

Resilience and Engagement Hubs Explored During FEMA's Higher-Ed Roundtable at Columbia University

By Julie Nucci

Columbia University hosted a Higher Education Roundtable on Resilience and Engagement Hubs this September in coordination with Mark Strohoefer, the FEMA Region 2 Higher Education Program Coordinator. Over the last several years, Jason Fenn, Senior Program Specialist in the Floodplain Management & Insurance Branch of FEMA Region 2's Mitigation Division co-developed the Hubs for Equitable Resilience and Engagement (HERE) initiative with Aidan Markland, the FEMA HQ BIL Program Office Policy Lead. Communities face a changing climate with increasingly severe weather events. The HERE Initiative fosters local empowerment throughout all phases of the disaster management lifecycle via university engagement.

The workshop speakers included Mark Strohoefer, Jason Fenn, and Aidan Markland from FEMA Region 2, Prof. Jeffrey Shaman and Laudan Behrouz-Ghayebi from the Climate School at Columbia University, Profs. Jason Rivera and Lucia Velotti of John Jay University, Prof. Kim Waddell from the University of the Virgin Islands, Kim Adams from the GEOS Institute, Dr. Julie Nucci from J. Nucci Consulting, LLC and the National Hazard Mitigation Association, Rodney Cooper and Rick Hoar from the Information Technology Disaster Resource Center, and Lynda Zambrano of the National Tribal Emergency Council (NTEMC).

The focus of the day's discussions centered on the urgent need to better support underserved, disadvantaged, and marginalized communities, and prioritizing the human dimension in emergency management through local advocacy coalitions. While a plethora of funding is targeted for underserved, disadvantaged, and marginalized communities in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and Inflation Reduction Act, without the resources to ascertain community needs and prepare competitive grant applications, these funds remain inaccessible and disadvantaged communities remain unprepared for risks posed by a changing climate. Place-based assistance via university-led, community-serving hubs and federal programs such as FEMA's Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities Direct Technical Assistance (BRIC DTA) and FEMA CERT are essential to bridge this federal-local gap and reduce social vulnerability while increasing social equity.

The event began with Dr. Jeffrey Shaman, Dean of Columbia University's new Climate School, speaking to how the new school provides pathways to engage, recruit, and train the next generation of climate adaptation professionals. Presenters went on to share vivid examples of challenges faced in areas such as the US Virgin Islands and the rural Village of Owego, NY as well as the need to establish emergency management programs on Tribal College campuses nationwide. Stories were shared about the incredible resilience tribal nations exhibited across the country in response to the Covid-19 pandemic through cooperation and mutual aid-based assistance. Moreover, the GEOS Institute spoke of its vision for building a system for national climate support services. Examples of university-based, service-learning projects were also highlighted. Collectively, these presentations demonstrated that help can come in many forms for vulnerable communities.

An engaging discussion with contributions from many roundtable attendees followed the presentations. A key roundtable theme and HERE goal is to avoid a continued redistribution of funding to wealthier communities at the expense of their underserved neighbors, who are at significant risk of displacement post-disaster. Cooperative extension and other community-serving academic functions could help underserved communities navigate the challenging and complex landscape of funding programs across multiple federal/state agencies. They could also provide services that engender trust while educating communities about climate adaptation strategies. University researchers could improve community needs assessments. For all efforts, a sustainable funding plan is critical for universities, and other coalition partners to ensure that funds and their impact focus on the intended communities.

As stated in the forthcoming FEMA Region 2 Hubs for Equitable Resilience & Engagement (HERE) Position Paper, “Many studies have observed the impact of direct community engagement in the sustainability of emergency management planning and implementation processes. Such engagement often has positive effects on the perceived legitimacy of governmental actors who administer these initiatives. The positive effects on emergency management actions in furtherance of sustainability and legitimacy have spillover benefits to democracy more broadly. By implementing the use of Engagement Hubs, FEMA has the opportunity to more effectively pursue the goal of enhancing community resilience with inherently place-based strategies, but also enhance democratic practice and the legitimacy of the Agency’s actions in the eyes of the public.” This paper, when finalized will be posted along with other HERE resources on an accessible platform to continue ongoing coalition-based collaboration on the HERE Initiative.

There is much more to discuss. The next FEMA Region 2 Higher Education Roundtable will take place at the State University of New York, Albany on Nov 16th. The topic of this roundtable will be “Extreme Weather,” and we encourage all who are interested in attending to reach out to Mark Strohoefer at: mark.strohoefer@fema.dhs.gov for further details.

About the author: Dr. Julie Nucci is the founder of J. Nucci Consulting, LLC. She is working closely with the National Hazard Mitigation Association and FEMA Region 2 to develop HERE initiative pilot projects throughout the Region.