

Building healthier communities should be a priority when preparing for and recovering from disasters

April 15 2015

U.S. communities and federal agencies should more intentionally seek to create healthier communities during disaster preparation and recovery efforts - something that rarely happens now, says a new report from the Institute of Medicine. By adding a health "lens" to planning and recovery, a community can both mitigate the health damage caused by disasters and recover in ways that make the community healthier and more resilient than it was before.

"We have an opportunity to transform our response to devastating disasters into an effort to meaningfully enhance the healthiness of our communities," said Reed Tuckson, chair of the study committee that wrote the report, and managing director of Tuckson Health Connections LLC, Sandy Springs, Ga. "Each year, millions, if not billions, of dollars are spent to restore communities after disasters. This report provides practical guidance for disaster and [health](#) professionals, government and elected officials, communities, and individuals that can not only enhance disaster recovery but also advance the realization of maximally health communities."

Healthy communities are conducive to healthy behaviors and free of environmental toxins and risks, and they include a robust human services infrastructure. They have roads that facilitate exercising such as running, biking, and walking; houses that are safe; and ready access to fresh fruits and vegetables. They are also well-served by health and social services

professionals who assist people in staying healthy and optimally managing diseases, noted the committee.

When roads, houses, and health infrastructures are lost in a disaster, communities should use all available federal, local and philanthropic dollars to rebuild in a manner that creates a community that is healthier than it was before the disaster. The report includes recommendations, case studies, and other supportive material to provide practical guidance for accomplishing this.

For example, local and elected public officials should incorporate a vision for a healthy community into community strategic planning. Healthy community planning should be the norm for all communities, and these plans should be connected to the pre-disaster planning that communities are also urged to conduct. Leadership by local officials is essential to bringing these two related activities together on behalf of their communities.

The report also provides specific guidance for [federal agencies](#) such as FEMA, the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Housing and Urban Development and other agencies involved in implementing the National Disaster Recovery Framework. For example, FEMA should update the National Disaster Recovery Framework to include health implications for the activities of all support functions involved in disaster recovery. In addition, federal agencies should use existing grant programs to enhance state and local ability to plan for and implement a healthy community perspective in disaster recovery.

"Thousands of dedicated, and too often unrecognized, professionals tirelessly serve our nation by helping communities recover from disasters," said Tuckson. "We hope these recommendations can facilitate their ability not only to respond to the immediate effects of disasters but also to create a more fertile foundation for creating [communities](#) that are

as healthy as possible."

More information: www.nap.edu/catalog/18996/healthier-communities-and-opportunities-and

Provided by National Academy of Sciences

Citation: Building healthier communities should be a priority when preparing for and recovering from disasters (2015, April 15) retrieved 20 November 2023 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-04-healthier-priority-recovering-disasters.html>

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