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GOOD STORY

Public Health-Seattle and King County's Vulnerable Populations Action Team

SUMMARY

The local health department for King County, Washington, Public Health - Seattle & King County, has a Vulnerable Populations Action Team (VPAT) that works to ensure that vulnerable populations have access to public health preparedness, response, and recovery information and services. The VPAT offers training and assistance to community-based organizations (CBO), provides emergency information to residents through a communications network, and advocates on behalf of vulnerable populations for greater inclusion in emergency preparedness, response, and recovery planning.

BACKGROUND

In 2005, Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast, forcing hundreds of thousands of residents to evacuate. Many evacuees sought short- and long-term refuge in other parts of the country, including King County, Washington. The response to Hurricane Katrina prompted the King County government, particularly Public Health - Seattle & King County (Public Health), to consider what would happen if it were to experience a local emergency similar in scale.

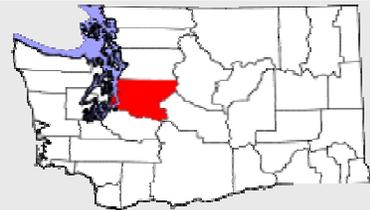
Public Health realized that some residents would experience particular difficulties accessing critical information and assistance in an emergency. It also learned that these individuals often communicate with a local CBO or non-governmental organization instead of with local government agencies.

Public Health decided to capitalize on these established and trusted relationships by partnering with CBOs in order to reach and support vulnerable populations in an emergency. With the support of the King County Executive Office, Public Health received funding to create the VPAT in 2006.

GOALS

The following goals guide the VPAT's work:

- To enable CBOs to have the skills and capacity to train their staffs and clients to continue delivery of core services and to provide basic response and recovery services;



King County, which includes Seattle, has the largest population in the state of Washington.

VPAT defines the following populations as "vulnerable:" the physically disabled, the blind and low-vision, the deaf and hard-of-hearing, seniors, limited- or non-English speakers, children, the homeless and shelter dependent, the impoverished, the chemically or mentally dependent, the mentally disabled, clients of the criminal justice system, and undocumented persons.

- To ensure that essential public health information will reach residents in all vulnerable population segments prior to and throughout an emergency event; and
- To integrate vulnerable population planning activities into all government, healthcare, CBO, and internal public health systems.

DESCRIPTION

The VPAT works collaboratively with CBOs to ensure that no single group is more impacted than another in an emergency. Also, the VPAT helps service providers get prepared, stay prepared, and be ready to respond to their clients’ needs during times of disaster.

Training and Technical Assistance for CBOs

Initially, VPAT staff created a training program focused on pandemic influenza preparedness and business continuity planning. It evolved into an all-hazards training program that enables CBO staff members and volunteers to provide residents with emergency information and assistance. Through funding from the King County Executive Office as well as the United Way of King County, the VPAT has been able to provide CBOs with small grants to help them move their emergency preparedness efforts forward. As of May 2007, the VPAT had trained approximately 100 CBO staff members, clients, and volunteers.

VPAT training programs typically cover basic emergency preparedness information, the Incident Command System, communication with other CBO partners and Public Health, and business continuity planning. Much of the training is done in small group discussion. Feedback from this approach has been positive; CBO partners find it tremendously valuable to talk with other agencies facing similar challenges.

Emergency Communications Plan

VPAT staff members created the Community Communications Network (CCN) to improve Public Health’s ability to reach vulnerable communities during an emergency. The VPAT asked each CBO to provide its staff members’ after-hours contact information, which the VPAT compiled into a master list. When an emergency occurs, VPAT staff can use the list to contact the appropriate CBO and provide it with critical information. CBOs pass this information to the vulnerable populations that they serve and notify the VPAT if their clients need any further assistance, resources, or information that the CBO cannot provide.

December 2006 Windstorms

The VPAT tested the CCN’s effectiveness when King County experienced severe windstorms that knocked out power for thousands of residents in December 2006. Many East African immigrants sought treatment at a local hospital for carbon monoxide poisoning caused by using alternative heating sources, such as burning charcoal indoors, during the power outages. When notified by hospitals, Public Health activated the VPAT to warn other limited-English-speaking communities about carbon monoxide poisoning risks. One of the CBOs that the VPAT contacted was Horn of Africa, an agency that works with East African communities living in southeast Seattle. Horn of Africa conducted outreach to East African community members to ensure their safety and to alert them to the danger of carbon monoxide poisoning.

For more on King County’s response to the December windstorms, see the following *LLIS.gov* Lessons Learned:

- [“Emergency Communications: Developing Alternate Emergency Information Methods That Do Not Require Electricity”](#)
- [“Shelter Operations: Cataloguing and Securing Medications for Residents with Mental Illnesses”](#)
- [“Shelter Operations: Establishing a Quiet Room to Calm Residents with Mental Illnesses”](#)

While warning residents of carbon monoxide dangers, Horn of Africa staff learned that many elderly residents were suffering from the cold and needed blankets. Horn of Africa notified VPAT staff members who then worked with the American Red Cross to provide those individuals with blankets.

Advocacy for Vulnerable Populations

The VPAT advocates on behalf of vulnerable populations for improved consideration in emergency response. The advocacy work focuses on improving coordination between first responders and human service providers.

REQUIREMENTS

Keys to Success

CBO Partnerships

Public Health's partnerships with CBOs allow the VPAT to reach vulnerable populations and to give them the critical information they need to remain safe in an emergency.

Resources

The King County Executive Office provided Public Health with funding for the VPAT in order to increase the county's pandemic influenza preparedness. Public Health expanded the VPAT program to include all-hazards preparedness.

Links

Vulnerable Populations Action Team

<http://www.metrokc.gov/health/VPAT/>

REFERENCES

Pfohman, Robin. VPAT Manager, Public Health – Seattle & King County. Interview with *Lessons Learned Information Sharing*, 22 May 2007.

United Way of King County, Task Force on Emergency Preparedness. *A Region at Risk: Improving Our Readiness to Respond to Disaster*. 20 Mar 2007, p. 15.

https://www.llis.dhs.gov/member/secure/detail.cfm?content_id=23990

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