

Facing disaster while averting tragedy

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Nobody can foresee disaster, but changing climate conditions are prompting smart communities increasingly to prepare for them with solid emergency response plans and protocols. Images as recent as those from the 2011 wildfire in Slave Lake, Alberta or as distant as those from the 1998 ice storm in Eastern Ontario and Quebec are distressing reminders that no area is immune from devastation, and reinforce the need to be prepared.

Yet while [emergency responses](#) may originate through official channels, new research from Concordia University shows that those plans are most effective when they incorporate input and leadership from [informal networks](#) such as volunteer groups and even families alongside the usual formal sources like provincial and [local governments](#). "By integrating local knowledge, a community that includes a wide variety of leaders, representing a range of experiences, competencies and assets, deals most effectively with crisis," says Bill Reimer, professor emeritus in Concordia's Department of Sociology and Anthropology and lead author on the study published in *Disasters Journal*.

The research focused on the Lost Creek Fire in the Crowsnest Pass area of southwest Alberta in 2003 as a case study, collecting insights from 30 community leaders on the ways in which they modified and adjusted their existing response plan in the face of an actual extended emergency. As disasters go, the Lost Creek Fire was a relative success – although the wildfire burned 21,000 hectares of land and 2,000 residents had to be evacuated during the 31-day state of emergency, there was no loss of life and injuries were limited to a few firefighters.

Although emergency responders started out by following preset protocols, it is the ways in which the plan changed over the course of rapidly changing circumstances that proved most instructive. At a high level, the initial hierarchical model was quickly flattened to be more inclusive, bringing representatives of groups at all levels from law enforcement to the women's auxiliary together for daily meetings. Those representatives in turn conveyed news to their established networks, which would often include people on the fringes who might not otherwise have received important information. Multiple channels of communication including radio, newspapers and word of mouth, were enlisted to help spread the word about the wildfire's progress.

Recognizing that informal groups operate and communicate differently from the bureaucratic style of the more formal networks can help officials in a disaster situation to incorporate their insights. Overlooking these differences and embracing their contributions allow officials to see major benefits. For instance, some of the most valuable assets in dealing with the Lost Creek fire included local knowledge of regional geography and landmarks, and the volunteer firefighters' familiarity with local conditions. Communication and transparency are also important factors in overcoming tensions between the different operating styles and enabling diverse groups to work together towards their common goal.

Reimer says the lessons of Lost Creek emphasize the need to recognize and get buy-in from existing leaders both formal and informal even as early as advance disaster planning, but especially through the response and recuperation. "Under disaster conditions, time is of the essence so it makes sense to turn to established leadership rather than attempt to build it from scratch. This can be anticipated in a disaster plan that identifies ongoing leadership needs, social networks and groups most likely to foster leadership."

Provided by Concordia University

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