

## Final Transcript: AmeriCorps Impact Webinar 6

### Double Trouble Reigniting Civic Engagement through Pandemics and Disasters

Katy Hussey-Sloniker    So welcome to Double Trouble Reigniting Civic Engagement through Pandemics and Disasters. My name is Katy Hussey-Sloniker and I'm the learning officer for the AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation. Today's webinar features the work of an AmeriCorps research grantee project from the University of Houston and Texas Southern University that navigated COVID-19 and a national disaster during their work.

Our objective is to share the insights researchers learned real time about what facilitates and hinders civic engagement. There'll be plenty of time at the conclusion of the presentation to ask our panelists your questions. Please be sure to place those questions in the comments section of chat. We'll be collecting them for the question and answer portion time block towards the end of the webinar. And now, here to welcome us to the discussion is Andrea Robles, Research and Evaluation manager with the AmeriCorps Office of Research and Evaluation. Andrea?

Andrea Robles:        Thank you, Katy. Hello, everyone. And welcome. I want to thank you for joining us to hear about a participatory action research study that explores factors shaping community members' engagement in civic life, and as Katie said, during the COVID-19 pandemic and a natural disaster. Although this study highlights just three communities in a single city, we all know that other localities are increasingly facing similar situations because we believe that an engaged citizenry is essential for a thriving democracy.

In this spring and early summer's webinar series, we're highlighting research that provides context on our nation's civic life and clues to how we might reimagine and reignite our civil society. You will hear more about this from Dr. Mika Patel in just a few minutes. Next slide, please.

As an Office of Research and Evaluation, we have several ways we support our agency's mission of increasing civic engagement and volunteering to strengthen communities. As you see on your screen, we categorize our work into four main buckets. As an office, we also translate knowledge and evidence so that it can be utilized to strengthen organizations and communities, improve our programs, and enhance our members and volunteer service experiences.

Our webinar series is one way that we make our research and evidence available. In this webinar, our speakers fit into the second bucket since they have been conducting research and building scholarship on civic engagement.

But we also hope that our grantees and programs who work in this space can imagine ways to incorporate some of these important findings into their programming and evidence-based models.

Before I introduce the speakers, I want to say a brief background on the reasons we believe so strongly in funding this research. So, next slide, please.

So since 2002, we have partnered with the US Census to fill the supplement on volunteering and civic engagement in the current population survey that we call the CEB. After about a decade of collecting national level data, we turned to the National Academies of Sciences to make recommendations on how we could improve and expand our data collection efforts and increase our knowledge of civil society more broadly. One recommendation was to complement the national level survey with different measurement approaches. Next slide, please.

More specifically, the National Academies of Sciences recommended using other research designs such as in-depth, longitudinal or experimental studies and conducting research at the subnational and local levels. To address these recommendations, we developed a research grant competition for scholars and graduate students at universities to conduct innovative research on civic engagement and volunteering.

More importantly for today's discussion, we decided that the best way to incorporate local level research was to directly fund scholars and communities conducting participatory research approaches in their communities. Next slide, please.

So, why does participatory research suit AmeriCorps? Participatory research is an equitable approach to community engagement and this compliments the agency's mission. The heart of this approach is democratizing the research process so that communities can systematically identify their strengths and challenges. And we believe that AmeriCorps national service programs that focus on local communities can be part of a solution in community strengthening. The speakers you hear from today who are also 2018 research grantees, and we could put the link in the chat, are doing precisely this type of work. So, next slide please.

Today, the first speaker is Dr. Megha Patel, who is currently a colleague and a research analyst at the Office of Research and Evaluation at AmeriCorps and has focused her work and taught classes on human and social factors of disasters. She will frame the importance of today's topic.

Our second group of speakers are both academic and community researchers, in an alphabetical order, include JoAnn Burbridge, community partner, Dr. Denae King, Texas Southern University, Dr. Suzanne Pritzker, University of Houston, Matthew Robbins who's a research assistant, Joetta Stevenson, a community

partner. We also have Katrina French from the Disaster Services Unit, who is a disaster services specialist at AmeriCorps. And she will provide some reflections. Finally, Dr. Emily McDonald who is a research analyst at the Office of Research and Evaluation will facilitate the Q&A.

During the presentation, if you have any comments or questions or have any great ideas you want to share, please put them in the chat. So Megha, I'm handing this over to you. Thank you so much.

Dr. Megha Patel: Great. Thank you so much. Hello and welcome. My name is Dr. Megha Patel and I'm a research analyst with the Office of Research and Evaluation at AmeriCorps. The objective for today's webinar is to set the stage for an ongoing conversation about reigniting civic life based on insights from three communities that navigated COVID-19 and a natural disaster.

I appreciate that you all have joined us today because I would imagine that some of you are probably a bit tired of COVID. Like me, maybe you're ready to move on and move forward. But the thing is, COVID was a really unique moment in history. It's one of those rare instances of a disaster that we experienced collectively. Every single one of us was affected by this disaster in many different ways. And that offers a rare opportunity for collective reflection and learning.

If you would humor me, I'd like for you to take a minute to reflect on those early days of COVID back in March 2020. Where were you? Who were you with? How did you cope? How did you feel? What did you need in that moment? And what did you do to help your family, your friend, your community, either formally or informally? And if you're able to, maybe even go back and look at photos from that time to recall how drastically our lives changed from normal to not normal.

In a different life outside of my role here at AmeriCorps, I teach and study the concept of community resilience, particularly in the face of disasters. One of the things that makes the concept of resilience so tricky is that sometimes we think of it as a trait. We talk about a quality that is innate to an individual or a community. We think of it as an outcome. We talk about how a person or a community was able to bounce back or adapt to a catastrophic event. Or we think of it as a process and something that we cultivate over time.

If we think of community resilience as a process, scholars will say that one of the ways we develop resilience is by continuously engaging in critical reflection. We need to take the time as a community to reflect on what worked, what didn't work, and what we can do better next time. Next slide, please.

Here at AmeriCorps, we have tried to do just that through the Reigniting Civic Life series of webinars. If you aren't able to join us for our previous webinars, I hope you will click on the link in the chat and watch the recordings when you're able to. We have touched on topics such as exploring new paradigms of civic

engagement following the release of findings from the longitudinal survey about civic engagement trends in the US, where we were reminded that civic engagement takes many forms.

This is important to keep in mind for our conversation today as we consider what we can learn about the role of civic engagement before, during, and after a disaster. We also had a webinar on community-based research as a vehicle for civic engagement and community impact with insights from a participatory research project in Reno, Nevada that explored issues related to climate change.

That webinar is a great compliment to today's webinar as we'll be hearing from another participatory research project. And finally, recognizing that formal organization base volunteering has been in decline in the US in the last decade, we had a webinar on leveraging transformative resources to meet community needs and ignite a lifetime of civic engagement with insights on research and best practices from the Volunteer Generation fund program.

And today, you'll be hearing from an amazing team of researchers that were recipients of funding from AmeriCorps research grants program. They will be discussing their experiences not only through COVID but also what happened when they simultaneously had to deal with another disaster. Maybe this sounds like your community. We know that many places around the country and the world have dealt with and are dealing with similar situations, disasters upon disasters. It often feels like we have barely caught our breath before we're dealing with the next thing.

The research team will be discussing takeaways from their study about how communities navigated civic engagement during this time. As you listen to them, I hope you'll take the time to critically reflect on civic life in your own communities following COVID or other disasters, and reflect on what worked, what didn't work, and what you can do better next time. As a reminder, please post any questions you have in the chat and we will be sure to get to them in the Q&A after the presentation. And now, I'm happy to pass it on to Dr. Pritzker and she'll be introducing the research team. Thank you.

Dr. Suzanne Pri...: Thank you, Megha, and good afternoon everyone. Our team is excited about the opportunity to share our research today and we are extremely grateful to AmeriCorps for their continued support of our work. Next slide. I am Suzanne Pritzker, a faculty member at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work, and I'm presenting today along with Dr. Denae King from Texas Southern University, Matthew Robbins, one of our graduate research assistants, and with JoAnn Burbridge and Joetta Stevenson, two community members who have been integral partners in this research.

Today, we are sharing with you a presentation entitled Building Connection During a Time of Disconnect, exploring civic engagement during COVID and at the intersection of COVID and Natural Disasters. Next slide.

This project stems from a partnership between the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work and the Bullard Center for Environmental and Climate Justice at Texas Southern University and with three Houston area communities, Fifth Ward, Kashmere Gardens, Sunnyside and Galena Park. Next slide.

We came together in summer 2020 during the COVID Pandemic to conceptualize this project focused on community members' experiences with civic engagement during COVID. We identified three core questions that we wanted to understand more about. First, how was COVID shaping the ways that community members experience civic engagement? And second, what was happening that was supporting community members' civic engagement during the massive shifts emerging during COVID? And what was happening that was getting in the way of civic engagement?

But we also added what, to us, was a critical third question. Dr. King and I had previously engaged in an AmeriCorps supported community-based participatory research project after Hurricane Harvey had reached devastation across the Houston region. And through that project, we had been particularly struck by the ways in which community members consistently spoke about the civic impacts of Harvey in the context of the multiple prior disasters that they had experienced. In a Gulf Coast City like Houston, we are seeing in real time the compounding effects of multiple natural disasters.

And so, for us, it became critical that we explore the impacts of natural disasters and subsequent civic engagement experiences. So, we developed a third question. How did community members' prior natural disaster experiences shape their civic engagement during COVID? Next slide.

By summer 2020, our partner communities Fifth Ward, Kashmere Gardens, Sunnyside and Galena Park, each had specifically been identified as at high risk for COVID spread. Each had also been directly impacted by Hurricane Harvey, which had devastated so much of the Houston region just three years before COVID. What we could never have anticipated in summer 2020 was that our data collection in winter 2021 would be interrupted by yet another natural disaster.

In February 2021 as consistent and accessible COVID testing and vaccinations were still out of reach for so many, Winter Storm Yuri hit Texas and our state was completely unprepared for the devastating impacts. As you'll hear shortly, however, the occurrence of a natural disaster in the middle of our project enabled us to gain new insights into how the experiences of COVID and natural disasters intersected in people's civic lives. Next.

The project we share today was an entirely virtual community-based participatory research study guided by a team of nine community co-researchers, including Joetta Stevenson, who you'll hear from shortly. In each of our three partner communities, co-researchers recruited their neighbors to

participate via Zoom in virtual focus groups and interviews in the early months of 2021.

After these focus groups and interviews were complete, co-researchers met virtually to conduct preliminary analyses that informed the findings we will share today. Now, I'll pass this over to Matthew Robbins, a recent Master of Social Work graduate who is truly the reason that we were able to implement this project so effectively to share more about what it looked like to implement a community-based project like this entirely virtually.

Matthew Robbins: Thank you, Dr. Pritzker. Hello, how is everybody doing today? I'm Matthew Robbins. I served as a research assistant for the project. I got a chance to work with a really great staff and some really great co-researchers. So today, I'll be discussing the successes and also the challenges. First, I'll start with technology access. We were able to provide the co-researchers with laptops, also mobile hotspots and also headsets, so they will be able to conduct the focus groups.

Also, I was able to build real genuine based relationships with these co-researchers. I was new coming into Houston. I was from Mississippi. It was my first semester in grad school and I just had no idea about the communities that we would be working in. I got a chance to connect with these co-researchers as in speaking with them individually one-on-one, almost talking for hours, just understanding their passion for their community, how they felt that their communities were considered underserved.

And also getting a chance to see how this research would expose the disparities and disadvantages that each community had. And we were able to complete a really successful job by doing that while it all started basically out there, building that rapport in the beginning. But I also had a chance to connect with participants as well. I got a chance to understand that so many participants wanted to join the study, but they also did not have access to a computer or a mobile phone.

So many participants will go over to their neighbor house or use family member's devices just so they can be a part of the study. That just shows you how awesome and how important this study, and they want to expose so many things to the community about the community to be able to have a successful community after this research. And I was able to be considered by my team, the tech guy, Zoom was new to everybody.

I had the chance to create a Zoom tutorial as in how to join the call, how if you get disconnected in the middle of the call, I would sometimes take calls in the middle of calls. Sometimes meetings will start almost an hour later. But we had participants willing to be able to still join, want to continue with the focus group. So I had an awesome opportunity to be able to be the tech guy, build relationships, and also just provide opportunity and technology access to the community.

And next, I will pass it over to Ms. Joetta, one of my favorite co-researchers, where she'll talk about her experience with the project.

Joetta Stevenso...:

Thank you, Matthew. I appreciate it. I am Joetta Stevenson and I am the president of the Greater Fifth Ward Super Neighborhood, which is an organization that was created by the City of Houston. As a matter of fact, all of Houston is divided technically by super neighborhoods. But there's only about 30 of us maybe that's really, really active.

In my role as super neighborhood president, when COVID first struck, one of the things that happened once the city shut down, we had an issue with people being able to get food. People with co-morbidities that weren't able to go to the grocery store or had no contact with family members who normally would visit them nonstop, but it was total isolation.

So, I started working with another organization that ... It was called Coco, and they set up a food truck that was more of a hub so that other neighborhoods' community leaders could come in with trucks or little flatbeds or trailers and get food from a hub at a church. We use a church parking lot and get food for their various neighborhoods. And even beyond that, we started doing other things in the community to help with our senior citizens that are disabled.

The one thing that I felt was so remarkable about even being asked to participate as a co-researcher in this project was the fact that they were so good with looking at pre focus group, during focus group and post focus group. And the questions, you're a little bit apprehensive, because I had not been a part of something like this, been a co-researcher like this before.

But it was in, what I call, plain speak. It embraced where I was and where I am. And I understood and we had a wonderful team from U of H, Texas Southern, and the graduate researcher, he was always accommodating. Because we're so active in my neighborhood with the super neighborhood, if I had a conflict in time or conflict on a day, then he was very amenable and very flexible to help me in terms of even training, understanding how to ask the question properly.

And what I learned through them, I knew that when we started looking and recruiting people to become part of the focus groups, I knew it needed to go across a vast diverse group. It needed to be male, female. I think the youngest was maybe 18 still in high school, the oldest in her '80s. So we wanted a broad spectrum of answers and perspectives in a situation that was across America that was so isolating and so unusual for all of us.

And the people that were chosen, I knew that with encouragement of Matthew and Dr. King, I knew that I needed to make sure that everyone had a voice. The focus groups I used were basically nothing, there were no more than 10 people, it was 8 to 10. And I knew I needed everyone to speak. And we know when you have no matter the size group, everybody has a different type of personality.

But guess what? It worked. And everyone contributed. I'm looking at the slide right now and it's saying connection in a time of disconnect. People actually, I believe were comfortable and were welcoming to be spoken to. When you are so isolated for someone even on a Zoom to talk to you directly, find out what your thoughts are, it actually had more of an uplifting impact on the people that were chosen to participate in this.

And then, of course, the information they provided was immeasurable. One of the things I take away from what happened from those findings during the post, we learned about what all the focus groups did and all the information that was gathered. One of the takeaways is that what, say, my 80-year-old thought in terms of who do they turn to in order to get information or believe what they're saying different from what my 18 or even my 30-year-old thought.

I learned that there's a certain aspect when you're in the community as old as Fifth Ward, we're about 154 years old, 55, something like that. When you're in a community this old, you understand you're dealing with younger people who are very good with technology. But as you go older and older, no technical skills whatsoever. And you learn that they have different ways of communicating and wanting to be communicated to.

And that was kind of eye-opening particularly with the younger people because we also found out in community organizations what some of our weaknesses are and how to reach people. The most active people in my community are not that astute when it comes to technology. But we are pulling in more of a younger crowd. And even if it's one or two of them, they're the ones I sit down and talk to and say, "Could you get me on Instagram? Could you get me on TikTok?" Because I know that that's where we're going to reach those members of my community.

So, it was eye-opening for an organization that has to deal with everybody within the family unit. And I thought it was outstanding. I really appreciated this happening within the historic Fifth Ward. Thank you.

Denae King:

Thank you, Ms. Joetta. Next slide please. So I am Dr. Denae King. I'm the associate director of the Bullard Center for Environmental and Climate Justice at Texas Southern University. And I have the pleasure of sharing with you the findings from the focus groups that Ms. Joetta so eloquently shared in terms of how they were successfully implemented. And she is absolutely correct when she says that people felt comfortable, that people were willing to share even in a virtual setting.

We were, Dr. Pritzker and I, were quite surprised. We were very concerned when we started the study and we had to convert it to a virtual study. But after a few focus groups and our wonderful co-researchers facilitating the focus groups, it became very apparent that we were going to receive some very rich and useful information. So, I'll be sharing with you information about the



facilitators and barriers that we found and specifically the disaster related findings. Next slide.

So in terms of facilitators and barriers, community members, residents basically had, as many of us did, COVID fear and stress. And so, people were very concerned about getting sick and whether or not they would get anybody else sick. People were concerned about getting engaged in terms of it putting a strain, the pandemic putting a strain on everyone, and it being very stressful. Others shared that the pandemic changed their lives. I think it changed many of our lives in terms of COVID precautions.

As it related to civic engagement, people were concerned that they missed being in the presence of others. So being able to physically greet and see faces and hug people. There were suggestions about the wanting to get together and using things like drive-ins and theaters, basketball courts, using schools, parking lots, any way that they could think of in terms of getting together in a safe way and using COVID precautions.

And then, others expressed concerns about people not necessarily adhering to the precautions. And so, that made them less likely to get involved because they were concerned about others and not themselves adhering. Next slide, please.

So information access was really important. Ms. Joetta shared a little bit about how we learned about different modes of disseminating information and how that is important when we think about different types of people in the community. And so, some talked about it being easier to participate and we use different kinds of social media, things like Facebook, WhatsApp, or even Zoom.

Others shared that they were not necessarily as technologically advanced. And Ms. Joetta has shared a little bit of that when we think about our seniors in these communities. Some people said they needed information that was written. They wanted things written and shared with them. And then others felt like they were just left out of the loop all the time. So, they felt like their community was not provided information.

And then, there were concerns about misinformation. I think we saw a lot of that during COVID and maybe some still to this day. Some participants discussed that they were distrustful and how information was disseminated. And then, others talked about it being very hard to focus on the information. It was just information overload. So, too much information and not really understanding what was true and what was necessarily not as useful information. Next slide, please.

And then, community members shared a lot about unmet community needs. And so, Dr. Pritzker shared in the beginning that the Houston area experienced quite a few extreme weather events prior to COVID. And many of our communities had not recovered from some of those events, specifically

Hurricane Harvey. And so, we heard a lot about residents feeling like they were on lockdown now during COVID and they were not necessarily clear about what the plan was in terms of getting access to COVID vaccinations and COVID testing.

Others talked about being overshadowed by other communities and feeling like some communities were receiving these resources while their community was left out. Some participants described being not necessarily valued, not necessarily getting the information that they needed. They even talked about the importance of understanding communities and where they are. And so, people needing a walkup site in addition to a drive up site.

So many of us experienced driving through to do testing and to get vaccination. And so, this participant described a need for a walkup site for that. And then, others shared, as we've shared previously, that the community was a technology desert. So, people talk about food deserts. Well, this community is a technology desert. And so they felt like there needed more resources in terms of cell phones and Wifi connections. Next slide.

And so, with all of the extreme weather events, the perception of an equitable recovery was very apparent in our study. We had residents that really talked about they didn't have the resources that they needed to help the community heal or grow. We also had residents that talked about a lack of response from government. And so, they feel like promises were made and had been years and really nothing had happened. And so, this perception of inequitable recovery was very clear. Next slide.

And then, when we think about Hurricane Harvey and the disaster that occurred where most of the city was flooded for at least three or four days, there are unfortunately, to this day, still residents in our city that have not recovered. And so, people felt like they were already behind before COVID. And now, with COVID, their recovery process was going to be exacerbated. Next slide, please.

And so, when we think about the intersection of COVID and disaster, you got to hear from Dr. Pritzker that unfortunately during our focus groups, we also experienced Winter Storm Yuri. And so, Winter Storm Yuri helped some residents to feel like they were able to come back together. We were forced to come back together in many ways.

This resident said, "It brought us back together because we needed each other, so we were without power for maybe four or five days. And as a result of the frozen temperatures for the four or five days, many of our homes experienced broken pipes and water damage. And so, it really forced us to come together as it did in Hurricane Harvey." So it was very similar for some residents.

And then, some people talked about being afraid to assist others during COVID. So if there were a natural disaster, some people said that they would be afraid

to help. They were just concerned about COVID. And then, others said, no matter what happened during COVID, they would still be there to help each other in spite of COVID precautions. Next slide.

And so, one of the ways that we do this great work is through community partnership, as you can tell. We work closely with community-based organizations that bring together the co-researchers like Ms. Joetta, that you were able to meet. And these community partners were able to use some of the findings from this study to kind of prioritize how best to work in their community during COVID and also their future funding mechanisms. And so, I'll turn it over to Ms. JoAnn Burbridge next.

JoAnn Burbridge:

Hello everyone. My name is JoAnn Burbridge and I'm the Vice President of Sunnyside Community Redevelopment Organization. Our organization received its nonprofit status in 2017. And our mission is to seek to create healthy and sustainable community. And we do this by advocating, educating, and empowering our community residents.

So, Sunny Sunnyside is positioned to do a lot of what we have just heard. And with the 23,000 approximately residents in Sunnyside, we have noticed that there is this tremendous fear to bring data to the community. And so, we reached out to several organizations, the city and the county, to assist us in our COVID initiative. We learned that doing the study, we had three co-researchers in Sunnyside that assisted in this study.

And we learned that COVID in Sunnyside was one of the hotspots. And so, we had difficulties trying to reach individuals to come out to receive their vaccination. So we contacted the Harris County Public Health, and we asked them, could they assist us in providing vaccinations. We reached out to the community. We did a lot of outreach by contacting our community residents. We made phone calls. We sent out information. We knocked on doors trying to get people in for those two times that we had the vaccination. And this was held at one of our member's church, First Missionary Baptist Church.

And with all of our efforts, we only received 68 people in the two times that we conducted the vaccination events. We learned from that that a lot of the fear was with the healthcare system that people did not want to get their vaccination because they didn't think that it was going to benefit them. As a matter of fact, we heard stories that they might get even worse off if they had COVID.

So we had a lot of education to provide to the community so that they would allay that fear. We received a grant from the Houston Health Foundation. And this was very productive in trying to get the accurate information in the hands of our community. So, in order to accomplish this, we hired block captains and the block captains are charged with going to the community. We identified three block captains and we have three zip codes, major zip codes, in our community that we wanted to reach out to.

And the block captains have been very productive along with the community health advisory committee that we formed to have us reach those individuals that are really in need of getting their vaccination. We are constantly getting information out to the community. We are providing test kits. We assist in any way possible to get them to understand the need.

We have a survey that we conduct each time we reach out to our community to ask them questions in terms of, have they received their vaccination? How many did they receive? Did they get their booster? What do they know about COVID and how it impacts their health? And what we are learning from this survey is that a lot of misinformation has been presented to them. And that fear factor is very, very real.

So, that is our challenge now in our community is to get to as many people as possible to make sure that that information is clear and accurate. This grant that we have with the Health Foundation will conclude in September. But we were fortunate enough to get another grant from the Hershey Foundation, but to continue this effort to get as many people knowledgeable about the effects of COVID and all the other health disparities that are affecting us in our community.

We realize that communication is the key to reaching out. And we want to get as many people involved in our organization and our community so that we can make sure that the information that we share with our residents are accurate and fair. So that is the findings, the future findings, that we have is that there is still a need to get as many resources in our community as possible. So, thanks to Dr. Denae King and Texas Southern University and University of Houston and all the other universities that have assisted us about how we can get more information into our community.

Denae King:

Thank you, Ms. Burbridge. Next slide, please. So overall, this was a phenomenal study. I think I shared previously that we were a little concerned that this was going to now be a totally virtual project. We had never done virtual focus groups. We had many people who had never really participated in a virtual setting. It was quite a few technology challenges, but overall, it was a great experience.

It demonstrated our resilience as researchers and community advocates. It demonstrated that people really had informative information to share with us in terms of what they felt, what they were experiencing, both as it related to civic engagement and their need to be involved and how they were involved. As well as the need to understand how community works in the event of a disaster.

I think we learned a lot about disaster response and how best to communicate that information. While there were challenges with the experiment, we found that because of COVID, people were on focus groups for over two hours. Ms. Joetta held a focus group for over two hours where people really shared and gave her all kinds of rich information. And I don't know that that would've

happened had it not been in a virtual setting. And so, we really obtained some very rich information.

This information has been used in terms of disseminating information to residents in the three different communities. We did not say we did the focus groups in English and in Spanish, and so we were able to also communicate and provide information in multiple different communities. So, we were very pleased with the outcome of the study. We are all using the information as Ms. JoAnn Burbridge shared in subsequent funding. And we are grateful that you joined us today to learn more. And I think I'll turn it over now for questions.

Katrina French:

Hello, my name's Katrina French. I'm a Disaster Services Specialist with the AmeriCorps Disaster Services Unit. I'm so grateful for the opportunity to be able to offer the reflection on today's webinar. And huge thanks for our panelists and the Office of Research Evaluation for today's session. Disasters reveal what is broken or weak. They show us what needs attention, support and care. And they do this in a very forceful way, usually also delivering trauma to both the disaster survivor and responders alike.

But something else can happen. There can be an intense bonding that can immediately happen after a disaster event. And I always find it profound. Neighbors can turn into first responders helping each other get out of their homes, helping with debris clearance, helping get each other to safety, to gather necessities like food and water, and just checking on each other. After disasters, strangers can become lifelong friends.

Disasters show us what we need to work on, but they also show us that when we put aside our assumptions, when we put aside our differences, and most importantly, when we put aside our busyness, we can make incredible things happen. I've seen people who on any other day would be arguing with each other about politics or religion or other issues, put aside those disagreements and work towards a common good.

The challenge of what disasters teach us is that it requires thoughtful, meaningful, and regular engagement to keep that solidarity and the engagement going to provide that attention and support and care to repair and shore up what the disaster has shown us is broken or weak. And all of us on the call have the power to help out with that. We have the power to engage in our communities, to expand our networks, our allies, to collectively work on providing the attention and support and care we know is needed, especially for those who are routinely underserved by our society, especially with extreme weather events becoming more and more common.

So, here's a few concrete actions you can take. First off, personally prepare, learn what disaster events are likely for your area and prepare yourself and your family for those events. The better prepared you are, the more options you have, and the more options you have, the more resilient you'll be during a disaster event, [www.ready.gov](http://www.ready.gov) is a great starting place for preparedness. Once

you've learned how to prepare, share that knowledge with friends, family, coworkers, and others, help spread that knowledge because a community that is best prepared, sorry, help spread that knowledge because the better a community is prepared, the better its citizens will come through that disaster event.

Third, get active in your community. Find an organization that will help during a disaster event and become a volunteer and if you can, donate funds. Find out what organizations are already serving underserved individuals and families and volunteer and donate if you can. Show up to your city council meetings. Stay informed about what your local government is doing to better prepare and mitigate disaster effects. And ask questions if they're not clear.

Finally, be a force multiplier. Share your efforts with others and invite them to join you. The more folks that are committed to civic engagement, the better your community will be for you. Take your kids, your nieces, your nephews with you, take anybody who will join you with that. And finally, I've also been asked to talk a little bit about what the Disaster Services unit is. So if we could go to the next slide.

The Disaster Services Unit is a small five-person unit inside AmeriCorps agency. And we lead the agency's engagement across the disaster services cycle. So that includes disaster preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation. And we work with our federal, state, local, nonprofit, faith-based and other partners to achieve those results. The DSU's role is to be a central hub for the agency's disaster-related activities and ensure that our engagement in this area is appropriate, consistent, and coordinated.

We've got three basic functions, and largely we are training in technical assistance office. So, we provide education and support both internally to the other offices within the agency. But also, to state service commissions, state emergency management agencies, FEMA, National VOAD, Voluntary Organizations Active In Disaster, State VOADs, nonprofits, faith-based and AmeriCorps, and AmeriCorps Seniors programming.

We also coordinate the agency's disaster services strategy. And when there's a federally declared disaster, we can turn on our operational command and coordination and field AmeriCorps disaster response teams to federally declared disasters across the country and territories. So that concludes my portion. Thank you so much for the opportunity. And I see the comment in chat about the website for ready.gov, I'll put that in. As well as how you can reach us in the disaster services unit if you would like a consult or more information about what we do or if you think we could be helpful to your organization. Thanks so much. And now, I'm going to pass it to Emily.

Dr. Emily McDon...: All right. Thank you so much, Katrina. Good afternoon everyone. We've been compiling all of the questions you might have. So, I'm going to invite our panelists back on screen. So first, we want to toss this to our friends in Houston.

What do you all think other communities can learn from your study about civic engagement in the context of disasters? Who we can start with? Our community partners, Ms. JoAnn, would you like to speak to that?

JoAnn Burbridge: I think the best thing that communities can learn is the need to reach out to the community. You can't communicate with the community by sitting in your house or sitting in your organization's office. And it does take time and it does require an effort. But if that is the goal to try to get to as many people as possible, I suggest to do so.

If you are able to get funding where you can hire people to do that work, I think, that's also a great idea. But the key is to reach out to the community.

Joetta Stevenso...: I'd like to piggyback on what JoAnn is saying. It's one thing that I have picked up on that I think is very valuable, that particularly when it comes to community-based organizations, they need to collaborate. Collaborate. Collaborate. And because there are some little tiny, maybe it might be a little, I don't know, grandmother down the street in a house, and that grandmother has outreach because she helped raise some people that's grownups now who now have children.

But in her bedroom, she has a file cabinet filled with cheese crackers, Vienna sausage, soda pop, whatever it is, because she's feeding the community and you have no idea that's what she's doing because you haven't collaborated or had a conversation with her. And this is a person that's a resource. When you are talking to people and you find folks that might need food, and we are in a food desert in my community, then that's an immediate resource right there that you didn't know anything about.

We all bring something to the table. We all bring something. Like JoAnn, they are excellent when it comes to the community development and housing. If I have questions because I have collaborated or been in meetings with them, I know I can pick up a phone and call JoAnn or Deborah. I can call and ask them about things that I'm not that good with when it comes to housing or certain aspects of development. So collaborate.

That's how we learn. That's how we reach everybody. There are people in my community that I haven't reached, but somebody down that street, they have already reached them. So we must communicate. It is really, really important. We drop flyers. Like I said, we have a variety of ways of reaching people. We'll go to those little corner stores that a lot of people do. Well, the media does.

They don't like them. But guess what? That little corner store is where that mother with five children or that grandmother who's taking care of grandchildren, that's the store they're going to go to. So, we drop flyers of anything that's going on in the community that impacts them. So, that's kind of what I wanted to contribute is important. Collaborate. Collaborate.

And I need even the larger organizations, stop going to your regular go-tos because they already have funding or whatever. And I promise you, a lot of that funding isn't quite trickling down to where it needs to go. So, you need to stretch and find those little mom and pop things that's going on because those are the people that have the ears of some folks that you might not ever get a chance to talk to, but that's how you reach them.

Dr. Emily McDon...: Thank you so much. Denaë, Matthew or Suzanne, did y'all want to speak to that as well?

Denaë King: I would. So I think that oftentimes in the event of disasters, and Katrina kind of touched on this a little bit in terms of thinking about preparedness. So I know that in our communities that we did this work in, all three of those communities have a system in place when you think about preparedness. And so, they do food banks every month. They do outreach in terms of having meetings where people know that they can get information on a monthly basis.

And so when you think about preparedness, they are the go-to organizations, they are the go-to leaders when you think about disasters and what needs to happen. They know people in the community that may be disabled or home bound. They know the people that they need to check on.

And so, when we think about preparedness those community-based organizations like SCRO and the community leaders like Ms. Joetta and Ms. JoAnn, they are the people who are really the central unit of preparedness for us as it relates to disasters.

Dr. Suzanne Pri...: I think, also, in terms of takeaways for other communities, I think, it's really important that we think about the interpersonal civic engagement that JoAnn, Joetta, Dr. King have been sharing, but also the compounding impact. We talked about the compounding impact of disasters. But there's a compounding impact of inequitable recovery. And I think that that's what really seemed too, that there's no reason to trust institutions. There's no reason these governmental institutions that are just making it harder and harder to recover.

You still haven't recovered from two natural disasters ago, and now there's disasters, pandemics, et cetera, coming. And I think that what we're really seeing is as these institutions are not doing their part in supporting recovery in equitable ways, it becomes then more and more the necessity of relying on each other. And I think that the disconnect in terms of when we talk about civic engagement governmentally as opposed to within communities, I think, is a really important takeaway.

Dr. Emily McDon...: We have another question, and I think this actually speaks to one of our previous webinars. So, we have the civic engagement and volunteering supplement that we have in our office. And someone asked, "With so many stepping away from volunteerism, how can we best encourage people to return



to service or encourage those who have never volunteered before to begin service?"

And so maybe we can think about the interpersonal civic engagement that we're talking about. So how can we maybe connect that to other forms of volunteerism?

Denae King:

So Ms. Joetta and Matthew and I had some conversation just yesterday about volunteerism and the importance of finding new people to now come in and do some of this work with them. They are in need of more assistance. And so, Ms. Joetta was sharing the importance of bringing in young people. And I think you've shared that today as well, Ms. Joetta, about the importance of bringing in new generations and people who can bring different kinds of expertise.

And so I think oftentimes people who are volunteers think about helping in the event of a disaster in terms of they need to come in and help us do like mud and gunking or helping with construction, things like that. But there are all kinds of different types of services that are needed. So there are people who you need people to help with social media. Ms. Joetta talked about needing people to help with technology.

So, we need to do a better job of explaining the various roles that a volunteer could play and not make people feel that the only thing that they can do is come in immediately after a disaster and help us with cleanup. Because there is so much more to what happens after a disaster than just cleanup. So, really, kind of providing different roles, making sure people understand that there are a lot of different kind of roles. We need people to bring in hot food after a disaster. So we need people who would volunteer to do that.

There are all kinds of things that are needed and we should do a better job of making sure people understand that, I think. Just one thought.

JoAnn Burbridge:

I'd like to agree with what Dr. King said. What we have found in our community, it's an elderly community, and we're seeing a lot of our elders being pushed out of their community. And we also see a lot of development with new homes and with that comes new people that's coming into the community. And that's where the awareness of what you do in your community is very, very important.

So we have reached out to some of the new members of our community, and they are in another generation, younger than us, and we're asking them for their support. And as Dr. King said, the role clarification is very, very important. If you ask a person to come and share 30 minutes of their time or share their skills and allow them to be part of your organization, I think, that's very beneficial.

Matthew Robbins:

I'll comment on, I'll just say probably you have the traditional way of volunteerism, but I think probably coming up with strategies to see what ways

do younger communities would like to see volunteerism happen. Or trying to see the mixture of satisfying both the elderly and the younger generation to see just ways they want to be involved. Just asking that question or just social media, just creating a poll or anything like that, just trying to see what they like to see. So that's my insight.

Dr. Emily McDon...: I think it was Ms. Joetta that spoke to this before, but we were thinking about participatory research itself, the actual process of collecting this data. Could you all speak to how that impacted civic engagement and maybe the ripple effects of bringing people together in this form of inquiry?

Joetta Stevenso...: I think that one thing that helped us get more data is the, like I said, during the training as a co-researcher, I learned and I listened well as well as I could. And that you have to sometimes have those little follow up questions. You have your regular questions, but what's that next question? Because it might be a next step in that answer that the person hasn't quite elaborated on.

So a lot of our questions had some follow. It was optional to ask them, but we worked on all of that just in case we needed them. And what it became very beneficial, because we were able to get more information and more detail from that individual that was speaking. And like I said, you let people understand in the beginning, there are no wrong answers. We just need this information so that it can help put together programs, help to improve programs, things that can raise the quality of life in your neighborhood, in our neighborhood.

I think that was extremely important, that aspect of the way we asked those questions. And we allowed them to answer in their own way, but we also had those little pull out more detail follow-up questions.

Dr. Emily McDon...: Anybody else that would speak to the participatory research process?

JoAnn Burbridge: I think when you decide on who you want to participate, as example, in our community, when we identified the co-researchers, we thought about where they live and their involvement in the community and the relationship that they have with others in the community. And I think establishing that relationship makes it even more comfortable for people to answer those questions.

Joetta Stevenso...: One more thing I want to add is that in my community, well, you need to look at your community and see the demographics. In my community, we have a high population of Spanish speakers from a variety of ethnicities from Mexico, be it Dominican Republic or whatever. And you have to think, well, how do I reach someone who they might speak English or they might not speak English.

So oftentimes, a lot of the things that we pass out or flyers, we may do a front and back. Front English backside Spanish, because we want everyone to understand whatever that service or that research is happening. And then, we also go to, when we drop flyers, we actually have a few businesses. Where Fifth

Ward is located, we have what's called Denver Harbor, which is as a very high level of Hispanic population. We have just at our borders, Buffalo Bayou.

So right across Buffalo Bayou, we have what we call the East End or Second Ward, heavily Hispanic. And then, to our western side, there's a lot of Hispanics in the near north side area. We want everyone to be able to take advantage of the services and the resources, and we have to reach everyone. And so, you need to think in terms, if you are in a community, I have a friend, she said in her community there's a high number of people from the Middle East. Or a high number of people in other communities that speak Mandarin, you need to look at your demographics because no one should be left out, no one.

And you'd be surprised at how they will come, whether they can speak English or not, they'll come to events. They'll bring maybe someone in their family to help communicate, but they come, that's important. So look at your demographics.

Denae King:

I'll just add that doing a CBPR is obviously a lot easier when you have very involved and engaged co-researchers like Miss Joetta and Miss JoAnn. So I think it's important to make sure that you are working closely and that you already have an existing relationship with community. That's one. Two is that you value the expertise of community. And so, when we put these questions together, so when we put together the focus group script, when we reviewed any of the findings from the focus groups, we met with our co-researchers.

We shared what we thought we heard, we got their input on the findings. They came back and said, "Well, we thought we heard some other things." So we went back, we looked at the data again, we shared more with the co-researchers. There's a constant bi-direction communication for this project. And I think that selecting really good co-researchers, people who are engaged in community, really know what's happening in community, who are trusted in community. I think those are things that make participatory research work.

Dr. Suzanne Pri...:

Yeah, I was just going to say somebody trained in traditional research methods first, I think, what really stands out is actually a lot to underscore a lot of what Ms. Joetta shared in that Dr. King and I didn't make those decisions. We trained, we provided training on how to recruit community members. What is for a focus group? How to facilitate a focus group? But we didn't make the decisions about who participated? Which neighborhoods were represented? Which community members were represented?

That was community driven. And I think that's really critical. I think another thing to add onto is, in all honesty, this is our first public presentation of the findings. We haven't written on the findings yet, but the community ... But as Ms. JoAnn shared, these findings are already being used. And so, there's much more, I think, engagement in having community members sitting in the focus groups and hearing from their community members having access to the findings long before they're in publishable presentable form really means that

there is that utilization of information really early on in the process and is able to cycle back.

And even as Mr. JoAnn shared that the way that these findings helped inform some of the block captain work they've done. Then that informs back to how we make sense of the findings and how we share those findings in other outlets. So I think that sort of, in back and forth engagement, is really critical in the participatory process.

Dr. Emily McDon...: Yeah. And for one more question. This is a little bit of a piggyback question to all we're talking about, but were there any challenges around power dynamics as you were bringing different people from different backgrounds, so researchers and different types of institutions and neighborhoods? Were there any power dynamics that you maybe spoke about directly if it was a challenge and how did you deal with it?

Matthew Robbins: I think I can go first to speak. I don't believe there were any. I think we really just let the co-researcher run the show as in just let them be the ... They knew their community better than we did. And we just really just let them speak and ask them what do they think, and let them just be so involved and act of any decision we made, make sure we ask them. And just me being in the meetings and focus groups, I just let them know that, "Hey, I'm here to support and I'm also here to learn." And I think that's what's really made a lot of the focus groups and the data become so rich and just become very great because the power of dynamics was never there because we knew that they knew their community. So that's from my perspective.

JoAnn Burbridge: As a community partner, we didn't feel it because we knew the relationship was very important that had already been established with other initiatives. So, it was collaborative all the way from the beginning. And the collaboration, it continues with other events and projects that we're working on.

Dr. Emily McDon...: Suzanne or Denaë, would you like to speak to that as well?

Denaë King: So I actually have the pleasure of working with Ms. JoAnn and Ms. Joetta on several environmental justice initiatives. So, we work very closely on work related to water and air pollution. Both of them are living communities where their organizations or their affiliation with organizations, they put in their own community air monitoring networks. And so, we do a lot of work together. And so, we have strong working relationships, I think. And so, I personally think that they are experts in all of the things that we work on together. And so, we have equal voice in whatever it is that we're developing and working on.

So I wanted to make sure that they answered that first because I wanted to make sure that you got to hear their perspective. But in my perspective, I think, that we work well together and we make sure that both of our voices are heard in all of our collaborative work.

Dr. Emily McDon...: Awesome. Thank you all so much. This was an amazing Q&A. And thank you for bringing us all down to Houston and sharing the process and all of the findings with us. I'm going to pass it back to our learning officer, Katy.

Katy Hussey-Slo...: We're now at the close of our webinar. We'd like to thank our panelists for their presentation and discussion. Katrina French for the AmeriCorps Reflection and Emily McDonald for facilitating the Q&A portion of our webinar. We hope we hit our mark for today's webinar objective and that you walk away from the session having gained a new understanding of what hinders and facilitates civic engagement. This is the final AmeriCorps Evidence and Impact webinar for the fiscal year 2023.

AmeriCorps has a new season of webinars that will start back up in September. So be on the lookout for topic announcements and registration. I'd like to extend a thank you to our Mathematica and Guardian of Honors colleagues for their technical support and coordination. This webinar recording and support materials will be posted on the [americorps.gov](http://americorps.gov) website under the impact webinars within the coming weeks.

Please feel free to share with your colleagues and networks. We will also be sending out a post webinar survey, so please let us know your thoughts on this webinar and any ideas for future webinars. We hope you have a wonderful rest of the day. And thank you very much for joining us today.