

7-27-2018

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## Recommended Citation

Douglas, Tronda L., "A Faith-Based Organization's Engagement of an African American Community in Disaster Preparation" (2018). *2018 Program & Posters*. 24.

<https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/symposium2018/24>

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# A Faith-Based Organization's Engagement of an African American Community in Disaster Preparation

Tronda Douglas, PhD

## Problem

Faith-based organizations (FBOs) are essential disaster resource tools that could be used to prepare and assist rural community members in recovering from disasters. Current research is lacking in understanding how FBOs could be utilized in African American rural communities for disasters (McGeehan & Baker, 2017; Muller et al., 2014).

## Purpose

This qualitative, **exploratory case study** investigated how an FBO in a African American rural community organized resources to build a community-based volunteer fire department

## Significance

Findings of this study could provide information to human services professionals, government agencies, community members, and policy makers on how social networks can be galvanized to leverage the social capital needed to prepare rural communities for disasters

Bring awareness to community members in rural areas of the magnitude of resources available from the internet on disaster preparations

Community members who are properly prepared for disasters may require less resources and manpower from governmental and disaster relief agencies after experiencing the impact of a disaster

## Social Change Implications

This research empowers communities in society that are often not served well by traditional responses to disasters. Formally recognizing FBOs as disaster resource centers could help community members in rural area be properly prepared for disasters

## Theory or Framework

**Principles of Social Network Theory and Social Capital Theory** grounded the study. The principles are volunteerism; trust; membership in a network; neighborhood connections; togetherness; everyday connections; and generalized norms within the community.

## Relevant Scholarship

**Faith-based organizations** contain social networks of individuals with information and resources that could be instrumental in preparing African American communities for disasters (Aldrich & Meyer, 2015; Ashida et al., 2016; Paton & McClure, 2013)

The **social networks** in FBOs could provide insight to community leaders on how to address community vulnerabilities and misunderstandings about disasters (Casagrande et al., 2015; McGeehan & Baker, 2017; Taylor et al., 2017)

**Community-based organizations** could use the dimensions of social networks and social capital to understand how to utilize the skills and experiences of community members to become better equipped to handle disasters (Narayan & Cassidy, 2001; Patterson et al., 2010; Rivera & Nickels, 2014)

**Rural community members** could partner with FBOs and government agencies for disaster preparedness programs and trainings on how to acquire and manage resources (Lachlan & Spence, 2011; Eisenman et al., 2014; Stajura et al., 2012)

## Research Questions

**RQ1:** What strategies or approaches did an African American faith-based organization in a rural community use to establish a community-based all volunteer fire department?

**RQ2:** What recommendations do the organizations have that could be used to assist other communities in preparing for disasters?

## Participants

### Snowball Sampling

- 11 participants; 7 men and 4 women, including community leaders, church leaders, and fire department personnel

## Procedures

### Data collection

- Semi-structured 1 hour interviews with 12 questions
- Newspaper articles
- Photographs
- Church documents
- Fire department reports

## Analysis

Used open coding approach to identify and create codes for recurring words and phrase. Allowed the themes to emerge from the data. Grouped descriptive statements into word clusters and categorical themes

## Findings

### Determination

- Too long for emergency services to respond
- Lack of knowledge, money, training, equipment, guidance
- Lack of support from city, state, and county

### FBO Center of Activities

- Business meetings, fundraising
- Dissemination of information, work group organization
- Provided financial, physical, spiritual support

### Dedicated to Building the Fire Department

- Community members donated time and skilled labor
- Local businesses donated material
- Community obtained franchise/charter
- Received adequate firefighting/CPR training

### Resilience

- Rebounded from disaster - newly built fire station destroyed
- Fire station lost franchise

### Persistence

- Overcame challenges, obtained required resources
- Rebuilt after disaster

## Interpretation

Some key take-aways include

- Community members trusted each other
- Members belonged to a social network at the FBO
- Residents were relationally connected
- Members were united throughout the entire process
- Volunteers were recruited thru FBO & community
- Members wanted to protect their community
- Community members experienced negative circumstances from outside sources throughout the process of starting a fire department

## Limitations

Possible limitations include:

- Sample were limited to only African Americans because no other ethnicity groups are represented within the selected community.
- The case study specifically addressed the issue of disaster preparations in African American rural communities.
- Case site selected was a faith-based organization in an African American rural community.
- Participant demographics showed an age and generational difference

## Recommendations

### Future Research

- Conduct a quantitative study of social networks and social capital resources in rural communities after an impact of a disaster
- Investigate the preparation requirements of a community before a disaster strikes.

## Acknowledgements

*Committee Chair: Dr. Sandra Harris  
Committee Member: Dr. Tina Jaeckle  
University Reviewer: Dr. Barbara Benolie*