

Viewpoints of Four Mayors Who Led Their Communities Through Disasters

Discussion Participants: Mayor Joseph P. Riley, Jr., Charleston, South Carolina; Mayor Keith Summey, North Charleston, South Carolina; Mayor AC Wharton, Jr., Shelby County, Tennessee; Mayor Brent Warr, Gulfport, Mississippi

Lessons Learned: Disaster planning and training help communities rebound more effectively in the event of a disaster and make for healthier communities in general. Post-disaster leadership is as much an art as it is a science. Leaders should be creative and able to adapt, react, and respond. Leaders should remain in the community; they cannot lead from afar. Disaster response and recovery demand political courage, and leaders must be willing to make difficult decisions and take responsibility for the outcomes. Communication with the public is critical, and messages should be tailored to the recipients. News that signals a return to normalcy is important (e.g., Wal-Mart has new supplies or the post office has reopened). Disasters disrupt normalcy, and the quicker people see even small signs of a return to normalcy, the better the long-term response will be. Local government's most valuable asset for disaster response and recovery is its employee. Provisions need to be made to ensure that government employees receive compensation in a timely manner and that their families are cared for. Government employees need to be acknowledged for their efforts.

The CARRI Community Forum brought together four mayors who were in executive office during a disaster. All four touched on common themes, but each offered special insights into the experience of being a leader guiding a community during a disaster. The mayors shared their successes, but they also shared lessons that were learned the hard way – things they thought they could have done better or did wrong.

Charleston Mayor Joseph P. Riley, who has served since 1975, led Charleston through Hurricane Hugo in 1989. Today, Charleston is recognized as one of the most livable communities in the country, annually attracting nearly 4 million visitors who enjoy its rich culture, history, and natural beauty. “When talking about the full range of disaster possibilities – hurricanes, earthquakes, and medical disasters – disasters accelerate trends that are already in place,” said Riley. “A community that is working hard to strengthen itself is, without realizing it, preparing for a disaster. You don’t get ready for a disaster the day before. The understanding of emergency preparedness is relatively new. We must keep sharpening our tools.”

Riley shared more of his lessons learned from Hugo by observing that the devastating effects of a disaster rob people of normalcy. “I was able to get the post office to resume pickup



(l to r) Mayor Riley, Warren Edwards, Mayor Wharton, and Mayor Warr

This information was presented at the first CARRI Community Resilience Forum, held April 28, 2009, in Charleston, South Carolina. The Forum brought together representatives from three partner communities (Gulfport, Mississippi; Charleston/Tri-County Area, South Carolina; and Memphis, Shelby County Urban Area).

and delivery, and the garbage trucks were making rounds. Every piece was leading us back to normal. Speed is so important. It's like a wound – the longer you wait to sew it up, the longer it will take to heal.

"We must remember we're dealing with people's emotions and spirits. I found that during Hugo people did not want to share their bad information. They would talk to you about someone who had more misfortune than they did. In working on resilience and preparedness, we need to make sure there is an accepted sense of fairness in the community."

As disruptive as Hugo was to the Charleston area, it also stimulated a number of positive initiatives and opened up opportunities for improving the community. A local Catholic church formed East Cooper Community Outreach (ECCO) to distribute food in the Mount Pleasant area after Hugo. The organization has since become a permanent fixture in the community, with a distribution center, medical clinic, and myriad services designed to break the cycle of situational and generational poverty. "We have an opportunity to be stronger than we were before," said Mayor Riley. "As long as we are concerned about what happens to *everyone*, the 'healing of the wound' will make us stronger than ever."



North Charleston Mayor Keith Summey was a Charleston county councilman during Hugo. "Sure, politicians have issues that cause us to be on different sides of the fence," he said, "but when the time comes to make sure our communities are safe, we come together and work hard. We have to make sure that every citizen is prepared, notified, and alerted. It's a major challenge.

"I am chairman of the Berkeley, Charleston, and Dorchester Counties Council of Governments (BCDCOG) this year and next. CARRI has been adopted by the BCDCOG as a major program to create the regional resilience that we need. When Hugo hit 20 years ago, I was a new member of the Charleston County Council. I was 42 years old. Most striking to me was the leadership that emerged in the aftermath. There is probably no one more notable than Joe Riley for his tremendous efforts, but it's unusual that a mayor hangs around for 20 more years. Not one single person who was on the council in 1989 remains there. Mount Pleasant has one. To stay prepared, we must train the new folks. The greatest thing we're challenged with today is making sure that 20 years from now there is a 'Joe Riley'; the leadership has to take us to that level."

Dealing with volunteers in Hugo's aftermath led to many valuable lessons learned. Mayor Summey observed, "The ability to deal with an influx of volunteers must be in place before the disaster. We need the assistance of volunteers, but they should be coordinated under one system to facilitate each knowing what their role is. Not doing this creates chaos. During Hugo, we had many well-meaning people, but quite honestly, we had stuff we didn't need, and some things we needed quite badly never arrived."

Not long after Hugo, the Charleston area was subjected to another, albeit markedly different, disaster with the 1993 announcement that the naval base in North Charleston would be closed. As the region's major employer, the closure had serious economic implications. When the federal government announced its plan to close the Charleston Naval Shipyard, Naval Station, Naval Supply Center, and Naval Hospital, the Tri-County community expected an

economic disaster. The closing is now complete, and the region rebounded. The military remains the largest single employer. “We were looking at potential economic devastation. Instead of letting that happen, we came together as a Tri-County community and made a plan,” Summey said. “We realized that the closure of the naval base would have a regional impact on the entire area and not just North Charleston.”

The value of cooperation among jurisdictions and sectors, as well as the need to plan and communicate clearly, effectively, and positively to the public during a disaster, were also themes echoed by mayors AC Wharton, Jr. of Shelby County, Tennessee, and Brent Warr of Gulfport, Mississippi.

Mayor Wharton began his comments with an adage, “ ‘The family that prays together stays together.’ Well, the family that fares together survives together, meaning there has to be a message for everyone.



“I learned when practicing law that what I saw wasn’t always what other folks saw. I learned to do focus groups and questionnaires. You can say the same thing about preparedness: we all think we know what to do. We decided to enlist the process of focus groups, and we got help from the Assisi Foundation in Shelby County. When we looked at ways to get out the message effectively to all, we found there is not one message. We began by asking all the area mayors to get on board, recognizing that we are divided by some political issues but that when it comes to emergency preparedness, we must see eye to eye.



“We found there are numerous modes of communication in every community – newspapers, television, notes carried by children. I suggested that everyone in the focus group bring in every item they use for communication. Then we saw how diverse we really are. Basically, we found that communication must be multimedia, layer after layer, similar to the United Way approach, and it has to be continuous every day. New folks arrive and other folks leave, so communication must go out every day. Our campaign is designed on a monthly basis. In the winter we cover ice storms, and in the spring we talk about tornadoes. It is critical to consider the diversity of the community when you tailor a message. We handle messages as if we are taking a product to market: we ask ‘how will it be received?’ ”

As one of the major cities closest to New Orleans and the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina, Memphis was a natural location to receive evacuees. Mayor Wharton said Memphis had two great tests: How do you take care of 15,000 new residents who arrive overnight? How do you handle those with special needs? “Among that vast group,” he said, “there will be people with special needs. For example, there will be people who are out on bail by the criminal justice system, some in ankle bracelets. A situation might exist in which a victim of an offense and the person charged with committing the offense are in the same shelter. We continue to work on this because the Memphis area is a logical terminus for evacuating Gulf residents. Before Katrina, we had a population of 620,000, and the next day we had almost 700,000. Where are the newcomers’ school records or social security cards? How do you set up a city in a matter of hours? We think about evacuating folks from a city, but how do you set up a destination city in 48 hours? That will be our next challenge, and we are confident we have not perfected our response.”

Disasters have political issues, and Mayor Wharton suggests addressing them head on. “There is no substitute for being there, both to boost morale and to make critical political decisions that might put your future on the line. Let me give you an example: One of the functions of our school system is to supply meals for many of the responders and workers following a disaster or an incident. They have huge kitchens and have the ability to transport food. We had a new school superintendent who questioned this. I asked him for a few hundred thousand dollars’ worth of meals. We had people, including expectant mothers, who hadn’t eaten in 24 hours. But the superintendent said such a request had to be made in writing beforehand because FEMA required it. He was concerned about who would pay, and he was concerned that he did not have the authority to make this expenditure. We got someone from Nashville to send an email, but someone else determined an email was not ‘in writing.’ So we printed it. Finally, the superintendent said, ‘I’ll start cooking.’ I told him I would take the heat for that. It is critical that leaders be willing to risk some political capital to get the job done.



“In another instance, we thought we had it all covered, but we forgot to get janitors to clean the restrooms. They are under a different union contract. I kept saying, ‘You’ll get paid. I’ll take the heat.’

“It’s not enough to do the right thing. You have to look as if you’re doing the right thing. You can be as right as right can be in doing things like restoring utilities, but if people are sitting on a curb and a utility truck passes them by, it can become a racial issue. The truck may be driving past a black neighborhood to the white neighborhood because that is where the trunk lines are, but those sitting on the curb don’t know that. Leaders have to be onsite to make the political calls that are not in the book.”

Mayor Warr’s lessons were also learned the hard way. “I was elected seven weeks before Katrina hit. On my first day of office, I had to declare a state of emergency [because of the threat posed by Tropical Storm Cindy]. I didn’t know how to do that. Was I to stand on the front steps and tell everyone to run? After Cindy, Hurricane Dennis threatened the Mississippi Gulf coast, and then about five weeks later, Katrina. I’ve had an interesting time during the last three and a half years and many opportunities to speak about it.

“Among the things we’re noticing now, after such an exhaustive recovery effort, is that having a community plan is vital, but it is very important that we don’t let our plans give us a sense of overconfidence. Things can always be overlooked.

“We have 157 lift stations in Gulfport that pump sewage. Fifty are below the surge line. When the water came up they were still operating, and they melted down to molten plastic globs. We should have shut them down before the surge. Our most critical pieces of infrastructure—water and sewer—were incapacitated. A third of our capacity was completely erased and our public works department was destroyed, which meant we had to do a lot of work by hand.”

More and more communities are recognizing their need for mutual support after a disaster, and in many cases mutual aid agreements are being formalized. Mayor Warr noted that even though one did not exist between Charleston and the Gulf communities, Charleston came through and provided Gulfport with critical support services. He said that nearly the entire Gulfport police force of 200 was needed to direct traffic, which meant that too few police were available to handle looters and emergency response. “I drove to Biloxi from Gulfport a couple



of days after Katrina,” he said. “We were literally on the verge of anarchy by then. As I approached Biloxi there was a small lady, about 95 pounds, who was directing traffic flow. She was wearing a Charleston, South Carolina, police uniform. When I saw her, I knew we were going to be OK. With the extra police on our streets, our Gulfport Police Department was able to turn greater attention to patrolling and securing property from looting. I will always be grateful to Charleston and Mayor Riley.”

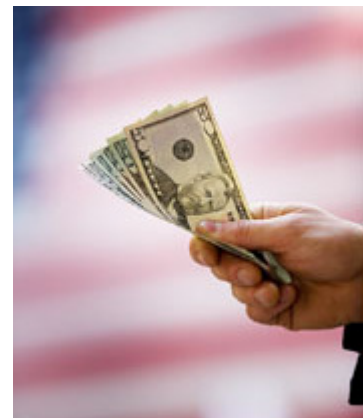
Warr advised that psychological recovery is significant. He commented, “There is a Harvard study on the psychological impacts during recovery following a disaster. Immediately after a disaster, everyone is worried about one another and not just themselves. The reaction is euphoria once they see that their family and friends are OK. But that wears off quickly and only gradually does it rise again. The euphoria usually bottoms out on the one-year anniversary of the event.

“I believe that visible progress and symbolic victories are important. Mississippi Power Company, among others, provided a great victory and encouragement to the city when 11 days after the disaster they had power back on to every home that could receive it.

“Consumer goods and shopping are another obvious sign of progress and a key ingredient to psychological recovery. Roughly 39 percent of Gulfport’s city budget was based on sales tax. It was vital that banks, Home Depot, Wal-Mart, grocery stores, shopping centers, car dealerships, and restaurants were up and running quickly, for the citizens’ sense of normalcy and for the sake of funding city services. We spent a lot of energy in those early months encouraging the return of retail.”

Warr emphasized, “Your employees are your most important resource. You don’t have anything without them. We were fortunate to have excellent employees, and post-event you must have the mechanism to pay them. We decided to pay double-time after the hurricane. The extra income allowed them to keep their families away and safe. The decision to pay double wasn’t in our manual or policies – we had nothing in place. Still, everyone agreed it was the right thing to do.

“On August 29, 2005, our employees were just a few days away from their latest paychecks being deposited into their bank accounts. On 3:58 p.m. on September 1, we called a bank board of directors in Memphis and told them we needed a favor. We noted that as a holder of some of our deposits, we wanted to give them the opportunity to help. Our employees needed their salaries, and we wanted to try our hardest to make the regular payday. They put me on hold and then came back to ask if a runway was clear at the airport. I told them yes. They said they would see us the following morning. At 8 a.m. a private plane landed, and numerous tellers and bank officers came walking out with over \$1 million in cash. We were able to pay nearly 700 employees that day. I stood in the back of the room and watched. As they departed with cash in hand, there was a little more bounce in their steps. Those steps were part of the psychological healing. Letting them know we cared about them mattered. It’s our job as executives to let them know it’s going to be OK.”



Mayor Riley made a concluding comment: “It’s very important that we don’t get overconfident because we have a plan and we’re ready with emergency operations center plans.

■ *Executive Leadership and
Community Resilience*

Have confidence in the guidebook, but remember that leading during a disaster is both a science and an art. Leadership requires both a regimented and a creative approach. Do as much as possible in advance, but be ready to lead and be creative. It's somewhat like being a battlefield commander. You're on duty; you are listening and looking; and then you adapt, react, and respond. I tell my people you need to be ready for every eventuality. It's like a war. The enemy is just across the hill. If we let up for one minute, we're dead."