

Harvey brings out 'hidden capacity in civil society' to respond, says resilience expert

29 August 2017, by Greg St. Martin

Hurricane Harvey has caused widespread damage in Houston and across Texas and Louisiana, as historic flooding reportedly may force 30,000 people from their homes and leave 450,000 people seeking federal aid.

Professor Stephen Flynn, founding director of Northeastern's Global Resilience Institute, said that Harvey has underscored a need for communities to continue to enhance their preparedness for [extreme weather events](#). It also, he said, has brought into the spotlight a critical factor in community resilience: "the hidden capacity in civil society that comes out often in these events."

Flynn said there are extraordinary stories of volunteer rescue operations and efforts throughout the region in addition to—and in many cases in coordination with—the work by officials at the local, state, and federal levels. "That's one of the key elements you always need to draw on in a catastrophe of this scale," Flynn said.

Professor Daniel Aldrich, director of the Security and Resilience Program at Northeastern, agreed. He noted the Federal Emergency Management Agency's role in encouraging volunteers to assist in the response effort—more so than in past disasters—under the new leadership of Brock Long, who took over as FEMA administrator earlier this year. "What we're seeing is a bottom-up, emergent response," Aldrich said.

Continuing to leverage the power of civilian volunteers will be crucial going forward, Flynn said, but he added that many [emergency management](#) organizations aren't set up to scale that effort. On a broader level, Long told CNN on Sunday that the storm would require FEMA to be involved there for years to come, calling Harvey "a landmark event."

Flynn said there are other important issues that bear watching in the coming days, one being the nation's energy sector. Nearly 30 percent of U.S.

refining capacity is located along the Texas coast, and the Houston Shipping Channel "is the most important port in the country from the standpoint of the energy and petrochemical sector," Flynn said. Reuters reported Sunday that the U.S. energy industry is set to curtail near-record oil production for several weeks. "This is going to take some time to get back up and running," Flynn said.

Another significant issue, Flynn said, is Harvey's effect on the health sector. He said that in addition to hospital care, a growing number of patients rely on in-home care or access to neighborhood clinics and health facilities. Ensuring that people have the electrical power they need to run the health equipment they need and that caregivers can access their in-home patients will be a crucial challenge.

Aldrich and his family narrowly escaped Hurricane Katrina a decade ago, an experience that has inspired him to study post-disaster recovery. He said "social cohesion and collective action" have been shown as factors that help areas recovery faster from these types of disasters—that is, people pulling together with a clear vision for the future and a desire to come back and rebuild. "These social ties are a strong determinant of going back and rebuilding a home or a business," Aldrich said.

Houston is the country's fourth-largest city, and both Flynn and Aldrich said its urban sprawl and development policies in recent decades will require closer examination to determine what lessons it and other cities might take from Harvey's devastation. This imperative aligns with the work being done at Northeastern's Global Resilience Institute.

"One of the things that we're committed to doing that, frankly, we haven't done enough of as a society, is to learn from these major disasters and push out findings and recommendations to other communities that may find themselves in the same

kind of situation," Flynn said.

Provided by Northeastern University

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