the importance of warning and preparedness measures, including the need to employ siren warning systems and to stockpile supplies, such as emergency power generators. Yet these communities maintained that preparedness activities could also be considered mitigation under some circumstances. For example, one participant from a tornado-prone area contended that warning sirens are necessary tools needed to mitigate against loss of life.

Apathy and complacency continue to be problems for Project Impact communities. As other DRC reports have stressed, one of the biggest challenges for communities that do not face frequent threats of large-scale disasters is convincing people that disaster mitigation is an important issue. One community found it was important to reach out to industry and their employees and point out how much a disaster event could really impact their health, their employment, and their community as a whole. While community members may realize that the threat exists, the challenge is getting mitigation on the agenda as a political priority. As a municipal manager from a large city noted:

*I think unfortunately [that] people, by their nature, do not focus on things they can't see, can't remember, and we have a great capacity to forget things very quickly and I think when you start trying to preach to people about disasters, it's very hard if they don't have a common understanding and experience, and it's recent.*

The existing political atmosphere helps determine the strategies communities can put in place to augment their mitigation campaigns. For example, one community is already very proactive in its mitigation requirements for residential housing when single-family units are sold. Other communities were very surprised that the community was able to pass such measures. Those communities, rather than being able politically to enact such sweeping and significant measures, had to settle for undertaking smaller mitigation activities. However, they expressed the hope

that, through such activities, they could begin to obtain the political support needed for more ambitious programs.

Another participant observed that because of an unreceptive political climate, some communities would fail at developing long-term mitigation programs regardless of how much seed money they receive. Some communities do not have the political will to make disaster mitigation an ongoing priority and will instead use the money to complete one or two large and worthwhile mitigation projects. Other communities do have the political will to move ahead with disaster mitigation initiatives; one group member expressed the notion that these kinds of communities would have placed an emphasis on mitigation even without FEMA support. However, Project Impact was still extremely valuable, in that it helped communities in which political will was already present to move ahead with mitigation activities at a much faster rate and to put in place organizational structures and networks to address mitigation in a long-term and more wide-reaching way.

Group members continued to emphasize the well-known point that disasters offer a teachable moment and a window of opportunity to implement change. Communities must be ready to seize upon the moments after a disaster to push forward mitigation strategies. In order to do so successfully, communities must assess their risks and develop strategic plans to implement programs – even when public and government apathy are at their lowest levels. Participants described how mitigation was usually something communities did occasionally after a federal disaster declaration. However, this reactive approach needs to change. Instead, communities need to first develop a local mitigation strategy that provides a blueprint for mitigation activities throughout the community. They should be ready with a plan of action when a disaster does take place and know how to use that moment as a window of opportunity. As one Project Impact coordinator and emergency manager from a large city advised:

*Have a road map. Should a disaster take place, [we need to know] how we're going to prevent those types of damages [from] occurring [again].*

Along the same lines, a group member opined:

*I agree [that] you have to capitalize on the moment. Y2K was a great time for us for planning, to get everybody on board. And you have to take moments like that and be ready to go with something. You just can't start to put your plan together; you have to have something ready to go when the time comes. You sell, it's like Christmas, you have your merchandise ready, and you have to wait.*

Various ways of taking advantage of windows of opportunity were suggested. For example, a Project Impact committee in a community impacted by a disaster event can share with its citizens, businesses, and agencies what has been successful in other communities and propose to implement these strategies shortly after the disaster when the community is most receptive to the ideas. Having access to ideas through the nation-wide Project Impact network and through FEMA-sponsored activities such as the annual Summits has enabled communities to provide that

kind of information. One group participant gave high marks to FEMA and Project Impact for making that kind of information available:

*The big advantage of this nation-wide effort of Project Impact and the sharing of ideas [is that] I come out of [the annual Summit] with a list of example programs that other communities tried and were successful [with]. [Then] I go back with a set of [mitigation] tools to [implement] when [my community is] most [receptive] to change, bring those out, get them started, and then continue to build off of that.*

An emergency manager from a large region underscored the point that small disasters or emergency events constitute opportunities to increase awareness about the initiative and activities. He noted that it is important to turn the emergency around and use it – in terms of planning, education, and coordination – to the initiative’s advantage. Several respondents agreed that the window of opportunity provided by a disaster event in the community or in a neighboring community is perhaps the most effective way to bring about change in community beliefs and practices.

### **Risk Assessments**

Although many communities understand the hazards threatening their communities, for many others the first step toward achieving disaster resistance is identifying the risks they face. Conducting an all-hazard community-wide risk assessment makes it possible for communities to consider disaster mitigation in concert with other community goals and to establish loss-reduction priorities. Several communities did not have time to conduct risk assessments before submitting their statements of work to FEMA and were unaware that they could change their mitigation goals based on priorities developed from the risk assessment. Group members suggested that communities that have not conducted risk assessments should be encouraged to do so in the early stages of the initiative and only then return to FEMA with a more concrete plan regarding how they intend to prioritize and implement activities. Perhaps a risk assessment and organization start-up fund should precede the awarding of the larger grant for communities that do not have those assessments and structures already in place.

A planner from a medium-sized county explained that communities must confront the complacency of people who choose to live in the floodplain because they think it is cheaper, because they think it is more beautiful, or because their families have always lived there. That group member observed that GIS is a wonderful tool to show people how much they are actually at risk and the damage a flood can really do to their property. The most successful GIS projects involve inter-community cooperation and collaboration across many departments. At-risk communities need the hardware and the software to conduct GIS-based planning and enforcement.



## Planning

### Linking Mitigation Planning Into Existing Community Efforts

One Project Impact coordinator/emergency manager who had been in the emergency management field for many years observed that disaster mitigation is not a new concept and had not been “invented” with Project Impact. This group member observed that buyouts of flood-prone homes had been taking place in his community for decades, but that suddenly those activities were being credited to Project Impact. Although this individual was a proponent of the initiative, he also stressed the notion that part of promoting Project Impact involves showing that mitigation is an activity in which many communities have long been engaged and that Project Impact presents an opportunity to do even more in a very focused way.

Others agreed that mitigation is an activity that their communities had been carrying out many years, but they saw Project Impact as helping to focus on prevention before a disaster rather than undertaking mitigation projects in the aftermath of disasters. Project Impact has also helped organizations to partner with other area agencies and businesses on projects, whereas prior to the initiative they had been working more independently. Through Project Impact, non-profits have been integrated into community-wide initiatives and have received funding not only from city government, but also the private sector. Moreover, Project Impact facilitates efforts to integrate mitigation into long-term, ongoing strategies instead of ad hoc activities. Group members emphasized that mitigation planning should build upon the existing community efforts and incorporate planning in such areas as growth management and development.

### Creating A Master Plan

One important way for communities to make a firm movement to disaster resistance is to integrate mitigation into comprehensive community planning documents and programs. Not only do master plans consolidate and coordinate efforts among different organizations, but they also make mitigation a priority in the community, placing it on the agenda for years to come. As this group participant noted, these kinds of comprehensive planning approaches in the past have proved elusive for many communities, but Project Impact has begun to move things in the right direction:

*Many of you may have dealt with this in the past, but each division and department [stays] within its own entity, and really never communicated with the others. And one of the things that we've done in Project Impact, as far as mitigation is concerned, is [we] have morphed it into our master plan strategy. So my Project Impact application actually emphasized that we would have a hazards mitigation section of the master plan for the [county], identify those actions, get some guidelines and some plans.... You know, and get people talking [to each other]. [For example,] how does project mitigation fit into GIS [and*

*other projects?]..... If I ever were to choose one thing about Project Impact [that was beneficial to my community], it would be [that] it has created the avenue for communication that [has] enabled us to better plan for the future.*

### Establishing An Organizational Structure

Not all communities are as advanced in their approaches to mitigation as others. One small community representative stated that some communities do not even have an emergency management director in place, which obviously makes it very difficult to launch sustained efforts to reduce disaster losses. One of the biggest challenges for many communities, particularly smaller ones, is to put an organizational structure in place to serve as a vehicle for mitigation. Clearly, moving from ad hoc and reactive approaches to dealing with hazards to organized strategic planning initiatives is a major challenge. Specific suggestions concerning how to build an effective mitigation organization are discussed in the section on the organization of disaster-resistant community initiatives.

### **Government Support**

Group discussion participants concurred that drawing local government support is an essential element in increasing disaster resistance. Strong program buy-in from government departments, elected officials, and school districts can give a Project Impact initiative the support it needs to sustain activity. Discouragingly, communities still report a good deal of complacency among both the citizenry and governmental officials, even in areas where both small and large disasters are relatively common. In areas where disasters are infrequent, politicians may not feel that mitigation activity is an election-winning issue. Project Impact stakeholders must show politicians that it is in their best interest to support mitigation strategies as failing to take the necessary steps to prevent losses can be an election-losing issue. A local champion in government sometimes has better access than other community members to the media, as well as a broad range of businesses and community organizations. Through these contacts, the government champion can keep the community aware of Project Impact activities.

Other group members, particularly those from larger communities, stressed the importance of having support from the community's executive level of government. Only with this support, they said, will disaster mitigation be given priority in the community and allocated the necessary time and resources to accomplish mitigation goals. A Project Impact coordinator from a very large city expressed this view:

*I think the biggest thing is having somebody higher up, like an elected official, set the priority. That set it for us. You get the mayor telling people under him [or her] to do it and it gets done.*

## **Interagency and Community Cooperation and Communication**

Regional communities have begun to see the importance of jurisdictional cooperation and coordination in order to achieve disaster resistance. This regional approach has also reinforced the need to strengthen the ties between different levels of government within the region. For example, emergency managers may already have established informal or formal ties with their counterparts through mutual aid agreements, routine interaction, and professional meetings. However, such networks may not have formed, for example, between emergency managers and planners or between city managers and social service organizations in the neighboring city or county. As this emergency manager explained:

*It requires an ongoing dialogue and an interrelationship among all levels of government...as well as the community level. [It takes] public officials, different types of planners, volunteer organizations, emergency managers, [and] private citizens to make it happen.*

Although participants stated that it was a constant challenge to encourage area-wide buy-in, they recognized that such efforts are necessary in order to achieve disaster resistance. As one group member noted: "Because the disaster does not stop at the city lines, everyone has to be a part of it."

Interagency collaboration is also important within jurisdictions. Participants frequently praised Project Impact for its focus on collaboration. At the same time, success in achieving collaboration has been mixed. Several communities had yet to achieve a truly collaborative environment, others were not hopeful they would be able to achieve the levels of collaboration they wanted. But according to focus group participants, the majority of communities had seen marked improvements in inter-agency disaster-related efforts, and they believed that the initiative did offer communities the chance to build and strengthen these ties if they chose to.

One participant observed that Project Impact was helpful in bringing together non-profits, city associations, and businesses and really establishing communication between the groups in her community. Some groups have been working on response-related issues for some time, but until Project Impact began, city departments had not been communicating with some of these other agencies. Focus and communication are therefore important components of the initiative.

Another participant from a large county stated that while the government council was in control of Project Impact, information had not been shared between agencies and within the county. Since that time, an advisory council was put in place, and the initiative is now set to strengthen ties between the private sector and non-profit sectors.

## **Capacity Building**

Communities differ in their capacity to develop and carry out mitigation programs. Project Impact must concentrate on utilizing these existing capacities while at the same time increasing access to indigenous sources of knowledge, resources, and organizing ability. In doing so, communities can leverage resources with organizations that already work with various segments of the community. These organizations can provide a wealth of information concerning the needs and capabilities of the people with whom they work, and at the same time, the Project Impact initiative can suggest ways that disaster mitigation would augment their own organizational objectives.

Group participants argued that communities must look at each neighborhood and at different resident populations and recognize that they have knowledge, materials, and resources that could make a difference in mitigating the risks those residents face. Even if after being contacted through outreach activities some residents or groups choose not to participate, they would at least have been given the information to make an informed choice.

One participant suggested that neighborhoods could conduct inventories to determine who in the community had particular types of supplies and skills. This had already been done for disaster preparedness and response issues in his neighborhood, and he observed that the concept could easily be expanded to include mitigation actions. In order to encourage participation, the neighborhood organizers posted the names of those who were not attending the meetings, and attendance quickly rose. The neighborhood group invited the fire department and school representatives to meetings and provided the fire department with a GIS map of their community and its vulnerabilities. Parents pressured schools to put together emergency supply packs for children who may be stranded in school after a disaster, develop bussing plans, and institute other safety measures. In this participant's view, organizing such programs is a matter of finding people in the community to take ownership and initiative.

Mitigation efforts cannot be seen as separate from broader concerns communities face. Communities typically must work toward mitigation while dealing with a host of other pressing issues. Changes in economic, population, and business and industrial trends often mean that communities are forced to deal primarily with basic survival issues, as opposed to "subsidiary" problems such as hazard mitigation. Group members acknowledge that it is a major challenge to encourage people to buy into the initiative when there are so many other needs, issues, and priorities and only a limited amount of time and money.

## **Broadening the Base of Participation in Mitigation Activities.**

Several participants found that by encouraging broad-based participation, Project Impact initiatives were able to expand their goals and activities to a wider range of community residents and organizations. They noted that it is important to hear what others in the community see as mitigation priorities and what strategies they want in place. Committees and sub-committees should have a cross-section of community representation and should ensure that activities benefit

all citizens, not just a select few. One community found it was important to have many different committees and ways for people to get involved. His approach allows people to become involved in the projects and tasks in which they are interested, which in turn helps sustain program efforts.

## **ORGANIZATION OF DISASTER RESISTANT COMMUNITY INITIATIVES**

By the time the focus groups were conducted in fall of 2000, the communities involved in the focus groups had already had organizational structures in place for a significant amount of time and were in a position to comment on the effectiveness of these structural arrangements. Community representatives could describe their respective organizational structures and how those structures had evolved, provide advice regarding what organizational arrangements appear to contribute most to Project Impact success, and offer advice for other communities that are beginning to establish their own organizational vehicles for the initiative.

### **Steering Committees and Subcommittees**

The typical organizational structure consisted of several subcommittees or work-groups and one steering committee. Approximately half of the participants indicated that the projects were driven by the work-groups, with final approval for financing and implementation lying with the steering committee. The authority of the steering committee varied across communities. In some communities, work-groups had control over their spending allocations, within limits, while others required final approval by the steering committee. One city saw its steering committee transition from a decision-making body to a facilitator of different subcommittee plans. Some communities had more elaborate structures. For example, a regional community established a steering committee within each of the subcommittees. A representative from the subcommittee steering committee then served as the representative to the executive steering committee. One of the large counties designated a transition team to determine the program's direction before it formed its steering and subcommittees. This same community had an additional layer in its organizational structure, an advisory committee, that made all final decisions and to which the steering committee reported.

Most of the communities formed subcommittees focused on specific projects or issues. Quite consistent across these communities were work-groups addressing public education, risk assessment and geographic information systems (GIS), media and publicity, and finances. Other committees mentioned by participants included those concentrating on infrastructure, lifelines, medical facilities, and issues such as natural resource management, early warning systems, codes and standards, prevention, large business issues and outreach, and small business issues and outreach. Three communities—one medium, one large, and one very large in size—instead chose to organize their committees around the hazards their counties and cities face. Among the committees discussed by respondents were those dealing with fire, seismic hazards, and flooding.

The sections below discuss lessons learned concerning organizational structure and advice group participants offered with respect to the organizational frameworks in which Project Impact activities are conducted. These recommendations center on the need for leadership and accountability, the need for interorganizational and interjurisdictional approaches to mitigation, the need to link Project Impact initiatives with the activities of existing community organizations, and the need for ongoing monitoring and assessment – and possible redirection – of Project Impact activities.

### **Assigning Responsibility and Establishing Mechanisms of Accountability**

The vast majority of participants stated that clearly articulated roles and responsibilities was one of the most important factors in creating a successful Project Impact organization. Key prerequisites to achieving this goal were establishing leadership within the organization and instituting a sense of ownership and accountability within work groups.

#### Leadership

As in other years, discussants in the 2000 focus groups continued to emphasize leadership as a vital component in hazard-reduction programs. Participants stressed that it is important for those active in those initiatives to have a clear understanding of who is responsible for decision-making and implementation within the community and who is the contact person for Project Impact activities.

Some communities found that many of the tasks associated with the disaster mitigation initiative fall to the community's emergency manager because of his or her association with disaster response. However, many of the focus group participants stated that although the emergency manager clearly has an important role to play in disaster mitigation, someone in that position is not always the most appropriate person to take on the leadership role within the Project Impact initiative. Instead, the people who fulfill this role should be individuals with strong community and organizational ties, who can reach out to different sectors within the community, lead meetings effectively, and help reconcile different interests while moving the community toward program goals. One community appointed co-chairs to lead the Project Impact Initiative. One of these chairs is a financial planner for a large business. This chair had lost a home in a disaster and was very active in the community. The other chair is an executive director of a large non-profit organization. The executive director also had disaster experience and strong ties to the community. These co-chairs were able to recruit other partners and establish credibility because of the connections they already had and because of the trust members of the community had in their leadership abilities. As this example shows, effective leadership makes it possible to garner the support of community decision-makers and can keep disaster mitigation on the community's agenda.

Leadership has two interrelated dimensions. Local initiatives work best when both dimensions are present and when they reinforce one another. First, communities clearly benefit from having local champions. Like the co-chairs described above, these individuals have access to decision-

makers in the public, private, and non-profit sectors. Effective champions are charismatic, have effective public relations skills, and are able to appeal broadly to different business and community groups. At the same time, champions demonstrate a long-term commitment to the initiative and are able to sustain momentum by encouraging others to make and follow through on their commitments.

Another type of leader that also makes a key contribution to Project Impact success is a facilitator, supervisor, and initiator. This person can administer grants, recognize and deal with federal regulation, complete quarterly reports, and fulfill other bureaucratic requirements. These individuals can draw on multiple resources and are able to mentor others. They see to the day-to-day operations of the program and ensure that the community is able to meet its objectives. The local Project Impact coordinator typically holds this type of leadership role.

While it is possible that the local champion may also serve as the Project Impact coordinator, it seems this is not the case in communities that appear most successful at implementing Project Impact. The skills and time required for championing public, private, and non-profit support and those needed to effectively manage the operational aspects of a program are not always found in the same individual. In other words, charismatic leader/advocates may make poor administrators and facilitators, and vice versa. However, both types of leadership are important and necessary.

Group participants also stressed that the responsibility for the initiative cannot solely rely on volunteer efforts. Focus group members concurred that a paid staff is important both for program continuity and for achieving project goals within a timely manner. For example, given the difficulties of promoting mitigation and the wide range of activities that must be undertaken to move programs along, the job of the Project Impact coordinator must be considered a full-time position. The coordinator's responsibilities include facilitating meetings, seeking alternative sources of funding, ensuring funding documentation and reports are completed, managing projects, and coordinating work-group activities. Unfortunately, Project Impact coordinators in some communities must divide their time between duties associated with the initiative and the full-time responsibilities of their other positions in planning, emergency management, the fire service, or other departments. When coordinators must split their time between jobs, both jobs suffer.

#### Work-Group Ownership And Accountability

The 2000 focus group discussions revealed that communities continue to struggle with many of the same challenges that group participants discussed in 1998 and 1999, including fighting community apathy and lack of engagement on disaster issues. As in previous years, encouraging community members to take ownership of the initiative was seen as an important organizational strategy. This issue will be discussed in greater detail in the section below on building partnerships in local communities. However, it also warrants discussion here because participants did raise several points specifically related to increasing partnership responsibility within the work-groups.

With respect to partners, group participants emphasized the importance of clarifying expectations regarding responsibilities and levels of activity from the start of a partner's involvement. Although communities receive inquiries from interested individuals and commitments from partners to attend meetings and work with Project Impact, some of these same communities found that their partners did not take initiative in following through on tasks as they had promised.

One participant indicated that the emergency manager had taken on all the responsibility of the initiative. Partners attended meetings, but they did not become active in carrying out Project Impact activities, and consequently the emergency manager was still left doing all of the work. Focus group respondents stressed that it is crucial to increase and sustain partnership activity and to organize the initiative in ways that encourage active participation.

Group members advised that because much of the planning and decision-making takes place at project or executive meetings, community participants should leave meetings feeling that tasks have been accomplished, that they have additional projects to take back to their organizations or groups, and that this collective endeavor is achieving the objectives they envisioned. Without this sense of achievement, participants will lose interest.

Participants must understand what is expected of them, and the responsibilities of the subcommittees must be clearly defined. Focus group participants noted the importance of matching responsibility for tasks to the interest of each partner. Because involvement in Project Impact competes with other professional and personal priorities, these participants agreed that partners were more likely to follow through on projects in which they had a particular interest.

The more successful a community becomes at garnering participation from partners, the more likely it is that there will be a need to further sub-divide the work-groups to keep them manageable. Discussants noted that when groups become too large, typically only a small core group of partners are active. The remaining partners attend meetings without truly demonstrating involvement. By sub-dividing into additional project work-groups under the umbrella of a larger themed subcommittee, communities are again able to hold individuals accountable for their participation – or lack thereof – and cultivate commitment to task-completion. For example, an education committee may sub-divide into groups such as grade school hazard mitigation, high school hazard mitigation, university degrees and certification on loss reduction, and public education mitigation campaigns.

Additionally, individual partners and the work-groups must be accountable for tasks they choose to undertake or the Project Impact coordinator will become overwhelmed. If subcommittees do not assume their fair share of the work-load, the community risks falling behind on its mitigation objectives or losing its Project Impact coordinator to burn-out.

One focus group participant described how his community was able to place responsibility on a select number of committee members while at the same time drawing in participation and resources from less active yet still committed partners:



*[There is a] dynamic tension...between the community involvement model – which really, the Project Impact [initiative] is based on – and the efficiency model. [We] have a few committed people involved in pushing a project along, and in our structure, we [also] have a committee that works on the projects, and then there is a coalition. [The coalition consists of] all the partners...that would be assigned to that project. It would be the responsibility of that committee to involve that coalition [on that] project as that committee sees fit.*

Several of the communities made commendable efforts to involve the community at every level of the decision-making process before approving projects. Although allowing community members the opportunity to provide feedback can delay mitigation actions, which in turn sometimes makes it necessary for communities to ask for extensions from FEMA, the stakeholders we spoke with stated that ensuring that different segments of the community were able to give input throughout the entire process was well worth the added time devoted to it. Moreover, they were given discretionary control, within limits, over funding projects, which fostered a greater sense of ownership. As a community planner affiliated with Project Impact noted:

*The work-groups will not have ownership of things they, the individual members, [do] if they don't have control of the money, if it's not their ideas, and if they aren't willing to put in the time and the energy to follow through.... I have wonderful, creative, strong people in there who have so many ideas that I couldn't possibly do everything that they want me to do. I couldn't do it in years, and years, and years.... Ownership of the tasks has to go back into the work-group and I'm pushing, and pushing, and pushing it back [to them].... I feel like sometimes like I'm in a handball court trying to [push] it back."*

Another group participant, a Project Impact coordinator/emergency manager from a medium-sized city, echoed this sentiment:

*When the projects surface, they surface to the committee. They do not surface [only] to me. I direct people who have a potential project to come to the committee meeting [and] raise the idea. The committee does the prioritization of the projects, saying, 'Yeah, this is good,' or 'No, we don't have enough money for that one.' Then [the committee has] ownership [of the initiative].*

### **Interorganizational and Interjurisdictional Approaches To Disaster Mitigation**

As in previous years, the concept of interagency and cross-jurisdictional collaboration was also very important to focus group participants in 2000. Participants recognized that in order to effectively mitigate against future disasters, communities must draw in many perspectives and areas of expertise. They also stated that because the consequences of disasters do not stop at

political boundaries, communities could most effectively address the hazards they face by working in collaboration with adjacent cities, counties, and even states.

Several of the communities were more successful than others at attracting representation from a variety of governmental departments, non-profit groups, and businesses. Those that were successful had made concentrated efforts to include many groups in the process, or had made a practice of encouraging interagency collaboration when confronting community issues. Inter-agency collaboration brings with it many challenges. Organizations may have very different interests and perspectives, or there may be a history of mistrust between sectors or conflict between city and county jurisdictions. However, community representatives felt that generating interorganizational and interjurisdictional approaches to disaster mitigation was important to the ultimate success of Project Impact.

A building official from a large county described the weight his community gave to intergovernmental coordination. The city council from the largest city within the county selected a Project Impact transition team when the county first received its designation. The transition team consisted of government employees who had previous experience working on intergovernmental projects. The council felt that these employees (for example, those who had worked on an intergovernmental project focusing on recycling) would be best suited to determine the direction of an interorganizational program. The members of this group were able to develop a hazard mitigation plan and reach out to all government bodies as well as non-profits and businesses. They knew to consult with researchers studying the community to find out information about the people who were already involved and interested in community mitigation efforts, and they were able to develop a new organizational structure in which others from the community who were interested in Project Impact could participate.

Some communities had already developed a local mitigation strategy and had utilized grant funds to bring players together before they officially joined Project Impact. One county Project Impact coordinator explained that his community had folded the initiative into existing mitigation strategies, committees, and business alliances. The existing structure consisted of two separate committees, one private and one public. He stated that if his community were to begin efforts over again, it would have been preferable to combine the public and private efforts, because it would have facilitated discussions between the sectors on growth management-related issues:

*I think it would have opened up a little bit, maybe a better a dialogue or some better understanding of what it is that we want our community to look like and how we can get there collectively from a private and public sector standpoint.*

Focus group participants also described regional approaches as a vital component of successful disaster mitigation initiatives, particularly once the initiative is ready to expand beyond its start-up phase. The resources and information available to communities can be pooled and maximized to produce the greatest impact within the hazard region. The risks communities face typically extend beyond their municipal or county boundaries. Regional planning can minimize

risks in neighboring jurisdictions – risks that ultimately can impact the designated community directly or indirectly.

By informally taking a regional approach to hazard mitigation, one large city was able to share resources and ideas with neighboring communities to help address common hazards. While not all communities were as willing to disregard territorial claims to funding and resources, this community demonstrated the interconnection between city and county risks and showed that regional approaches can work. The community was also able to work with other Project Impact communities within its region to develop a resource network and generate new ideas about both how to mitigate disaster and how to organize the initiative successfully. As the Project Impact coordinator in this community explained it, this kind of outreach, while much needed, is certainly not without its challenges:

*We started out making [Project Impact] local and quickly realized it [was not only] our city [that was at risk].... What we did affected what went on in the county.... [The county] was very surprised [that we] wanted to share our funding and our ideas with the rest of the county because everyone in the past has been so territorial. [It] is hard to break down some of the walls that are out there, the political walls that are out there. Democrat, Republican – you know, we have the same ideas. We work together out in the field as emergency managers. I don't even know what [political affiliation the other emergency managers] are...but when you are dealing with your bosses it is tough to get [the political] walls broken down.*

At the same time, one mayor from a very small city observed that while the regional approach has these distinct advantages, each community still has to contend with its own unique issues. And while collaboration is certainly an important ideal, in the end, each jurisdiction must look after its own constituents. Similarly, another much larger county realized the decision to mitigate ultimately rested with each municipality within its jurisdiction. In this case, however, the Project Impact community asked each municipality to adopt its own individual plan, but in the end, most adopted the general plan set forth by the county. Only a few municipalities had additional special interests that were incorporated into their own respective plans.

Obviously, no community can force another jurisdiction within its region to collaborate. However, community representatives who participated in the focus groups saw the benefits associated with collectively confronting regional risks and encouraged other communities to strive toward building regional partnerships around disaster mitigation issues.

## **Integrating Project Impact Initiatives into Existing Structures and Organizations**

Many focus group participants stressed the value of integrating Project Impact into existing structures and organizations. They stressed that although the initiative should avoid adopting existing structures that clearly do not work well, and although it should be open to new approaches, to the greatest extent possible Project Impact should utilize the organizational resources and strategies already successfully at work.

Most communities have developed organizational approaches that have dealt successfully with other issues in the past. Those arrangements that have proven successful should serve as models for Project Impact initiatives. For example, one large regional community took an existing council structure and used it as the basis for the Project Impact initiative. Although the structure remained the same with the addition of Project Impact, new members were added, particularly from each county's local emergency community commission, information technology employees from each county department, and representation from planning and growth management.

Communities also succeeded in tapping into organizations that were not already involved in disaster mitigation. These organizations were willing to broaden their mandates to consider and integrate mitigation. One benefit of this approach is that existing organizations already have established strategies for reaching the segments of the community with which they work most closely. Incorporating these organizations can prove an effective and efficient way to broaden the initiative to accomplish mitigation goals.

Project Impact meetings are necessary to coordinate activities, monitor progress, and discuss emerging issues. However, focus group participants from both small and large communities also noted that there are major challenges associated with obtaining full participation in the various meetings that need to occur to move the initiative forward, e.g., executive committee and sub-committee meetings. Project Impact partners have indicated to some focus group participants that in their view, taking part in Project Impact requires attendance at too many meetings, particularly given their many other duties and responsibilities. Project Impact must compete with the meetings of other organizations, particularly because those who choose to become active in disaster mitigation activities are often also active in other community groups. Several communities were able to overcome the problem of crowded schedules and increased participation in Project Impact by utilizing already-existing organizations and placing mitigation on the agenda of their regularly scheduled meeting. Efforts to incorporate disaster mitigation into the agendas of established groups do not eliminate the need for meetings that do focus primarily on community mitigation planning and actions. Rather, such time-saving strategies are a good way to enhance the organizational structure, increase participation, and remove burdens from participants who are already very busy. As one Project Impact coordinator observed:

*And, from there, you know, you can get their input. They don't have another meeting to go to. I mean, how many times have you heard, 'I'm meeting-ed out'?... That is a big issue. So, [it helps] if you can integrate the topic into what already exists.*

## **Obtaining Local Government Buy-In**

One of the predominant themes that emerged in the focus group discussions is that Project Impact initiatives need to have the support of local government officials in order to succeed. While the role governmental officials take and which departments become most active in the initiative may vary according to the community context, what does not vary is that budgeting, planning, and other decisions of local government have a profound impact on Project Impact implementation at the local community level. Whether government agencies financially support the initiative will also partly determine its sustainability. Noting that any federal program involves some oversight, most focus group participants felt that local government was in the best position to provide such information and accountability to FEMA.

## **The Importance of Periodic Reevaluation**

For many communities, community-based mitigation planning is a very new endeavor. Some communities have had years of experience in disaster mitigation planning, and Project Impact has brought about a new or revitalized focus on the issue. Fundamental for both types of communities, however, is the need for periodic reevaluation of the effectiveness of program structures, strategies, and mitigation activities. Communities may find that certain aspects of the Project Impact organization have worked really well, while other components have failed or not generated the expected results. Communities may also have interacted with other Project Impact communities since their designation and received suggestions or heard of innovative ideas about how to improve their own organizational structure.

One historic preservationist who works very closely with Project Impact described the initiative as a “work-in-progress” in the community. In this large city, the initiative is reevaluated annually and has been adapted to increase both levels of activity and its emphasis on sustainability:

*[Our community has] been having...an annual meeting that's been almost like a retreat to re-visit what's been committed in the past and to look at what they want to commit to in the future, and [we] even actually re-organized the committee, re-visited the committee structures.*

A representative from a large county Chamber of Commerce described how the Project Impact program began under the control of county administrators in his community. Since that time, a new advisory panel, sub-committees, and alliances have been formed. A third example comes from a representative from a large non-profit organization. She described how her community brought the subcommittees together to reexamine the initiative's objectives and ensure that all subcommittees were still working toward achieving common goals:

*We've come back and convened as a large group and [made] sure that we focus on what our initial [goals, tasks, and subgroups were]. And that seems to pull people back to where they should be. The frequent monitoring is really important...*

### **Organizing an Initiative that Involves Broad-Based Community Participation Takes Time**

Community representatives agreed that organizing an initiative that includes broad-based community participation involves a lengthy planning and partnering process. The more integrated the approach, the more time it takes to give everyone a chance to provide feedback and define roles for themselves. Some communities stated that they were told by FEMA to present a detailed work plan and budget during the initial application process. These communities argued that this requirement was not conducive to a community-generated process, as the plan was submitted before meaningful partnership recruitment could take place. Other communities were given more flexibility in the application process and were told by FEMA that they only needed to provide a general sketch of what they intended to accomplish, and could adapt their plans once the community was consulted. Although focus group participants did acknowledge that setting time limits is necessary to ensure that activities are completed, they also felt that investing time to solidify relationships and encourage broad community participation was important for achieving Project Impact goals – even if that kind of strategy might result in delays in mitigation implementation. It obviously takes longer to network and involve the community than to make an executive decision and hire a contractor to do project development work. However, the people we spoke with felt there were important pay-offs to increasing community input and participation. As a consequence, however, these communities often required funding extensions from the Federal Emergency Management Agency. One Project Impact coordinator observed that:

*It is a fairly administratively intensive project and I think you really need to have a full time dedicated staff member. We had only allocated thirty five thousand dollars in administrative funds for our whole duration of a five hundred thousand dollar two year project. So we underestimated. Because we are trying to network with so many different groups...and while it's valuable and is what I think is going to sustain the momentum in our communities, it takes three or four times as long to get lots of people involved than just to hire a contractor consultant to do a job and produce a product. But I think it will pay off.*

Many communities underestimated the time they would need to devote to the project, particularly during the start-up period. These communities felt that FEMA's deadlines discouraged them from spending the time that they really needed to plan. Others felt that some communities that were able to move ahead quickly with mitigation projects structured the initiative to spend the money within FEMA's designated time period as these communities had no intention to continue the local initiative once the federal money had run out. Some expressed frustration with spending requirements:

*But I mean my whole three hundred thousand had to be budgeted out with identified projects before we could get spending funds.*

*When we became a Project Impact community, [it] was not the case [that all of the seed money needed to be spent by a certain date.] It is now. These are new ground rules. That stuff is supposed to be seed money. If you have to commit yourself to spending every penny of it before you are sure that you have a project, [the situation] is pretty dumb in my personal opinion.*

Many focus group participants indicated that by devoting time during the start-up process to assessment and long-term planning, and by considering ways to leverage federal money beyond the FEMA funding deadline, communities would be in a better position to undertake long-term mitigation projects and to sustain Project Impact activities.

## **BUILDING DISASTER MITIGATION PARTNERSHIPS WITH DIFFERENT SEGMENTS OF THE COMMUNITY**

### **Developing Partnerships with the Private Sector**

The majority of participants reported that they had success in reaching out to businesses and attracting their participation in mitigation activities. Several representatives from large communities indicated that many of these local businesses had had a long history of involvement in community activities. Thus, focus group participants were not surprised that these businesses were willing to become involved in mitigation issues after receiving letters inviting them to join the initiative. Representatives from smaller communities noted that the size of their communities made it very easy to approach local businesses and garner their participation. In smaller communities, local business owners are likely to be active in community issues and to have close informal contacts with mitigation advocates in city or county government.

Other communities were able to get the private sector involved because the businesses had experienced recent disasters or threats. One non-profit representative from a large city described how her community used the recent Y2K computer threat as a teachable moment to outline loss reduction strategies and discuss how business vulnerability and overall community vulnerability are related. By reminding businesses of actual or potential disaster impacts on their business operations, Project Impact organizers were able to successfully attract private sector representation to serve on their steering committees. With business owners and employees assuming a visible role within the Project Impact organization, the community initiative was then better able to attract additional private sector support. Table 2 provides a listing of the businesses, business groups, and other partners that were identified as collaborators by participants in the 2000 focus groups. This table reflects partners that were mentioned as examples by participants and is not meant as an exhaustive list of business-related partners active in communities. As indicated in the table, partners included business alliances, universities, media organizations, and a variety of manufacturing, construction, financial, service, and retail operations.

When asked for advice on how to involve the private sector, group participants indicated that Project Impact organizers should identify specific projects in which they want businesses to become active. If told how they can become involved, many businesses will offer their assistance. One participant suggested that communities should distribute a Project Impact “wish list” that outlines the items or services needed by the Project Impact organization. Businesses can then identify the ways in which they can contribute. Participants stated that when businesses are not provided with activities from which they can choose, they often have difficulty understanding how they can become involved and do not actively propose projects. Businesses then become inactive, not because they do not believe in the concept of disaster mitigation, but rather because they do not see how they can fit into the community’s mitigation strategy. As one Project Impact coordinator from a medium-sized city put it:

*[Businesses] are very open and receptive if you can come to them with the project identified that you want them to help with. In fact some of them have made it very clear, ‘Let us know when you want this support, when you want this help for your identified project. Other than that I am sorry, but you know, we can’t just get involved in all of them.’*

Some communities had prior experience integrating the private sector into disaster-related programs before the Project Impact initiative was introduced. Activities in which these communities had involved businesses in the past included the development of local mutual aid agreements, training sessions, hazardous materials programs, and local emergency planning commissions for chemical emergencies. Businesses that had participated in these kinds of disaster-related programs were also likely to become part of Project Impact when asked to do so.

**Table 2. Business Partners and Other Organizations Discussed by Focus Group Members**

Lending institutions	Business alliances
Insurance companies	Concrete associations
Universities	Home builders associations
Shutter companies	Chamber of Commerce
Home hardware stores	Institutes of Business and Home Safety
Building developers	Television stations
Mortuaries	Radio stations
Gas stations	Newspapers
Book stores	Manufacturing plants
Small local retail stores	Large industries
Local chains of national retail stores	Airports
Technology companies	Utility companies
Consulting agencies	



### Asking Businesses What They Need

Focus group participants indicated that, rather than asking directly for help at first, asking businesses what they need to achieve disaster resistance is an important initial step in engaging businesses to become Project Impact partners. They advised that business owners and managers should not be seen only as sources of leveraging resources in their community. Instead, they contend that the owners, their business operations, and their employees are also potential victims to hazardous events. Several communities began the dialogue on Project Impact by engaging in discussions with local business representatives to find out what they needed to become disaster resistant within their own operations.

Several community initiatives attracted business involvement by offering no-cost risk assessments of their facilities and operations. Project Impact partners were willing to visit a business, conduct a risk assessment of the building or the firm's operations, and discreetly offer the business the report at the Project Impact office. Through this strategy, they were able to help businesses identify ways they could implement loss reduction measures, provide a service to the businesses as a means of establishing a relationship with them, and begin a dialogue with business owners and managers about how the business could contribute to community efforts and how they could educate their own employees concerning disaster mitigation at home and in the workplace. One Project Impact coordinator noted that the initiative must first offer something to induce businesses to get involved:

*The most important [strategy is to identify the type of] disaster prevention [needed] for that particular business...and then getting [the business] involved on that angle. Then, that may spin off into other activities.*

Other group participants echoed this idea:

*We're going to go in there with a two-pronged premise, one is to try to get people to do business continuity plans...and the second thing is to do education with their employees.*

*Whether they do [the mitigation activities] or not, we open that door and...talk to the staff and [ask to] talk to the employees. If we sell them on the fact that if we can't get your employees [to make their homes more disaster resistant], they are going to be a little bit slower getting back [to work].*

Other communities offered businesses training courses on how to identify risks and develop mitigation plans. Larger businesses partnered with communities to mentor smaller businesses on disaster mitigation. One very large community developed a speaker's bureau through which it trained partners to talk about Project Impact and disaster mitigation, and then sent these individuals to speak to other organizations within their own sectors. Group participants observed that businesses are most receptive to information provided by other business leaders.

Many business owners and managers are skeptical of government-based initiatives because they believe such initiatives will lead to further regulation of businesses. Thus businesses were most receptive to Project Impact when the initiative was presented as a source of information and resources instead of as a regulatory or quasi-regulatory agency.

Clearly most businesses want to reduce their disaster vulnerability if they can. However, many suffer from a lack of knowledge on how to prioritize reduction strategies and a lack of financial resources to implement mitigation measures. Group members observed that even when communities have experienced disasters, the collective memory tends to be short, and this is another reason why businesses tend not to support mitigation.

Focus group participants discussed how their communities are going about developing financial incentives, insurance reductions, and low-cost mitigation loans so that businesses can follow through on mitigation activities once loss-reduction plans are developed. As one historic preservation official from a large city stated, businesses are quite willing to participate in mitigation programs, provided those initiatives are voluntary and accompanied by incentives, rather than additional regulation:

*[The home builder's association was] concerned that codes and regulations would be brought into effect. What has ended up happening is the leadership of the local home builder's association became solely mitigation [focused] and began a voluntary program of promoting safe rooms. And [it] is now even interested in trying to develop a legislative committee for developing incentives. They're still opposed to codes, they don't want to be regulated or told what to do, but they are going to work with us, on voluntary basis, and on developing incentives.*

Some communities have opted for achieving mitigation through the pursuit of "recommended practices" instead of implementing stricter codes. Advocates for mitigation have then concentrated on educating the community about the standard of disaster resistance they can expect to achieve through that approach. Other communities have concentrated on educating the public about what they should demand from building developers. Focus groups participants noted that when market forces demand increased disaster resistance, businesses will comply to meet the expectations of their customers. As one group member observed, builders will change not when new mitigation strategies become available, but rather when consumers demand higher levels of disaster resistance:

*We started one of our projects before we got Project Impact. It was on wind resistance. We thought we would go to the builders to get changes in how people built homes. We thought 'These are the right people, right? They're the ones building [the homes]. You show them [the] different ways to do it so that they can do it affordably. They probably wouldn't be able to sleep at night if they built them the old way once you show them that there's a new and improved way with very little additional cost....' But they are not going to be the initiators unless they*

*want to market it and they see a niche for themselves in a competitive market....  
It's the consumer [we need to reach who will see the benefit and demand disaster  
resistance].*

The ability to gain business support is rooted in the ability to launch strategies that recognize business views on regulation, provide benefits for businesses that wish to become involved in mitigation activities, and overcome reservations businesses may have about taking part in government-initiated programs. By encouraging greater private and non-profit sector involvement in steering and sub-committees, Project Impact initiatives were able to avoid creating the kind of resistance from the business community that many government initiatives create. Group participants were careful to point out that Project Impact has a responsibility to encourage the adoption and enforcement of mitigation regulations even in situations in which businesses oppose those measures. At the same time, they observed that by first helping businesses take steps on their own, Project Impact organizers are in a better position to elicit private sector support for broader mitigation strategies at a later time. Government agencies must implement loss reduction regulations in accordance with a proactive mitigation strategy; however, the adoption of mitigation activities is less difficult when those who are being asked to mitigate agree with – or at least agree not to oppose – those measures. And they must also be willing to make a long-term investment in mitigation. As one Project Impact coordinator noted:

*It may cost less in the long run [to mitigate], but it may cost more right up front,  
and we can't back away from that. We've got to be blunt about that and maybe  
even show people how, contrary to so [many] of our beliefs, that we should invest  
now for the future. I mean, it's a national trend that we don't do that, and it may  
be human nature, but we have to try to change on that.... We are making some  
progress on that, but boy is it slow.*

One business representative explained that businesses often believe they can either mitigate their own risks or buy more insurance to cover potential losses, without taking into account community vulnerability and the need for community-level mitigation measures. Some have failed to consider the potential vulnerability of their own employees or to consider how their operations will be affected if those employees become victims in a community-wide disaster. While mitigating against the structural damage and the loss of goods and services at the work site is extremely important, so too are the mitigation measures taken by employees to ensure that they and their families are safe during a disaster, have not suffered significant property damage during a hazardous event, and can get to work after a disaster.

One community retained a consulting company to arrange appointments with forty community businesses, spend a few hours walking through their facilities, and have a very positive discussion about what those business owners can do to identify the risks and mitigate the hazards. Because the consultants were able to point out to business owners specific actions that should be taken at their business sites, the mitigation message was much clearer than if it had been presented to a large number of businesses at an off-site meeting space. One business representative discussed the kinds of issues these inspections raise:

*Gee, the water heater is not strapped. Maybe you want to do that [because] you're in an earthquake area. Or from a flooding standpoint, what can they do to have some quick release on their electronic equipment so they can get it above the four-foot level? From a wind standpoint, do they have safe areas [in the business], from a tornado standpoint, for their employees? Do they know how to shut off the utilities?*

Following these visits, businesses were provided with a detailed checklist that addressed not only business risks but pointed to risks within the community at large that might impact their operations. This information was supported with detailed handouts about mitigation and preparedness for the business and their employees. Once the Project Impact initiative had established an information-sharing rapport with the business, the Project Impact contact person was able to initiate a discussion with the business contacts about broader community mitigation goals and strategies. A business representative discussed how these risk assessments were then broadened to include the entire community:

*And, then we also talked about how you protect a community [by] educating the children, educating their families, pulling together. To get communities to galvanize together to do it, independent of Project Impact, just bring their own little community of home owners [and businesses] together to understand [the risks and how to mitigate them].*

The community followed up by conducting a survey of the businesses that had been assisted through this program and received very positive feedback. The community found that businesses often have a lot of incorrect information about risks and how they can be reduced, and that the walk-through helped clarify many mitigation issues. The program seems to have had an effect, in that businesses reported following through with a number of loss-reduction measures, such as buying flood insurance, holding education programs for their employees, and purchasing emergency supplies. The community was committed to reconnecting with businesses approximately every six months to keep them involved. The community representative who described this business outreach effort observed that as a result:

*[The businesses] are getting totally involved in the community and they really start to support the efforts of they city and Project Impact, and [are] becoming more self-sufficient.*

### Strategies To Encourage Business Participation

From the point of view of discussion participants, businesses have been receptive to the information Project Impact has provided them and have also offered innovative ideas regarding what their communities needed to do to become disaster resistant. Group members pointed to the following factors that motivate private sector participation in broader community mitigation activities beyond the walls of their own businesses:

1. *Businesses want to provide services to the public.* Businesses seem genuinely concerned about the impact a disaster could have on the community, and they believe that they should be contributing to the overall well being of the community. Participants agreed on the need to encourage a “big neighbor” concept, in which businesses identify a need and work together with others in the community to address it.
2. *Businesses recognize that community disasters affect their own viability.* Businesses understand that community losses could ultimately impact their financial well-being. Strategies to reduce community risks can, in turn, reduce the damage, disruption, and loss of sales their businesses may experience following a hazardous event. Study participants found that by demonstrating to business owners that their disaster resistance is contingent upon the disaster resistance of the community, they were able to increase businesses involvement in community mitigation projects. When possible, businesses should work on community projects they believe reduce factors that most put their business directly or indirectly at risk.
3. *Businesses want publicity for their involvement.* They want to be able to place the Project Impact label on their own material and use Project Impact events to gain exposure for their own products and services. This is true virtually across the board – that is, for businesses that provide goods or services that are directly applicable to disaster mitigation activities (for example, home hardware stores and shutter companies), for businesses that must mitigate in order to support community-wide mitigation efforts (for example, utility companies and airports) and for other businesses that hope to acquire community support by supporting community activities like Project Impact. Participants suggested that if local Project Impact programs publicize businesses that are active in Project Impact, other businesses will want to become involved as well.
4. *Businesses want incentives for participation.* Beyond publicity, many companies still want to see some direct financial benefit from their participation. For example, some may be willing to give reduced rates for printing or materials, but they still want those purchases to be made from their establishment. Businesses are willing to reduce their profits to benefit a community cause, but they still want to earn some amount of profit on the transaction. Thus, instead of asking for free products and services, Project Impact communities have begun to employ other strategies, such as asking to pay reduced rates, purchasing one item while getting the second for free, and offering web link exchanges for businesses if the business home page provided a link to the Project Impact site.
5. *Businesses want to be appreciated for their contributions.* Focus group participants observed that even small tokens of recognition, such as thank-you cards and certificates signed by the mayor, demonstrated to owners and managers that their contributions were valued and showed them that time spent away from the organization to assist with Project Impact activities was well spent. One Project Impact coordinator noted that even seemingly minor things, such as seeing their names and pictures in print or on television,

are rewarding for some people. By inserting pictures of participants into media promotional and education material, communities are able to acknowledge active participation in a very visible way.

6. *There are some business owners and employees who will take a personal interest in Project Impact.* In some cases, employees were particularly interested in disaster-related problems or found disaster mitigation an especially worthwhile issue with which to become involved. In others, business representatives had experienced a devastating disaster and wanted to prevent future losses in the community. These employees and owners placed hazards high on their own business agendas and were willing to work to mobilize support for community mitigation projects.

### Private Sector Contributions

According to information provided by discussion participants, businesses contributed to the Project Impact initiative in a variety of ways. Table 3 lists various types of contributions participants discussed during the focus groups. A cautionary note is required here: the activities listed in the table are those that were voluntarily mentioned by participants in the course of responding to the discussion questions. The listing is not meant to provide an exhaustive account of all types of contributions made by businesses in the communities represented in the 2000 groups.

As indicated in the table, businesses enhanced local mitigation activities by making direct financial contributions as well as by providing various types of services and supplies. While some businesses provided funds directly to Project Impact, in most cases, businesses provided material and services at reduced rates, provided free samples or prototypes of products such as safe rooms, donated items such as generators and surplus products, and provided on-site services in the forms of meeting space and printing.

Business representatives also provided valuable expertise to Project Impact initiatives. Employees with a variety of skills, knowledge, experience, and professional contacts served on steering committees and were active on mitigation activity. Larger businesses also mentored smaller businesses on how to take steps to assess risks and reduce losses in a business.

Another way in which businesses provided assistance to community-wide efforts is through educational and promotional activities. Companies have provided or sponsored initiative-related advertising and educational spots on local television stations, radio stations, and in local newspapers. They have also helped produce advertisements and instructional videos and produced and distributed disaster mitigation material to children. Chamber of Commerce organizations and industry associations included information about Project Impact in their newsletters as a way to attract private sector participation. Many business partners also provided links on their web sites that took Internet surfers to the Project Impact homepage.

**Table 3. Examples of Business Contributions**

Monetary Contributions, Services and Supplies	Expertise	Education and Promotion	Political Support	Mitigation within the Business
Financial contributions	Large business mentoring of smaller businesses	Mitigation instructional videos	Political support and government pressure to sustain initiative	Discussions with employees about mitigation
Mitigation tool kits	Service on committees	Web link exchange with PI and partners		Provision of educational materials in payroll envelopes
Generators		Education for children		Business-focused mitigation plans
Discounted water-heater straps		Discounts (e.g., to wild-fire fighters)		Insertion of information in business newsletter
Meeting space		Advertising spots		
Safe rooms		Association newsletter inserts		
Surplus items		Display brochures		
Brochure printing		Educational spots		

Another way that businesses make an important contribution to Project Impact goals and objectives is through their political influence. Indeed political buy-in on the part of businesses is crucial to the longevity of the initiative. Building cooperation between businesses and the local government and showing that city leaders are concerned about their constituents also becomes a very positive benefit that business-centered Project Impact activities can provide.

Private sector partners also contribute to the initiative by taking steps to make their own organizations disaster resistant. By completing risk assessments and mitigation plans, businesses not only help reduce potential losses to their own operations, but also contribute to overall community resilience. Companies have included mitigation information with employee checks

and internal business newsletters. Businesses of all sizes talked to their employees about disaster mitigation, and many invited speakers to give presentations.

#### Challenges Associated With Attracting Private Sector Participation

The focus group discussion contained questions on challenges communities face in attempting to attract private sector organizations to take part in local PI programs. Group members made a number of observations concerning barriers that stand in the way of fuller business participation in the initiative. Major challenges identified by participants are listed in Table 4.

**Table 4. Challenges Attracting the Private Sector**

Businesses are over-extended
High business and employee turnover rate
Business competition
Fear of increased regulation
Sustaining partner activity
Involving small businesses
Eliciting support from local branches of national partners
Contacting the right person in the business

One of the challenges described by a non-profit representative was the fact that all types of representatives – from government to non-profit organizations to the business sector – are already over-extended. Disaster mitigation is an issue many feel they can put off until some future time.

Communities that experienced high rates of business turnovers were forced to repeatedly reach out to new businesses simply to sustain the same level of participation. Even when business organizations remain in the community, employees frequently move to different departments within the company or even change companies. When a business loses an employee who was particularly interested and active in disaster mitigation, the local Project Impact initiative may lose the participation of that business unless ties can be reestablished with another employee.

Group members observed that when a particular type of business participates in Project Impact, its competitors may also want to join. However, those situations can backfire, because some businesses try to avoid offering the same products and services or being affiliated with the same activities as their competitors. Because businesses tend to like to carve out unique niches for themselves in terms of their community activities, high-profile involvement on the part of one business might discourage those that offer similar goods and services from taking part in Project Impact.

As suggested earlier, communities also encountered resistance from businesses because they feared increased regulations. In one community, for example, the owners of one of the community's major industries, a smelting operation, said they supported hazard mitigation and



had already allocated money into dealing with the issue for themselves, but that they did not want to become involved in Project Impact because they saw it as potentially connected to tighter environmental regulation. This same participant explained the resistance his community met from businesses and industry to a hazard-mapping project that was intended to lay the groundwork for future Project Impact activities. In this case, the mapping study was seen as a threat to local development interests:

*Realtor groups, for example, looked at my field hazard mapping project, which had to be [the] first [Project Impact activity] because first we needed to know where the wild land...hazard was. And guess what? It's in the interface. I think we all know that. We have people moving out in droves into the trees telling us it's kind of in the basin in the mountains and all around us very heavily timbered. [The realtors and developers] saw [the mapping project] as another [regulation like the] flood plain coming down the road; that the next step was to say, 'Thou shall not build there.'*

In this community, fire hazards could have been addressed by requiring the developer to provide additional sources and on-site storage of water for fighting fires. However, this approach would have been costly for the developer. Instead, optional residential sprinklers were offered, shifting costs to potential buyers. Once this was done, real estate and development interests stopped opposing the measure.

The focus group discussions reinforced the idea that attracting private sector involvement is only the first step in the Project Impact process. Once businesses have committed to Project Impact, organizers must continue to find ways to sustain their activity. For example, the Project Impact coordinator must involve partners on specific projects and events and delegate responsibility to them. This delegation helps lessen the burden for the coordinator while helping to establish ownership of the initiative among partners. Additionally, the initiative should not provide partner acknowledgements and publicity unless there has been a substantial contribution, including on more routine tasks. In other words, the publicity gained from participation should not exceed the contribution made. One participant indicated that her community had given up on attempting to achieve total business buy-in and were now focusing on working with partners who were truly supportive:

*Our biggest problem is keeping people interested and focused. You have to get the accomplishments [along] the way, and get some successes, even if they are small, just to start building your history and track record.*

Focus group participants expressed general dissatisfaction with their efforts to involve small businesses in the initiative, indicating that smaller businesses are often left out of the Project Impact decision-making process. Although they are invited to participate and attend meetings, small business owners typically do not have expendable time and resources to contribute to the same extent as representatives from larger companies.

Local small businesses may also not yet understand how they can make a contribution. Several participants discussed how they had been in contact with businesses that believed in Project Impact's objectives but did not know how to help. Based on these observations, greater effort must be made to develop avenues through which these interested businesses can make a valuable contribution.

Some communities, recognizing that smaller businesses often can't afford to provide much in the way of financial assistance, asked them to contribute in smaller yet important ways. In these communities, small businesses were able to help in various ways, for example by posting and displaying Project Impact material, providing thank-you discounts to wildfire fighters, and distributing disaster-related information to employees.

Participants were also aware that by partnering with larger companies, the Project Impact initiative runs the risk of isolating smaller businesses. While large national companies are often very helpful to Project Impact, locally-based businesses do not always have the same capacity to support the initiative. Participants cautioned one another and other communities to ensure that mitigation partnerships developed out of a desire to make the community safer did not create an appearance of government-endorsed favoritism toward national chains that can afford to make a contribution. As one Project Impact coordinator observed, efforts should not involve local counterparts of national chains at the expense of locally-based businesses that can provide the same types of resources:

*Obviously in our community we've got the [large building supply chains] of the world and we want them to participate, but we also want the [smaller hardware and lumber shops] of the world to participate as well, and I think our challenge has been not to necessarily grab the [large chains] because it's the smaller businesses that we don't want to dry out. That's what makes our community our community, you know, the hardware store that's been there for fifty years.*

A representative from the non-profit sector also expressed concern that alliances with nationwide chains do not do much to help local economies:

*[What] you risk [when] working with a corporation like [a national home building supply chain] or any other large corporation is that they're often not based in the community that you are working in, so you're taking dollars away from the local lumber yard when you use your own materials. I don't know how to reconcile that because [the large building supply company is] doing a great thing, and they are smooth to work with.*

One group participant, a city manager, pointed out that it is important for Project Impact to devote a considerable amount of time to sustaining momentum in involving smaller businesses. Although small business representatives are enthusiastic when they first become involved, taking part in Project Impact often competes with their many other business commitments and

activities. Considerable communication and coordination is therefore needed to keep them active in the initiative.

Similar to discussions generated in previous focus groups, participants in 2000 expressed difficulty connecting with local branches of national partners, but overall the concern was not as great as in previous years. An emergency manager from a large regional community described how one local branch in his city was unaware of the existing agreements its parent organization had made on a national level. The community initially did not know whether the branch made its own decisions regarding participation or whether it considered itself bound by regional or national agreements made by the head office. In this particular community, a state agency intervened to help establish a separate agreement with the local branch. Another large community was relying on cold-calls to the local branch store.

One participant shared information on a successful strategy he had used to mobilize the local affiliates of national partners. First, he contacted the home office at the regional or national level. Next, the main office identified an individual employee to contact in the local branch of the chain. When meeting with that local branch, he also brought with him a letter from the national or main office requesting involvement in the local Project Impact initiative. This participant noted that the letter helped establish a rapport with the employee and lent credibility to the initiative.

Participants expressed frustration concerning difficulties in identifying the most appropriate person within a business organization to contact. In some instances, community initiatives were most successful when they contacted the business owner or the chief executive officer. At other times, the most receptive contact was the risk manager or safety officer. In very large organizations, Project Impact organizers often had to guess about who would have the authority to designate business resources to the initiative or who might take the most interest in disaster mitigation and take it upon themselves to pitch the initiative internally to the decision-makers. As one Project Impact coordinator noted, efforts to enlist business support often run into dead ends:

*A lot of people get key-holed down to somebody in the company or in the plant that's not in the decision-making role and is reluctant to participate, and I'm struggling with that. I'm having a hard time getting the right people [who are] enthusiastic and that say, 'We'll do this...' I can get the people who report back or listen, but don't take the action, don't have the authority within those organizations to take that initiative.*

Many local initiatives begin mobilizing business support by utilizing the relationships built through other emergency networks. For example, as part of its disaster preparedness efforts, one community had issued passes to the industries in its area for their designated critical employees, depending on the number of employees they have and the percentage of the people that would be designated critical. Because these passes were distributed to banks and other major industries, the emergency management community had developed a good relationship with these businesses

over the years. These relationships formed the starting point for this community's effort to build private sector involvement in Project Impact. Another participant suggested that Project Impact organizers find champions in the community who will take mitigation cause to businesses. He believed that someone from a segment of the community other than government, either from the private sector or even from community-based organizations, would be more effective at making a connection with potential private sector partners.

Mayors, other elected officials, and appointed officials often have extensive connections within the private sector. Support from local political figures can help to legitimate the initiative and can provide access to decision-makers within major companies. Communities suggested networking with agencies that have private sector contacts and asking them to introduce the Project Impact contact to the person in the company that make the decisions. Other public/private task forces, such as those linked to Y2K preparations, were also thought to provide useful initial contacts.

One Project Impact coordinator described the problems he faced attracting organizational decision makers and other key officials to the initiative. He felt strongly that the initiative could benefit from more participation on the part of individuals in finance, marketing, and other departments. However, when he contacted individuals within business organizations to enlist their help, they tended to refer him to safety officers, rather than to the kinds of people he really wanted to reach.

Another participant noted that while it should be clear to any business that helping Project Impact makes businesses safer and also has good public relations value, it is almost inevitable that organizers will at times end up targeting some individual who just doesn't 'get it.' He explained that talking to that person any further is wasting time. Instead, it is better to move on and to try to speak to someone else within the organization.

### **Involving Vulnerable Segments of the Community and Community-Based Organizations**

Although from its inception Project Impact was intended to be a program that included a range of stakeholder groups and community organizations in loss-reduction activities, in the early years of the initiative a considerable amount of emphasis was placed on developing partnerships with private sector organizations. As the preceding section indicates, those efforts have met with considerable success, particularly with respect to larger businesses and local branches of national chains. Without downplaying the importance of those successes, there remains a need to expand the initiative to other community sectors, including non-profit and community-based organizations and groups providing services to more vulnerable community residents, such as the poor, recent immigrants, and racial and ethnic minorities. Thus, one of the goals of DRC's research is to establish the extent to which local Project Impact programs are beginning to move in the direction of greater inclusiveness.

In the focus group discussions that were held in 2000, participants were better able than in previous years to suggest issues related to broadening and expanding the initiative. However, communities showed considerable variation in the extent to which they were actively working on including previously underrepresented groups in local mitigation activities. Several participants stated that their communities had not yet developed any activities aimed at reducing losses for vulnerable populations. Instead, they appeared to believe that activities that seek to make the entire community safer will automatically help vulnerable groups. Other participants admitted that while their communities had begun attempts to include and assist the most vulnerable of their community in the initiative, they still had much left to accomplish.

#### Establishing Linkages With Groups That Are Already Working With Vulnerable Segments Of The Community

One of the most frequently recommended strategies for reaching out to vulnerable segments of the community was to establish working relationships with existing groups that already interact with those populations. Group members noted that whether the organizations are government departments, large non-profit agencies, groups supporting interests based on race, gender, or age, activity interest groups, community action groups, or faith-based organizations, these groups and agencies have established community contacts, outreach mechanisms and are familiar with the needs and capacities of the populations they serve. Table 5 contains a listing of the types of organizations focus group members indicated were targeted for participation in Project Impact in their communities. Although participants in the 2000 groups mentioned a greater variety of organizations that had been designated for inclusion than had participants in 1998 and 1999, still absent from the discussion were non-Christian faith-based organizations and a variety of ethnicity-focused groups.

A common strategy for broadening the initiative was to try to include Project Impact concerns in the activities of existing organizations and networks. Several communities had already established interagency councils and task forces to address other community issues. One community, for example, had set up a health alliance of organizations in an effort to build healthier communities. This community drew upon its contacts within the health alliance and redefined the concept of community health to include mitigation activities. Project Impact organizers were quickly able to attract support from many organizations that work with vulnerable segments of the community because they approached existing groups already in the network. A business representative from a large county observed:

*So we have within our organization, about seven or eight different councils and those councils are made up of people, professionals, and lay people and administrators of programs, probably about ninety programs in our county.*

Efforts to expand Project Impact to more vulnerable segments of the population are complicated by the fact that organizations that help meet the needs of vulnerable groups often have limited funding sources and sometimes compete with other organizations for the same resources. An organization working with the poor, for example, may struggle to deliver services within its

mandate and hesitate when faced with incorporating a new component, such as disaster mitigation, into its activities. As one Project Impact coordinator commented:

*Sometimes it's been a challenge to ensure that we're striving to accomplish and achieve the goals that we've set out without impeding an individual organization's ability to do the things they normally do that may or may not be related to the specifics of Project Impact. There's only so many dollars that go around.*

In order to include these organizations, Project Impact organizations must continue to identify ways that mitigation contributes to their existing mandates. They should also find ways to help share the burden these organizations will assume by becoming involved with another community initiative. A suggestion provided by one participant was to provide funding to existing groups to implement mitigation as a demonstration project, and then ask them to continue mitigation efforts using their own funds. As a result, organizations will have the opportunity to see what is involved in incorporating mitigation into their activities and determine whether or not they consider such efforts worthwhile and sustainable. At other times, mitigation education and implementation can be incorporated into existing activities without requiring additional funding and time. One strategy to engage both small businesses and vulnerable segments is to encourage small businesses to educate their employees. One representative of a faith-based non-profit advised:

*[Get small] businesses to educate the community members who work [for them], and that could easily be one way to catch minority communities and low-income residents who might not turn out at a community meeting [scheduled at times or locations they may find inconvenient], but if you could convince the employer to let Project Impact take an hour to address the employees, [that might work].*

Communities have long lists of what could be done in the community to increase disaster resistance. The challenges they face include determining how to maintain momentum, how to go beyond their original set of projects and partners, and how to successfully reach out to the variety of organizations that serve our increasingly diverse population. One community incorporated hazard risk and mitigation needs into one social service agency's existing special needs database. Another group participant told of his community's experience with a national non-profit organization that helps build homes for low-income families. He explained that as is the case with local branches of national private sector organizations, local counterparts of national non-profits may not necessarily know about or choose to be involved with Project Impact. Eventually, his community was able to work out a plan to involve the local branch affiliated with that non-profit, although there were still some obstacles to be overcome:

*The reason why their director was unwilling to be involved was because he wanted every single house to be exactly the same. Their model is that you have a minimal house, you only put[in] what is necessary because you want to build as many houses with the money you have as possible. And it needs to be fair to everybody. And, as he pointed out, the people that are getting these houses work on other houses, so if you stick something in a house...everybody else that worked on this house [wants the same thing]. So it was kind of difficult to talk to [the director] about the idea of doing mitigation efforts on these houses as on a demonstration house, unless we could assure him that it would be affordable enough to be done on every single other house after that.*

Group members also pointed out that government organizations working with initiative should not appear to be micro-managing community-based organizations. Additionally, local projects should find representatives from the vulnerable segments of the community to help identify those in need, such as low-income. One participant pointed out the importance of taking into account internal community politics, including political issues that may divide different economic strata and racial-ethnic groups. Various community stakeholders have different opinions about who is really in the most need. These differences in perspective must be worked out collaboratively through the initiative decision-making process, but not in a way that further isolates disenfranchised groups.

Group discussions revealed that many Project Impact participants appear to view less-well-off and vulnerable segments of the population as mainly recipients of services undertaken by others, rather than as potential partners that have resources and expertise to invest in community-based mitigation. As a counterpoint to this notion, one Project Impact coordinator observed that low income and working class citizens not only want information, but they also want to participate. Vulnerable groups within the community have significant needs and often require assistance with mitigation efforts; however, they also have skills, resources, and ideas that can benefit the overall initiative. As a building official from a large county observed, "Without [these] resources, you can have the money and still not [get projects done]."

Group members cautioned that the inclusion of vulnerable segments of the community should not be an afterthought. Rather, groups representing those most in need should be involved in the earliest decision-making and planning phases of Project Impact. Organizers must make efforts to print mitigation material in several languages and speak at meetings attended by members of vulnerable groups. Equally important, they should focus on training indigenous community leaders who can work with those constituencies. The goal of Project Impact should be to reach out to vulnerable groups, provide information and tools, and build capacity, while supporting the decisions these groups make. This kind of strategy, according to one group member

*...really is very successful because you're talking about not only empowering the community, but also letting them decide what they want and how to participate.*

Another observed that a key to getting vulnerable populations involved with Project Impact is to help these groups begin to feel a sense of ownership and self-reliance. The focus must be on educating the population that the government is not going to be able to do everything that needs to be done for them when there is a disaster. Rather, they need to be prepared to take responsibility for their own safety and that of their property. Participants suggested that the best way to begin that process of education is to meet with community members in their own organizations and neighborhoods instead of expecting them to attend meetings that might be held too far away or at inconvenient times. As this group participant explained, direct outreach works best with underserved populations:

*In general, I think that what we found works is you have to take the education process directly to the people. If you do it in just normal advertising mode from a media standpoint on television, or just print media, it's not as effective as if you can meet the folks face to face. So that [means] going down to the senior homes, where the elderly are potentially, or minority population [communities], to educate them face to face or directly. You know, I have seen programs work effectively that have done that.*

Several participants wondered if using existing networks really does reach all sectors of the community that need help with mitigations. One group member observed that in his community outreach efforts needed to expand from relationships with social service organizations to further include the neighborhood associations in the low-to-moderate income areas. Other participants noted that community-based organizations are in some ways easier to partner with than businesses, because they tend to be less skeptical about establishing government linkages, more oriented to community-related goals, and not profit driven.

#### Contributions From Community-Based Organizations

Participants also discussed the many ways in which community-based organizations in their areas had already contributed to the Project Impact initiative. Many of the activities mentioned were similar to those discussed in previous years. For example, communities held educational programs and gave presentations at senior citizen centers, completed non-structural retrofit projects in elderly and low-income neighborhoods, and provided educational programs for school children. Similar to other years, several communities reported having put into place school mitigation initiatives. Often Project Impact initiatives encounter resistance when they propose large capital improvement mitigation projects because of the high costs associated with such programs. However, communities seem to be more successful in garnering community support for school mitigation projects, because residents want to protect children. As one Project Impact coordinator noted:

*If you wanted to do a program to get the school, something done at a school, community support for that is much bigger than almost any other program associated with Project Impact.*



Communities mentioned several creative Project Impact activities involving more vulnerable segments of the community. One large county organized neighborhood associations and block-groups to form environmental or hazard watches. Similar to neighborhood crime watch programs, these groups were trained and organized to watch for debris that might cause flooding during periods of heavy rainfall in their community.

**Table 5. Examples of Existing Groups Involved in Local Project Impact Activities**

Community Based Councils	Neighborhood Groups	Block-Grant Funded Organizations	Drug-Free Community Council	Health Alliances	Community Action Projects
Tourism	Chamber of Commerce	Airports	Hotels		
Food Programs	Meals on Wheels	Food Banks			
Race and Gender Interest	NAACP	Women's Alliances			
Activity-Based Interest Groups	Garden Clubs	Outdoors Groups			
Elderly Interests	American Association for Retired Persons	Senior Citizen Groups	Retired Teachers Associations		
Youth Interests	Youth Development Commission	Groups That Work With Families	Schools	4H Groups	Youth Radio Stations
Education-Based Groups	University Student Groups	AmeriCorps			
Large Non-Profit	Red Cross	Salvation Army	Habitat for Humanity		
Animals Interests	Humane Society				
Faith-Based Groups	Churches	Faith-Based Disaster Recovery Groups			
Government Agencies	Fire Department	Health Department	Police Department	Social Service Agencies	Housing Authority

In one community, low-income households were initially skeptical when Project Impact leaders came to their homes to discuss hazard mitigation. The Project Impact initiative was more successful in its outreach when it partnered with Red Cross youth who came to the homes with identification badges.

Community groups can benefit Project Impact both by providing people to conduct outreach within their community as well as providing personnel to carry out mitigation activities. These outreach workers can be very successful in mobilizing community residents. One non-profit leader described how those efforts proceeded:

*We recruit someone from that community to really go out and recruit the rest of the community involved. Like for instance, about a month ago we did mitigation in about thirty homes in a low income project, and we got the leader of that Community Council to go out and recruit the homes that we mitigated. She did a wonderful job, got us thirty homes. Then we got a sorority to sponsor the mitigation to actually fund the mitigation project. We have done a lot of senior homes, and we get someone in the senior group that's leader of that senior group that meets on Tuesday nights and say, 'Hey, I have a project for you all to do. I have a project I want you guys to be involved in,' and that way we've been able to get the leaders of it and we provide the resources and the educational training, and that's really worked.*

Community-based preparedness efforts should take into account the fact that at any given time many people who happen to be present in the community are in fact from somewhere else. Tourists, transients, and short-term and seasonal residents may make up a large proportion of the population in some communities. Group participants from communities whose economies are based on tourism reported that it is often difficult to reach tourist and transient populations with safety information. Project Impact personnel in one community talked with the Chamber of Commerce in an effort to include hazard tips in travel packages; however, the private sector had strong reservations about alarming potential visitors. The difficulty this participant faced was addressing the vulnerability of specific segments of the community while at the same time appeasing community business concerns.

Community-based mitigation also involves addressing the needs of the elderly. A large regional Project Impact community put in place mutual aid agreements to set up animal cages outside the emergency shelters during a disaster. This community found that many people, particularly elderly citizens, are hesitant to evacuate to shelters unless they are able to bring along their pets. These animal storage cages, which are located outside the shelters, allow elderly persons and other community residents to be safe while staying close to their pets.

This same community launched an outreach effort focusing on garden clubs. Outreach workers educated club members on how to plant different types of fire-resistant and wind-resistant greenery. This activity showed the gardening group how to do something related to their interests that would also make their community safer in the event of a fire or windstorm.

Several communities conducted vulnerability and needs assessments or mapped critical facilities. More so than in previous years, DRC found that special needs are increasingly considered in mitigation and preparedness efforts. One participant described his community's efforts to prevent loss of life for the disabled population in the community.

*A lot of times a segment of our population is [immobile]. We worked to build an identification card system where we can track their needed medications, allergies, and other types of things that advance in an emergency. The list is kept in a database and utilized to facilitate the evacuation.*

In all, group participants identified eleven segments of the population they believe are particularly vulnerable to disaster. The majority of the participants mentioned low-income groups, the elderly, and children or youth as important groups to partner with and assist. Other groups that were referred to less often included tourists, racial and ethnic groups, minority populations in general, animal owners, hospitalized and disabled persons, residents who have mental health problems, non-English speakers, and the homeless. These are groups with which local Project Impact programs are currently working, or with which they plan to work in the future.

Based on the information provided in focus group discussions, it appears that communities have begun to give serious consideration to how to include more vulnerable segments of the population in community-wide mitigation efforts. However, group members also agree that much more still needs to be done, especially to involve groups not represented in mainstream, established community networks and leaders from these sectors of the community. They also caution that it is important to engage underserved populations from the very beginning in designing programs, rather than waiting until later to include them in the process.

### **Partnering With Government Agencies**

Many of the strategies communities use for partnering with government agencies have already been discussed above in the section entitled "Strategies for Building Disaster Resistant Communities." In addition to local government departments, communities had partnered with the US Army Corps of Engineers, the US Geological Survey, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the Department of Natural Resources, the Council of Governments, and other state agencies. In general, participants were satisfied with their success in attracting the support of government agencies. Participants offered several specific recommendations for new communities that are starting to partner with government departments. Most important among those suggestions are the following:

1. *Coordinate with agencies working on similar projects.* Participants advised communities to talk with other agencies that have funding and are working on projects whose objectives are compatible with those of Project Impact. Because there are often many areas of overlap between projects, it is important to work together, coordinate timelines,

and build upon one another's budgets. One Project Impact coordinator described how her community was able to leverage \$35,000 that was to be used for flood plain acquisition into an approximately \$3 million overall environmental cleanup and recreation project by partnering with other agencies working on community environmental issues. Organizations must first identify the projects they are working on, then look for ways their activities can contribute to loss reduction strategies, and move on to partner with agencies that can enhance the overall disaster resistant impact of such projects.

2. *Identify common goals.* Because disaster mitigation is inherently a multi-organizational, multi-agency endeavor, intergovernmental coordination is essential. The activities of one department can boost or impede the loss reduction strategies of another. Departments should share their objectives and work together to develop strategies that can help multiple departments reach their goals together. As one group participant noted

*When the agency doesn't have all the answers, [it takes] an advisement [process in which] you put everyone at the same table and you see what the common goals are. You can really come up with some wonderful solutions. And it's just almost like it takes a community to make a disaster-resistant emphasis on everything.*

3. *Partner with school districts.* Focus group participants stressed that not only can schools educate the next generation about disaster mitigation, but school children also take material and information home to the rest of their households. The schools provide an excellent means for reaching a large segment of the community. Participants encouraged communities to approach school superintendents as initial points of contact. They also suggested approaching the schools early enough to ensure mitigation can be added to course curricula. For example, the Red Cross offers Masters of Disasters educational material for teachers. In situations where teachers are resistant to adding another component to the curriculum, Project Impact initiatives can build on programs police and fire departments already offer in schools.
4. *Government agencies should set the community standard.* Government must take the first steps toward supporting and carrying out mitigation efforts, working collaboratively with others, and implementing loss reduction strategies. If government is willing to show leadership in the area of hazard mitigation, businesses and community groups will follow. If government is unwilling to assume that leadership role, it will be significantly more difficult to gain the support of those other stakeholder groups.
5. *Seek information on the roles, responsibilities, and activities of federal and state agencies.* Communities must seek out information how these organizations can help them achieve their mitigation goals. State and federal agencies can provide guidance, suggestions for how to design projects so that they will move more quickly through government bureaucracies, resources such as maps and data, and information on alternative sources of funding. Many of the focus group participants had strong relationships with state and federal agencies, but some were still unsure about how to

utilize these partners as resources and involve them more actively in their local initiatives. They encouraged other communities to work with state and federal agencies and develop innovative collaborative projects that are locally driven but also carried out with state and federal support and guidance.

6. *Involve political leaders.* Vital to the sustainability of Project Impact is the political and financial support of government leaders, in part because their administrative decisions will determine budget allocations for projects and personnel. Their level of interest and support can mean the difference between success and failure for an initiative. Participants stressed the importance of keeping local government officials informed about Project Impact activity by sending weekly updates on Project Impact activities to government officials, including them on steering committees, and involving them in the planning process and promotional events.
7. *Understand existing tensions between government agencies and jurisdictions.* Government jurisdictions sometimes must overcome longstanding inter-organizational or inter-jurisdictional disagreements before working together collaboratively on Project Impact. Although a history of conflict between agencies or jurisdictions does not prevent collaboration on disaster mitigation, those wishing to carry out community-based programs must understand the tensions that may exist among groups and develop strategies that reduce those tensions and foster a spirit of cooperation among participating groups.

Group members suggested that communities should adopt sector-specific strategies for attracting and involving a wide range of sectors and community groups. In order to do this, they argued, Project Impact organizers must “fine tune” their messages. By adopting strategies focused mainly on attracting government departments, initiatives run the risk of isolating businesses and community groups. Similarly, outreach approaches that elicit large business participation may not appeal to small businesses, and groups representing diverse neighborhood require diverse outreach strategies. Although employing multiple and varied strategies takes time, participants agreed that the end result, broad-based community participation in disaster reduction is worth the effort and is one of the most important components of Project Impact.

### **WHAT FEMA CAN DO TO HELP LOCAL PROGRAMS SUCCEED**

As communities continue to implement Project Impact in their communities and strive toward disaster resistance, the federal government still has an important role to play in disaster mitigation and the overall effectiveness of this multi-jurisdictional initiative. Focus group participants were asked to outline what their communities needed from FEMA (besides their obvious need for additional financial resources) in order meet the goals and objectives of the initiative on the local level. Not surprisingly, many of the responses echoed opinions expressed in the focus groups that were held in 1998 and 1999. Like previous focus group members, participants in the 2000 groups still wanted FEMA to provide guidance, promote realistic timelines and objectives, help develop networks between Project Impact communities, improve

its inter-agency coordinator, and assure communities it was committed to supporting the disaster resistant community initiative. New to the 2000 focus groups were calls for FEMA to coordinate federal agencies and guidelines. The brief discussions and interview excerpts below summarize those needs, as expressed by group participants

1. *FEMA should provide guidance to local communities, but should not try to micromanage programs.*

Communities continue to be interested in receiving templates and guidance about how to implement the program. At the time the focus groups were conducted, many participants believed they were still “re-inventing the wheel” and not learning from the experiences of other communities. Communities are still looking for a simple and straightforward Project Impact guidebook. Either the information communities are searching for is not available in the format they want or they are not finding the information that is available. Communities also want templates that explain how to undertake activities, not simply what to do. They are not looking for “cookie-cutter” approaches because they value the initiative’s flexibility and the freedom communities have of adopting mitigation strategies within their own needs. They do, however, want information about how to go about organizing an activity if they chose to. As one Project Impact coordinator from a small county stated:

*The project itself is very flexible and that was one of the issues that was brought up in our community is that because it's so flexible, people aren't used to working in that kind of environment.... That has enabled us to do the unique things that we've been able to do within each of our individual communities...I mean, yeah, we got the toolkits and if you're like me in the middle of a project, you have hardly had a chance to even open it up and go through it piece by piece. But if we had a resource manual, and contact names, and grant capabilities of – yes, it may be a multitude of information, but if you're working on one thing, you could go to flood mitigation and pick out somebody that's in headquarters or your area or your region or whatever and contact that person and find out where it is you need to get additional funding for whatever project you're working on. If we had a better-defined template or guidelines that could better direct us instead of saying, 'Have a community meeting, have a convening session, and a signing ceremony,' and you're going, "How do I do that? They don't even know I exist?' You know, how do I do that?*

Participants suggested that FEMA require new communities to attend the Summits before starting the initiative. Communities that did not send representatives to the Summit when FEMA designated them or the first year after the designation now believed they would have gained much from learning about the experiences of other communities.

Participants also suggested providing communities with a Project Impact coordinator profile or job description. Many communities underestimated the work involved in the coordinator role. Had they been aware of the skills and abilities the position would demand, they would have

selected an individual who already possessed those skills, such as the ability to manage grants, the ability to understand and deal with political, jurisdictional, and intergovernmental issues, experience documenting programs and writing quarterly reports, the ability to draw on multiple resources, and the ability to mentor others.

At the same time, communities stressed that guidance should not overtake community plans. Participants spoke disapprovingly of situations in which FEMA regional representatives signed partners in the community without informing the Project Impact coordinator about what they were doing. They also gave examples of FEMA representatives they believed had attempted to dictate community activity priorities. Participants recognize FEMA regional staff as important resources, but want guidance without being controlled or undermined:

*We know what we need for our community. We were not going to do what our region wanted to do. We wanted to do what we [knew was] good for our community, so we lost almost a year. I said, 'I don't want to do the program if you are going to tell me what you think is good for our community. Let us in the community and our business people tell you what is good for the community.'*

Improvements can be made in areas of coordination, communication, and flexibility to meet the needs of individual communities, so that communities have the ability to decide which the high priority projects are, and so they do not feel as if requirements are being forced upon them.

## *2. FEMA should have realistic plans and goals for local community projects.*

Participants expressed the view that FEMA allows too little time for communities to establish Project Impact before the federal agency expects the money to be spent and the activities completed. Communities need more time to plan their mitigation strategies. As one non-profit representative from a medium-sized city observed:

*We talked about getting people involved, giving them direction to work on, identify what your real hazards are and proceed from there. But [FEMA says to] get it within thirty days of the Summit, [and] budget for your program for the next two years before you put this committee together.*

Communities that invested the time to first recruit broad community participation and then hold planning meetings typically needed to request extensions on deadlines, yet these kinds of inclusive strategies are exactly what FEMA is trying to encourage. Initiatives that seek broad participation are better able to obtain community support, and very much in keeping with Project Impact's overall philosophy, but they do take time. Without additional resources and dedicated staff, more-inclusive mitigation activities can still be undertaken at the same cost, but the tasks take longer to complete.

Communities also want to make sure they are spending their financial resources wisely, in a way that will stretch and leverage seed money over a period of years. Participants expressed the

opinion that their communities were not being rewarded for successful leveraging and instead were being indirectly encouraged to follow the path of other communities that intended to end the initiative once the federal seed money was spent. Group members also pointed out that passing through local bureaucratic requirements necessarily takes additional time:

*I think it would be really helpful for FEMA to look back and see how many the communities receiving grants have actually requested extensions because I don't believe that a two-year grant period, to get the money spent and get this thing up, organized, and get the projects underway and completed in two years, is realistic. And everybody that I've talked to talks like, 'Oh, I just feel like we're getting underway.'*

*I don't think most of [the communities who have failed] have grown a plant from a seed.... They think plants just grow. Plants that grow that way die real easily. Seeds have to be cultivated, and it takes time, and so a lot of the projects take time. I know that [FEMA is] always on you [about] weekly highlights. I've actually started deleting those because I was so bombarded with nothing [happening in my community]. Sometimes nothing can happen for a month. Then I finally got fed up and starting deleting them, and not feeling guilty for it. It was hair-raising for a while.*

As part of their Project Impact responsibilities, communities are asked by FEMA to monitor and assess mitigation successes. Communities appreciate the need to document successes, yet many of our group participants indicated that in their view FEMA expects significant changes too early in the program. By laying the groundwork for future projects, communities think they will ultimately see major reductions in potential losses. However, they find it difficult to predict exactly when those benefits will be realized, and they have trouble quantifying future program impacts. The results of local efforts may only be completely evident at some future time, when the next major flood, or hurricane, or earthquake passes through the area.

A municipal manager from a large city observed how difficult it is to quantify the impact a program like Project Impact can have. Although he believes that program is making a difference, he recognizes that existing data on Project Impact may be insufficient to impress some funding agencies. The general sense conveyed by many focus group participants is that if FEMA expects to see particular kinds of results within a given period of time, the agency must make these expectations clear to communities and must also provide them with tools or a method with which they can demonstrate in a credible way the difference mitigation is making. One group member was blunt in expressing his frustration with the need to quantify program impacts:

*I'd say one of the big things is that they don't understand how good projects are put together. They [FEMA] don't understand a damn thing. All they're worried about, driving us all crazy with, is having success stories. How do you quantify it? What do you mean how do I quantify it? They were [asking]... how many people didn't drown, or how many big buildings didn't fall down after the*



*hurricane. It's a forced mentality that is in the federal system. So quantifying just can't be done.*

*3. FEMA should assist with the development of broader interactive networks among PI communities.*

Focus group participants spoke of a need for obtaining FEMA's assistance in developing relationships with other Project Impact communities. Many considered the annual Summit a wonderful opportunity to share information with newer communities and meet counterparts from other areas. Community representatives who had attended sub-Summits in their regions found these meeting especially useful because these meetings exposed participants to new ideas, provided concrete information on strategy development, and helped them implement those strategies once they returned home.

Community representatives also expressed a willingness to meet with and mentor communities that are new to the initiative to help them get started. Communities that used nearby Project Impact cities, counties, and regions as mentors felt the process benefited the local initiative. Mentoring programs could be set up on a regional, state, or hazard-specific basis.

*4. FEMA should make an effort to improve its own intra-agency coordination*

The need for clarity and consistency with respect to FEMA guidance is a theme that has regularly appeared in focus group discussions. As in past years, community representatives in the 2000 focus groups continued to express frustration about receiving inconsistent information from FEMA, especially regarding initiative guideline and Summit/mentor expenditures.

The need for clarity with respect to Summit-related travel is significant because of the key role Summits play in motivating Project Impact participants and in transferring valuable information on the initiative. While it is difficult to find alternative funding to send people to the Summit, it is also important to train people and to make those connections between communities. While larger communities may have larger budgets, smaller communities have a difficult time funding such trips. The two communities that pointed to the problem were, in fact, medium to large sized urban communities. One participant indicated that he had advanced the funds himself using his own credit card so that other participants from his community could attend the Summit:

*I'm bringing three people on another grant but right now I've got it all on my credit card. I've got \$6,000 on my personal credit card until I get [reimbursed] and I don't know when [that will be]. And that is a thorn that I have to foot the bill, that there is no way to cut a purchase order to pay for the people and to bring them here – the people that should be here that are going to help you sustain your program. That is something I think that FEMA has to do: to come up with a better way to do business.*

Another community representative took issue with the fact that FEMA asked someone from the community to make a presentation at the Summit, but also wanted that person to be responsible for the expenses associated with Summit-related travel. That particular individual was not part of the local government, and eventually the state agreed to pay for that participant's travel.

A far more important problem that was highlighted in the focus group discussion centers on what Project Impact participants see as inconsistency in the information being presented to communities. For example, some communities still felt that FEMA decisions are not consistent and as a result, some communities are getting approval where others are not. Communities also complained that regions and states often provide inconsistent guidance. One emergency manager described conflicting guidance that his local Project Impact initiative had received:

*Our regional person says you can use the money to do this and this and this and then you...get everything all ready to go. Then the day before you are going to do something it is turned around and instead [they say] 'Oh no you can't' or 'This was misinterpreted.' [It's] the same thing with the state.*

Community representatives observed that understaffing at the regional level could be one reason support is often inconsistent. Participants noted that while some FEMA regional offices are very helpful, others appear to have more problems with offering consistent guidance and are less flexible than their counterparts. Group members pointed to turnover within FEMA regional organizations as one potential contributor to inconsistent grant requirements. As one participant put it:

*It would be very nice if [requirements] could stay consistent, that the process that a community started with, [that] each of the details that are associated with [the initiative] could be consistent on down the line when a new player comes on board. That would be very helpful...[If communities] didn't have to chase their tail...we would be much further ahead.*

##### *5. Communities need assurances regarding long-term federal support of Project Impact*

At the time the focus groups were held, participants were unclear whether FEMA would make a long-term commitment to support Project Impact. They appreciated the seed money FEMA provided, which in many cases had enabled them to leverage other funding sources. However, they also recognized that large mitigation projects sometimes require more money than the community can bear alone. Technical assistance, expertise, shared educational materials, and networking opportunities are valuable federal contributions that they also hoped would continue in the future.

Participants asked for additional regional support for communities that are beginning the Project Impact process. One participant stated that it would have been useful for someone from the FEMA regional office to visit the community and to help local organizers get started by guiding them through developing strategies for contacting businesses, pulling together the convening

sessions, organizing the signing ceremonies, and other key steps in the Project Impact process. Essentially, what group members were saying is that FEMA should provide someone to walk communities through the start-up process.

Local communities that have succeeded in establishing Project Impact programs have made a long-term commitment to reducing future disaster losses through community-based mitigation programs. Those who have gone through that process understandably expect the federal government to maintain a similar commitment over time to disaster resistance nationwide.

*6. FEMA should facilitate coordination among governmental agencies, rules, and guidelines.*

Focus group participants pointed to the need for better coordination among the various federal and state programs whose funds support (or can potentially support) community-based mitigation activities. Existing rules, guidelines, and regulations often make coordination among different funding sources and projects extremely difficult. Group participants explained that while FEMA has a relatively short timeline during which the agency wants to see mitigation activities completed, federal and state regulations and reviews often delay mitigation implementation. Communities are not asking to bypass these reviews. Rather, they would like FEMA to work more closely with them to ensure mitigation projects meet the requirements of other federal agencies and make sure that all the agencies involved have common overall objectives. One business representative observed that with respect to intergovernmental coordination:

*The process is not necessarily broken, but [it] is not working anywhere near as well or as it should. And people are going through a lot of consternation, a lot of challenges that you [shouldn't go through] with a program that was designed to help the community in this way. It is counter-productive.*

Communities want FEMA to provide information about how federal agencies, particularly those that are Project Impact partners, can contribute to local community efforts. They suggested, for example, that FEMA should compile and distribute to Project Impact communities a guide of federal service, resources, and technical assistance. A regularly updated contact list should accompany the resource guide and be distributed periodically so Project Impact coordinators can speak to individuals in different agencies who are familiar with the initiative and willing to help.

## **THE FUTURE OF PROJECT IMPACT IN LOCAL COMMUNITIES**

Project Impact was originally designed to provide federal seed money to local communities. Using this seed money, communities are expected to leverage additional mitigation resources and put into place locally-driven initiatives to carry out mitigation activities when federal funding stops. Planning for future sustainability must therefore be one of the guiding principles of local Project Impact initiatives. To assess the extent to which local participants see Project Impact as sustainable in the long-term, focus group participants were asked whether or not they

believed Project Impact would still be present in their communities in ten years. The responses they gave and the discussions that ensued painted a mixed picture. Many participants indicated that they believed the initiative would stand the test of time – that is, that Project Impact would succeed in drawing funding and would continue to be a viable force at the community level after FEMA support ends. Others were unsure about Project Impact's long-term prospects. A small number of participants expressed the idea that Project Impact momentum would slow or even stop at the point when federal funding ceases.

### **Sustainability of Project Impact**

Those group members who expressed confidence that Project Impact would continue in their communities into the next decade came from Project Impact communities of all sizes and represented a wide range of job positions. One reason why these participants consider Project Impact to be sustainable in the long-term is that they view disaster mitigation as instrumental to and linked with other economic and development issues. They expressed the hope that now that a structure is in place to address mitigation issues, support for Project Impact can be maintained into the future. The key to sustaining Project Impact is to continue to integrate the initiative with broader community development and growth management strategies. As one group participant stated:

*It's a smart growth issue. It's a community issue [that] everybody needs to be a part of. Whether the name Project Impact exists or not, the spin-offs that will happen because of the Project Impact issues that I've been able to do over the last year and a half, or in the upcoming six months, those spin-offs will always be tied to Project Impact...It's going to take us ten years to do some of those projects. So in my opinion, yes [Project Impact will still be in our community].*

Project Impact is also sustainable because, in many cases, it links and builds upon measures that communities had already been committed to undertaking before the initiative started. Some participants observed that mitigation had already taken place in their communities for many years, but that after the introduction of Project Impact those activities had more concentrated focus. To them, Project Impact was a long-term solution to an important problem facing their communities. A committed steering committee, long-term financial support, and a sense of ownership by community members were viewed as fundamental to any sustained effort. As these community representatives put it:

*Probably if we looked hard enough, there probably always has been [Project Impact] in some fashion. I think it will be more of a mitigation coordination group, or disaster effects prevention group, which will ultimately lead to a better community planning initiative. [That] is what I would envision it to be.*

*I think there's probably one caveat as we make it seen what's in the community that certain segments, like the community sector, needs to be constantly reminded, revitalize the issue. It could be set in the infrastructure of the government and the*

*business community, but for the public and for the sake of the non-profit organizations, there needs to be an organization, a steering committee, some kind of link of communication to lend encouragement, and always hone the message in new ways.*

Significantly, one community represented in DRC's focus groups even passed a resolution to maintain Project Impact for twenty years in order to follow through on mitigation projects. Another representative from a very large city indicated that Project Impact had support from both Democrats and Republicans – in other words, in that community disaster mitigation was truly a bi-partisan goal. That same community representative also noted that in his city, the initiative had always been seen as a long-term effort toward planned institutional change, not just a short-term project.

Participants who believed that Project Impact would still exist in their communities in 2010 also conceded that changes would likely occur in the program over the next few years. Participants suggested that Project Impact was still heavily connected to response and recovery efforts and to the immediate needs of communities that have recently suffered a disaster. Group participants expressed the hope that in the future communities will place a greater emphasis on mitigation projects, as opposed to focusing on post-event response and recovery measures.

One group of discussion participants felt strongly that Project Impact would adapt over time and expand to take into account new hazards, a wider range of hazards, different community participants, and alternative resources. Some participants opined that the name of the initiative would likely change once the seed money had been spent. (One of these participants even added that the Project Impact label had been somewhat problematic because her community already had a separate "Project Impact" initiative that dealt with issues unrelated to disaster mitigation in place prior to the disaster resistant community program.) Overall, group members expressed confidence that although the name might change, and although in some cases modifications might take place to organizational structures, the ideas behind the initiative would survive.

Only one person, a mayor from a small city, stated that the initiative would remain unchanged after federal support runs out. Others described changes ranging from simply giving the initiative a different name to very significant changes in organizational structures and in responsibilities for coordinating mitigation activities. For example, groups discussed shifts from primarily government-run programs to initiatives supported by non-profit organizations. Shifts were also seen as possibly occurring in the governmental locus of coordinating efforts, for example, from emergency-management-centered to planning-and-development-centered programs.

Some participants were skeptical about whether communities would choose to continue to support paid positions devoted to disaster mitigation, equivalent to the Project Impact coordinator positions currently funded with FEMA seed money or temporarily funded with local government resources. Others envisioned communities becoming more self-sufficient and committees seeking alternative sources of financing as federal funds decrease.

Along different lines, a number of community participants took the position that mitigation programs should continue to receive the same federal financial commitment and investment as response and recovery projects – that is, that it would be a mistake to discontinue federal funding for Project Impact. One participant noted that since Congress has provided considerable funds for disaster response and recovery in the past five years, it should make the same commitment to aggressively fund mitigation actions.

One of the participants who expressed doubt that his community would still have a Project Impact initiative in ten years explained that his city had not succeeded in garnering sufficient political buy-in for the initiative. He contended that when the seed money is spent, the city's priorities will shift, and city council will not be inclined to provide budget support to continue the initiative. Mitigation activities will still take place on an ad hoc basis, but the organized movement will significantly lose momentum. Because Project Impact does not have the necessary political and financial base, and the city will not devote the resources needed for an employee to oversee the program:

*Just realistically speaking, [if] the money is not there to provide for [projects], [the administration would] probably be happy to see us go. We [with the Project Impact initiative have] gotten into a lot of political disputes over changing ordinances and stuff 'cause it hampers development. In five years, there will be projects that will be there, that you will see were done by Project Impact, ...but as far as somebody sitting at the head, taking care of these committees, and still meeting ten years from now, [that will not happen.]*

Participants who were unclear with respect to the fate of their local Project Impact initiatives argued that if the committees and subcommittees diversify and make use of marketing opportunities such as constant disaster threats and events in order to reinforce the message of mitigation, Project Impact might survive. Private sector pressure on local government could also encourage sustainability as administrations and federal priorities change. For these participants, impediments to the continuation of the initiative in their communities include bureaucratic requirements that cause creativity to stagnate – particularly requirements concerning reporting on expenditures – limited political support, and a possible breakdown in the organizational structure following the cessation of Project Impact funding. These ideas were summed up in the comments of one group participant:

*[First], having diversity in your Project Impact coalition can allow you to keep reinventing yourself in what project you are doing, and that reinvention does give you the opportunity to seek sustainability. [Second], having disaster re-occurring in your community can be a great reinforcement for the community and it is kind of the reverse of what you want to be doing in this project, but that is pretty much the reality of it.*

Although participants expressed some skepticism with respect to the sustainability of Project Impact, particularly in informal discussions that took place after the groups concerning the then

undecided November 2000 federal election and potential change in federal administration, focus group participants stated that every effort should be made to encourage the administration and Congress to continue the initiative. Enthusiasm remains high and support for Project Impact and its principles remains widespread among those participating in the program.

### **The Impact of Project Impact**

All of the focus group participants were confident that Project Impact had made and would continue to make a difference in their communities. They noted that in the very few years in which they had participated in the initiative, financial support for mitigation had grown, risk assessments were ongoing, efforts were being made to plan and prioritize mitigation objectives, small mitigation projects were being completed, and the mechanisms were already in place for undertaking larger capital mitigation projects. Moreover, participants expressed satisfaction with ongoing changes at the local level, including increased public expectations, a more concentrated focus on loss reduction, better communication and collaboration between agencies and neighboring communities, and what they saw as the growing potential to change the way community organizations, governments, businesses, and households deal with disaster.

### Mitigation Tools And Plans

Participants also identified other positive effects they expect Project Impact to have on their communities in the coming years, including the new resources they obtained, such as generators, stream gauges, and flood-gates. They enumerated other benefits, in the form of new policies and planning tools, such as changed zoning ordinances, hazard mitigation plans, and upgrades to seismic loss-reduction regulations.

It is important to note that even participants who were unsure or even pessimistic about the long-term sustainability of Project Impact could still point to actual or anticipated positive outcomes from the initiative, including changes that will remain in effect even if formal Project Impact activities are discontinued. For example, even the Project Impact coordinator who believed that the Project Impact organization would cease once the seed money is spent remarked that under the initiative his community had completed a vulnerability assessment and had prioritized projects for the next twenty to thirty years. In order to safeguard the continuity and maintenance of structures and projects, this community required that any department or agency that received Project Impact seed money needed to commit to maintaining or sustaining the project for a given period of time into the future. In other words, Project Impact goals and objectives had been institutionalized within those organizations. Thus, while Project Impact may not continue formally in this community, the initiative's effects will continue to be felt.

### Cultural Shifts

When asked what impact Project Impact will have made to their communities in ten years, participants anticipated that by 2010 people in their communities will have begun to change the way they think about disasters, and that organizations and individuals will be incorporating

mitigation into their routine activities. A business representative who had worked with multiple Project Impact communities offered the opinion that the most important component of Project Impact is that it encourages a cultural shift in the way communities think about disasters. In the words of that group participant:

*The objective was for Project Impact to be a catalyst – not the solution, but a catalyst to get people motivated to want to build their own disaster resistant communities, and build their own efforts, and I think that will work because just as we see technology advance at more rapid rates than we have ever seen before, safety is a factor, the value of life. We look at medical advances [and] people are living longer and that will continue. The importance of having a safe place to live, a safe place to do business ought to have just as high an importance.*

For many communities, Project Impact built upon and gave momentum to what they had already been doing to contain disaster losses. For example, one community had a long history of activity in disaster mitigation. Project Impact was, as that community's representative described it, "a shot in the arm" that focused and accelerated mitigation activity. While the city government has already made a commitment to the disaster resistant community concept, the challenge over the next ten years will be to translate that concept to the entire community. The participant saw Project Impact as an initiative geared toward the organizational level and as a starting point for what really needs to become a transformation in how the community moves to institutionalize disaster mitigation at a neighborhood and even an individual level:

*I just made a note to myself that we passed these laws to retrofit our schools, we voted for this, we decided it was this important. But [for me] personally? I have some stuff in my car, I have water and extra jackets and blankets and stuff, but I don't have cabinet locks, my TV is not strapped. I mean I'm embarrassed to say that, you know, I'm on this big committee. And that's what we need to change and I think that can be done in ten years. I don't think it will be Project Impact, it's just going to be a continuation of the city and hopefully, what we're hoping with Project Impact is to really jump with this process.*

Focus group participants emphasized that because the local communities were given control over spending and flexibility in prioritizing projects, they were more successful in moving from a reactive response and recovery approach to one that is more proactive and more focused on pre-event loss reduction measures. One participant suggested that although the state is an important partner in the local initiative, she did not think her community would have been as successful if the seed money had been filtered through the state. Local control brought with it the idea of local responsibility. Equally important, local control also meant that the initiative was in a better position to attract the attention of local elected officials.

Other participants saw Project Impact as a means not only to identify vulnerability, but also to highlight local capacities. Project Impact teaches community organizations and residents what they can do to take responsibility for becoming disaster resistant. The initiative provides



information and education while at the same time stressing the importance of mitigation through regulations and through the creation of a city, county, or regional role-model for disaster resistance that includes both structural and non-structural community mitigation projects. As two focus group participants put it:

*I think Project Impact could look at the assets [in the community and identify],...the assets we're looking for [in the future] and...build on those assets, instead of them saying what's wrong with the community, what we don't have...[This alternative approach] gets people energized in a different way.*

*I love the part about it that focuses on individuals' responsibility for changing the ways things happen to you from natural disasters. If you want to, you can do something on your part to be better prepared and survive better, and to keep more of the things you've invested in and that are dear to you there. I like that better. I mean that's a good way of looking at things from an internal, philosophical thing, and that's why I think it might be successful. It's not treated in that way in all cities where it's introduced.*

#### Understanding The Need For Mitigation

Participants described how Project Impact has highlighted for government and businesses the pressing need for mitigation action. The initiative has also demonstrated to communities – and even to many emergency managers who tend to concentrate mainly on emergency response issues – that they can take a proactive rather than reactive approach to disasters.

Additionally, Project Impact has provided a platform to demonstrate to politicians that it is in their best political interest to prevent disaster-related damage and disruption rather than hoping disaster does not strike while they are in office. One Project Impact coordinator/city manager indicated that there is now a greater recognition that disaster mitigation is crucial to his community's survival. Approximately 25,000 jobs in his community are located in the floodplain. Since businesses are increasingly mobile and can leave any community they consider unsuitable, the city must continue to help mitigate local businesses, assist businesses in keeping their economic edge despite hazardous conditions, and prevent them from moving to less vulnerable communities or moving elsewhere after a disaster strikes. This participant identified Project Impact as an important mechanism for achieving those goals. However, a business representative from a small county noted that if not handled properly, enforcing codes, zoning regulations, and other mitigation strategies could actually give businesses an incentive to move to areas that are not as stringent. Another participant noted that some non-Project Impact communities are actually becoming less stringent in an effort to encourage development. However, because of its nationwide reach and visibility, Project Impact has begun to raise safety expectations and promote standardization across regions while helping produce a general climate in which more substantial mitigation activities are seen as desirable.

If Project Impact continues, it could prove to be an advantageous method for helping the more proactive communities promote their mitigation advances. For example, businesses may decide

that it is indeed better to locate in communities that are actively pursuing mitigation if they are shown the impacts a disaster could have on their operations. Less progressive communities may learn that if they resist mitigation standards today, they will be forced to deal with the consequences of those decisions in the future.

Interestingly one emergency manager pointed out that in addition to its other accomplishments, Project Impact has also created a new role for emergency managers within their communities. Emergency managers in Project Impact communities now have more visible community involvement both during disasters and on an everyday routine basis. Emergency managers in the focus groups also described feeling more influential in their communities because of the proactive rather than reactive position disaster mitigation gives them. These emergency managers discussed how Project Impact has enhanced their community recognition and involvement:

*Prior to Project Impact, [public officials] couldn't have cared less whether [emergency management] existed or not. I mean, if there was a disaster and you came in and helped the people out of harm's way or you rolled up your sleeves and sandbagged, you were great. But right afterwards and after the damage assessment is done and the money comes in and it's all back-to-normal, they're ready to call you out for the next disaster. They don't see you, or didn't see me, as a proactive part of their planning process. Now, that's not true anymore. I think they've seen me as a very positive, proactive, mitigative component in all the different aspects of community planning.*

*You think about the emergency management persona, or perspective for others, and we've gone from civil defense, as somebody just sitting there with an army hospital in your basement waiting to set up in case of a civil disaster, and evolving into someone that does response and recovery and damage assessment into yet a small step further, which is mitigation. You know, that whole perspective, we have had to make our community realize that [we are not] the civil defense guy that's sitting in the shelter anymore. You know, we are now about creating a disaster resistant community and if Project Impact has enhanced that capability of changing their perspective, then great, let's use it until we can't use it anymore.*

An emergency manager from a large regional community hoped that over the next few years, with the designation of more Project Impact communities in his area, other regions would work with his Project Impact community to develop statewide enabling legislation or model ordinances in an effort to standardize requirements. Another emergency manager from a large county said that the mitigation initiative had already helped his community tie together zoning, growth, and public safety.

## Focus

Participants observed that Project Impact is a very good mechanism to generate community support and give the community concrete mitigation issues on which to focus. One representative from a very large city explained how Project Impact had been helpful in bringing together non-profits, city agencies, and businesses and in solidifying communication among those groups. Some groups had been working on emergency response issues for a long time, but until Project Impact was established, they had not been communicating with these other important agencies. Other group members observed that while their organizations had been engaged in mitigation activities for years, Project Impact shifted the focus from emphasizing mitigation after a disaster strikes to investing in pre-event loss-reduction measures. It also has helped organizations form partnerships with other agencies and businesses, whereas before those groups had been working more independently.

## Interorganizational Collaboration

According to group participants, Project Impact has helped communities establish networks of resources and information. Communities have started to see an increase in private sector involvement in hazard mitigation, and they look forward to involving more small businesses and non-profit groups in local mitigation efforts. Participants observed that prior to Project Impact organizations typically worked on mitigation projects independently from one another. Since the formation of the Project Impact organization in their communities, mitigation efforts are increasingly collaborative, and at the very least agencies are better informed about which agencies are involved in different activities.

Project Impact communities have also learned from one another, establishing new lines of communications with cities and counties within and outside of their own FEMA regions. Communities that have made smaller strides toward disaster resistance have developed relationships with more experienced communities. Highly proactive communities have served as mentors, sharing ideas, lending advice, providing promotional and educational materials, offering suggestions on how to garner private sector, government, and community-based organization support, and recommending avenues for alternative funding sources. The national nature of Project Impact has not only given mitigation proponents a legitimate platform from which to attract the attention of organizations and individuals in their communities, but it has given them access to a wide variety of information and resources across the county.

## **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

Participants in the 2000 focus group discussions identified a number of positive contributions Project Impact had made to loss-reduction efforts in their communities. They continued to make good progress on risk assessments, prioritization of mitigation projects, and project implementation activities. In communities where activities were already under way prior to the initiation of Project Impact, the seed money provided by Project Impact has served as a catalyst for moving those projects along more rapidly. Group participants generally concurred that

Project Impact has served as an important framework and organizing principle for linking together diverse public education, structural, and nonstructural mitigation activities.

Community representatives who took part in the focus group discussions provided many insights into the Project Impact implementation process and offered guidance that should prove extremely useful both to other communities seeking to carry out community-based mitigation partnership programs and to FEMA. With respect to strategies for organizing, launching, and sustaining community-based loss-reduction efforts, group members stressed the importance of:

- *Educational strategies.* Public education campaigns should target diverse sectors of the population, explaining why mitigation is important, what needs to be done, and what they themselves can do, both to reduce their own vulnerability to disasters and to help contain community-wide losses. Public education efforts are also an important means for garnering financial support for community-based mitigation. Educational activities should reach all age groups, but with a special emphasis on school-age children – the next generation that must be educated in order to understand the importance of mitigation. Educational efforts are needed both to overcome apathy and to establish a political support base for mitigation programs. Among the key goals of community education are to begin changing cultural expectations and practices and to begin institutionalizing the concept of mitigation.
- *Organizational strategies.* Community-based mitigation programs must work from a master plan that is a multi-organizational collaborative product. How local initiatives are organized matters: programs work best when there is effective leadership, when organizing efforts build upon existing organizational capabilities and capacities, and when partners are made to feel both responsible for the directions their efforts take and accountable for making progress. Successful programs are those that develop and sustain strong interorganizational collaboration. At the same time, fostering collaboration is not easy. Community-based mitigation efforts will not succeed unless they first recognize and then find ways to neutralize sources of conflict and opposition that may stand in the way of program progress.

With respect to strategies for partnership development, focus group participants offered advice on how best to engage businesses, other community-based organizations, and governmental partners. Regarding partnerships with businesses, group participants noted that gaining business support for community-based mitigation necessarily entails understanding business concerns – for example, their resistance to regulation – and giving considerable thought to how best to involve businesses. To foster genuine collaboration, businesses must be encouraged to take an active role in working groups and steering committees, if possible from the very earliest stages of program development. To enlist the support of businesses, locally-based mitigation programs should recognize the benefits businesses expect to derive from participation. Businesses are very interested in serving the public, and most recognize that disasters can threaten their own viability. At the same time, businesses need incentives in order to participate in programs like Project Impact, and they want to be appreciated for their contribution. Positive publicity can be

an important incentive for business participation, but successful programs also find ways of providing businesses with other things they may need such as on-site risk assessments or educational materials for employees. Business partnership-development efforts should strive to be inclusive, involving businesses of all sizes and identifying a good mix of nationally- and locally-based firms.

To have a broader community impact, locally-based initiatives must involve a range of other participants beyond the business community. In particular, they must reach out to community-based groups and to organizations representing more-vulnerable segments of the population, such as members of racial and ethnic minority groups and low-income residents. Group members observed that communities have begun to give serious consideration to how to include such groups in community-wide mitigation efforts. However, they also agreed that much more still needs to be done, especially to involve groups not represented in mainstream, established community networks. They also cautioned that, as with businesses, it is important to engage in outreach to underserved populations from the very beginning in designing programs, rather than waiting longer to include them in the process.

Other suggestions focused on ways of developing and improving collaborative relationships with government agencies. Locally-based mitigation programs need to be able to leverage funds from a range of sources. In order to accomplish that goal, local program personnel need information on the roles, responsibilities, and activities of a variety of state and federal agencies, and mechanisms need to be put in place to ensure that potentially conflicting regulations, guidelines, and requirements do not stand in the way of leveraging and coordinating efforts.

Focus group members also offered a number of ideas on how FEMA can further support community-based mitigation efforts. Among those ideas are that FEMA should:

- provide guidance to local communities, but should not try to micromanage programs;
- have realistic goals and plans for community projects – including realistic expectations concerning what can be done within specified periods of time;
- assist with the development of broader collaborative, information-sharing, and mentoring programs among Project Impact communities;
- make an effort to improve its own intra-agency coordination;
- facilitate better coordination and consistency among various government agencies, rules, regulations, and guidelines

Although focus group participants recognized that there was some question about whether the federal government would continue to fund Project Impact, they also expressed the belief that continued federal support is needed, and they stressed that communities need to be kept informed about long-term funding possibilities.

Discussions on the future of Project Impact in local communities elicited varied responses from group members. Some group members indicated that their communities have already institutionalized the process of locally-based mitigation and that their efforts will continue regardless of levels of federal support. Others expressed considerable uncertainty regarding how local efforts would fare in the absence of federal funding. The general tone of participants' comments indicated that they see federal leadership as very important for supporting and sustaining community-based mitigation efforts. That leadership has been particularly important for facilitating the sharing of information among communities, mobilizing diverse sources of support for mitigation – including support from both public and private sources – and generally keeping mitigation-related issues on the political agenda.

The focus group discussions and the community field studies DRC has conducted consistently show that building local coalitions and fostering a commitment to loss-reduction in communities across the United States is very challenging. Sustaining that commitment over time will be equally challenging. Communities across the United States are looking to FEMA not merely as a funding source – though at this juncture funds do appear to be vital for program progress in most communities – but equally important as a source of continued leadership, guidance, and innovative loss-reduction strategies. Without that leadership, there is a very real possibility that community-based mitigation efforts will stagnate, except perhaps in the very few communities that have already institutionalized the concept.

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## APPENDIX A

Dear [Participant's Name]:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the focus group discussion that is being conducted by the University of Delaware's Disaster Research Center at the Project Impact Summit.

As we explained in our earlier telephone call, a focus group is a research technique that uses a group to obtain in-depth information on a particular topic. The goals of the focus group discussions are to obtain information on how Project Impact activities are progressing around the country and to document lessons communities have learned. Your insights and suggestions will serve as the basis for recommendations on how Project Impact can be strengthened to meet its overall objective of making communities more disaster resistant.

Each focus group will consist of a group of seven to ten people from Project Impact communities around the country. The groups have been specially designed to include people who hold different positions in their communities—for example, elected officials, emergency managers, planners, and business representatives—and who come from different cities, counties and regions. In order to assist you in planning for the focus group interview, we are including the list of questions that we will be discussing. Please feel free to discuss these questions with others in your community before you come to the focus group, but remember that we will be most interested in your own personal observations and experiences. This fax includes some general guidelines on how we plan to conduct the group discussions.

We will be tape recording the discussion in your focus group so that we can keep a careful record of the things that we hear from you and other members. However, to make sure everyone feels free to speak candidly, we guarantee the confidentiality of your comments. Any findings and recommendations that come out of the interviews will not be attributed to specific individuals or communities. FEMA recognizes the importance of the need for confidentiality, and that is one reason why the Disaster Research Center, which is an independent research center, was asked to conduct the focus group discussions.

Once again, your focus group will meet on Sunday November 12<sup>th</sup>, the day before the official start of FEMA's Project Impact Summit. Your group meeting has been scheduled for 1-3 pm in the Marriott Wardman Park in Washington, D.C. The Marriott Wardman Park, located at 2660 Woodley Road at Connecticut Ave., is the same hotel where the Summit will be held. A member of the DRC's research team will be near the Summit registration area from 12 p.m.– 5 p.m. to assist you in locating your session.

We know that your time is very valuable, and we will make every effort to respect everyone's busy schedules by both starting and ending on time. We have scheduled two hours for this group interview, so please be sure to allow yourself enough time to reach your assigned room in the Marriott a few minutes before 1 p.m..

Once again, we are very pleased that you have accepted our invitation to participate in this important group discussion. The success of any group depends on each of its members, so we are counting on you to participate fully. If for some currently unforeseen circumstance you need to cancel your trip to Washington in the next few days, please call Tricia Wachtendorf at (302) 831-6618 as soon as possible.

We look forward to meeting with you on November 12<sup>th</sup>.

Sincerely yours,

Kathleen J. Tierney, Ph.D.  
Director, Disaster Research Center

Tricia Wachtendorf, M.A.  
Project Coordinator

## APPENDIX B

### Discussion Topics for Mitigation Summit Focus Group Members

1. **In one minute or less, please introduce yourself to the group, telling us**

*Your name*

*Your organization and job title*

*Your community name and if it is a city, county, or region, and*

*When your community joined Project Impact*

2. **What do you think is involved in making a community more disaster resistant?  
What strategies can be used to work toward this goal?**

3. **What is the best way to organize Project Impact activities at the community level?**  
For example:

*What type of organizational structure has your community developed, and is that structure working?*

*If your organizational arrangements are effective, what makes them effective? If they need improvement, how can they be improved?*

*Do some organizational structures work better than others for a program like PI?*

4. **Business partnerships are an important part of Project Impact. Discuss your own program=s experiences with the business community.**

For example:

*What success has your community had with involving businesses?*

*What have businesses contributed to your program?*

*What problems, if any, have there been with business participation?*

*What strategies work to attract businesses and keep them involved?*

5. **One goal of Project Impact is to involve all segments of the community in loss-reduction activities. This includes groups that could be considered especially vulnerable, such as low-income residents, elderly persons, and minority communities.**

*To what extent are groups like these involved in your local program?*

*What strategies, if any, are being used to reach out to these groups?*

*What approaches are most likely to work in providing help to vulnerable populations and getting them involved with PI?*

6. **What can be done in communities to foster productive ties with**  
*Local governments?*  
*State, federal, and national partners?*  
*Businesses?*  
*Community-based organizations?*  
*The general public?*
7. **Looking ahead ten years from now, will there still be a Project Impact in your community?**  
  
*If so, what kind of a program will it be? If there won't be a PI program, why not?*
8. **In ten years, will Project Impact have made a difference in your community? In what ways?**
9. **What kinds of help do Project Impact communities need from FEMA? Aside from giving communities additional funds, what are the one or two most important things FEMA can do to help the local programs be more successful?**

