Innovative Allied Partners: Academia and American Red Cross Exploration of ESF#6

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When one considers a list of allied organizations relevant to emergency management, it is likely that the usual suspects come to mind. Fire department, EMS, law enforcement, hospital and health department may be initial responses to the query. However, given the complexity and duration of several recent natural disasters, innovative alliances are forming to deepen understanding and develop best practices. This article profiles an innovative allied partnership between the American Red Cross of Ohio and The Ohio State University.

Emergency practitioners know that the American Red Cross (ARC) fulfills an essential role in all-hazard situations, and therefore is held to a high standard of accountability by entities and the public served. Recent additions to the National Response Framework further clarify essential functional responsibilities of the ARC.

The National Response Framework (NRF) presents the guiding principles that enable all response partners to prepare for and provide a unified national response to disasters and emergencies — from the smallest incident to the largest catastrophe. The NRF establishes a comprehensive, national, all-hazards approach to domestic incident response.¹

The ARC is also accountable for Emergency Support Function (ESF) #6 — Mass Care, Emergency Assistance, Housing, and Human Services coordinates the delivery of federal mass care, emergency assistance, housing and human services when local, tribal and state response and recovery needs exceed their capabilities.²

The Ohio State University recently facilitated a Leadership Development Series (LDS) throughout Ohio for all-hazard teams, and used an application of the Participative Action Research Model Appreciative Inquiry (AI). A component of the success of the LDS was that leadership skill-building activities were matched to the four-phase AI process. Members of the local ARC participated in the LDS, and thought that an adaptation could be incorporated into plans for development of a new ARC Leadership Academy.

ARC Leadership Academy

Allies in the ARC Leadership Academy (LA) include an ARC cohort of practitioners under the guidance of an academic researcher. The hypothesis is that identified recognition of self-identified ARC organizational values in turn will expand capacity to manage ESF #6 functions during all hazards. By ARC partnering with the university, they gain access to a subject matter expert for consulting, facilitating the AI method, curriculum design and delivery, data analysis and reporting of program impact statements.

The Framework

The conceptual framework for this research is exposure and validation of organizational value indicators with ARC leaders and community stakeholders. The four phases of AI include discovery, dream/visioning, design and deployment. An anticipated outcome of the research is that practice by an Ohio-based ARC cohort will inform and advance generalized application of AI theory, to reveal and validate organizational value indicators with national ARC affiliates, and therefore emerge as a best practice.

Organizational Value Indicators

The perception of organizational values and the reality of value indicators are revealed through the AI discovery phase. Inquiries around a shared experience bring into focus value connections. Discovery is revealed through storytelling, and a forum regarding the 2007 Northwest Ohio floods enlivens organizational accountability conversations. Values are next validated through a meaning making process in the AI dream/visioning phase, and true organizational values, decided upon by the cohort, are carried forward to the AI design phase. Thoughtful in-session work and take-home assignments enable cohort participants and municipal stakeholders to co-create action plans in the final AI deployment phase.

Anticipated Outcome

Revealed core value indicators dictate specific leadership development issues and topics for cohort assignments in the LA. One hypothetical benefit of a customized LA is that when partners craft a plan together, accountability for the actions embedded with the strategy is more likely to be successful. Clarity of accountability standards and requisite ESF #6 actions during all hazards will likely improve for the ARC cohort.