



FUTURE OF HEALTH SUMMIT PRIVATE SESSION SUMMARY

Helping Communities Heal After Disaster

This session was co-hosted by the Milken Institute's Center for Public Health and Center for Strategic Philanthropy. Participants were from both the private and public sectors, representing charitable organizations, funders, advocates for special populations, federal and state government, and on-the-ground public health and emergency response experts. This discussion opened with comments from a mental health expert and a representative from a philanthropic organization focused on community resilience and long-term recovery.

Together we addressed three areas:

- Coordination of responders and funders and the barriers to working together effectively.
- Sustaining resources after the initial emergency.
- Unaddressed, long-term impact of disaster on communities.

Why aren't responders (and funders) better coordinated? What are the barriers to working together more effectively?

Although seen as a significant challenge, participants agreed that it is essential to break down silos to move toward a system of recovery that is defined by local communities and individuals affected by disaster, rather than a top-down recovery approach. Siloed, top-down approaches often fail to meet the unique needs of already existing populations: children, the elderly, people with disabilities, and individuals with mental health support needs. Focus should be on these groups even before the disaster, and other populations in whom developing resilience is a function of who they are and the particular communication approaches that will be most effective. Planning for recovery with disproportionately affected communities may occur and be communicated before a disaster event.

Life-altering, long-term effects of disaster are often overlooked following the immediate emergency response. While disaster preparedness drills have improved public- and private-sector response coordination, more frequent and geographically dispersed convenings enhance trust and coordination. Increased frequency of convenings also allows for additional evaluation of post-disaster, long-term response, and recovery.

Participant Observations on Mental Health Effects of Disaster

Mental health consequences become especially apparent when individuals and communities feel “left behind” after disasters.

“Psychological first aid” can help affected communities and individuals understand and cope with disaster to help provide a sense of safety, calm, connectedness, and empowerment.

Steps toward improved coordination are being taken and are showing promise. A joint pilot project in Texas of the Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster, the St. Vincent de Paul Disaster Services, and management by local faith-based organizations focuses on long-term recovery in 33 Texas counties. This project aims to remove duplicative efforts and ensure that specific local needs are identified and addressed.

Lack of coordination is due, in part, to competition for funds and recognition. Successful coordination also requires adherence to a standard system, which often does not take local communities' individual needs and desires. While the Incident Management System provides these response standards, each organization must commit to full-system coordination to successfully execute response and recovery efforts.

How can resources be increased for needs such as essential rebuilding that remain long after the initial emergency has passed?

Seventy percent of all disaster funding is spent after two months post-disaster, and recovery funding is depleted after six months, even though disaster has a long-term impact. Poor use of resources is tantamount to insufficient funds, and ineffective rebuilding that does not prepare for the next disaster is a tragic mistake, often made in the name of cost-cutting, and needs to be eliminated.

While more resources can be utilized and are needed, preparedness and prevention must be a focus before a disaster event occurs. Community preparedness for dealing with special populations, isolated rural areas cut off from services because of road closures, evacuees who need to be returned safely and expeditiously to their homes, and other such post-disaster necessities is crucial. New intensity and increased frequency of natural disasters are having an impact as more communities and leaders at the local, state, and federal level are recognizing that failing to prevent or mitigate the effects of the next disaster will have increasingly devastating effects on the economy of the region and the physical and mental health of its residents.

The focus on prevention must equal the intensity of increasing resources for immediate recovery from disaster. Long-term recovery relies on pre-event preparation: developing community resilience through reducing or minimizing risk by identifying and strengthening vulnerable communities in advance of a disaster, openly sharing successes, failures, and learning from previous local and global events, structurally sound rebuilding, and successful cross-sector collaboration. Coordination and excellent communication during disaster response and recovery are critical to success, and this begins with and is contingent on identifying partners and planning and preparing together.

Participant Observations on Community Recovery from Disaster

Women play a critical role in ensuring community recovery, especially in rural and vulnerable communities.

60% of donated goods go to waste during and after a disaster, reflecting a lack of coordination and effective communication.

A significant proportion of disaster-related giving, whether from philanthropic organizations or individuals, is reactionary. It reacts to the immediate disaster impact and fails to consider the full life-cycle, from preparation and developing resilience to mitigation and long-term recovery. Although in the US, immediate needs following a disaster are often met (e.g., providing emergency shelter, food, clothing, etc.), long-term recovery is overlooked and poorly funded. Resources become increasingly limited as time passes, and coordination between private and public sector responders is ineffective. However, the development of long-term recovery committees composed of local government, community, and nonprofit leaders are examining how future rebuilding after a disaster can improve a community's commitment to public and mental health, disability assistance, and poverty reduction.

This effort is evident in examining the city of New Orleans, ten years after Hurricane Katrina. Mayor Mitch Landrieu said, "The trauma will never fully heal, but Katrina didn't create all our problems. They have been generations in the making, and over the last ten years, our progress has been anything but a straight line. There have been many fits and starts, big sacrifices and incredible successes."

[What long-term impacts of disasters are still unaddressed even years later, and what steps are needed to address these?](#)

Months and even years after a catastrophic event, communities in Puerto Rico, Houston, New Jersey, New Orleans, and others remain without essential health services, schools remain only partially open or shuttered, individuals with special health needs who evacuated have not returned to their communities or families, and families are still living in temporary housing, while their damaged homes remain unbuilt. Mitigating these long-term impacts requires additional resources and a commitment to stay with communities impacted by disaster, as a funder, a government or private service organization, or an on-the-ground worker. Long-term physical and mental health impacts of disasters are real and have serious repercussions not only for the affected individuals but also for entire communities.

In many cases, communities and entire regions never fully recover. The economic consequences of disaster can be significant, from substantial recovery costs for local and state agencies to once middle-class families descending into poverty due to lack of insurance or other reasons they cannot cover their losses.

Prevention, early preparation, and building resilience in advance are vital steps to mitigate or eliminate disastrous long-term consequences. Private and philanthropic funders must be educated about the importance of directing resources toward long-term recovery.

Increased opportunities are needed for potential funders and responders to collaborate on facilitating and to ensure successful community recovery. On a larger scale, underlying matters of crumbling infrastructure, inadequate housing, and insufficient attention to mental health, stigma, and isolation must be recognized and addressed before a disaster occurs to increase the likelihood of a successful recovery.

Recognizing that these events will recur, and, in many cases, with higher frequency and intensity, requires taking action not just at the time of the disaster but also to prepare for them and prevent their long-term devastating effects.