

PROMOTING COLLECTIVE RECOVERY THROUGH ORGANIZATIONAL MOBILIZATION: THE POST-9/11 DISASTER RELIEF WORK OF NYC RECOVERS

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Summary. NYC RECOVERS, an alliance of organizations concerned with New York City's social and emotional recovery post-9/11, was formed to meet the need to rebuild social bonds strained or ruptured by the trauma to the regional system caused by the destruction of the Twin Towers. NYC RECOVERS, with minimal funding, was able to create a network of 1000 organizations spanning the five boroughs, carrying out recovery events throughout the 'Year of Recovery', September 2001 to December 2002. This paper describes the concepts, techniques and accomplishments of NYC RECOVERS, and discusses potentials of the model, as well as obstacles to its implementation.

Introduction

It is well known that massive disasters cause numerous problems, ranging from individual traumatization to economic losses. As societies have learned more and more about the effects of disasters and the use of remediation, they have become more and more committed to post-disaster intervention. By the end of the 20th century, it was usual practice in the United States to initiate vigorous post-disaster relief efforts, in the short-term focused on containing the threat to life and property, and then, in the long-term, directed at the rehabilitation of affected people and the local economy. A large body of experience has documented that the immediate response to a disaster can be optimized by preparedness that includes planning, training and stocking key materials. However, there is not nearly the same level of certainty about the efforts needed to ensure the long-term recovery of communities (Quarantelli, 1997; Paton & Johnston, 2001; Prizzia & Helfand, 2001; Norris *et al.*, 2002).

The model of intervention that was used to respond to the September 11th World Trade Center disaster in New York City had the principal feature of being directed at 'affected individuals'. The governing assumption appeared to be that remedying the ills of the most affected people and businesses would lead to general recovery. In both the sharp demarcation between the 'affected' and 'unaffected' and the targeting of

individuals, the disaster relief policy was at odds with the lived experience of the disaster as a process that disrupted the lives and well-being of millions of people.

There are many examples of this, but a few will suffice. People who had lost jobs or income because they worked in Lower Manhattan were included in the 'affected' group. Taxi drivers, however, were not eligible for benefits, even though they were severely affected by the disaster (Desai, 2002). In some cases, neighbouring businesses got significantly different aid because of differences in their addresses that placed one 'inside' and the other 'outside' the disaster area. Obviously, destabilized businesses that were located at some distance from Lower Manhattan had no call on disaster relief (Wyatt & Fried, 2003).

This highly targeted relief model was inadequate, in the authors' view, because it failed to address the broad impact of the disaster. The Twin Towers were not 'buildings' in the sense that the federal building that was destroyed in Oklahoma City was a 'building.' Rather, the World Trade Center was an enormous complex that organized commerce for a very large region. Its destruction led to the dispersion of 50,000 people and many businesses. This set ripple effects in motion that staggered the region. In addition, the towers were the iconic representation of the city. As such, their destruction represented the symbolic destruction of the whole city, an aspect of the catastrophe that was felt by people in the whole area. The World Trade Center was a crossroads of travel, and its destruction obliterated paths through the metropolitan area, reorganizing significant distributions of goods, services and people. Thus, there was no corner of the metropolitan area that was not 'affected' by the events of 9/11 and their aftermath.

The disaster operated not simply at the epicentre, but throughout the region. For example, it disrupted social connections in many ways, some not so obvious. Among those who perished, a remarkably high proportion were leaders not only at work, but also in their home communities. One example was Clyde Frazier Jr, who was the principal organizer of a girls' basketball tournament (*New York Times*, 2002, p. 165). The tournament created important opportunities for poor girls to demonstrate their talents and win athletic scholarships. In the absence of Frazier, its continued existence was threatened. However, the tournament and the girls it served were excluded from disaster relief.

Economic losses, social disconnection and emotional turmoil affected a group of people that numbered in the millions. The recovery of the entire group was not likely to happen as a result of remedying the losses suffered by individuals at the epicentre of the tragedy. Rather, it is proposed, it was important to add to targeted relief efforts a more general attempt to ensure collective recovery.

The ecological perspective

Ecological theory provides an important new perspective for understanding disasters and planning relief efforts. Ecological theory has its roots in the 1920s, when theorists of the Chicago School were among the first to use the metaphors of ecology to think about such urban processes as competition and succession among city parts segmented by race, class, occupation and other factors, as well as the manner in which the subparts are organized into the whole of the city (Burgess, 2000).

In the 1980s and 90s, studies using a greatly expanded set of ecological tools further refined our understanding of the linkages among the city and its parts, and demonstrated that the destruction of a single neighbourhood undermines the larger system of the city and its region (Wallace & Wallace, 1998). The repair of disasters, the ecologists contend, depends fundamentally on repairing ruptured social linkages within and among the city parts (Wallace, 1988; Cantal-Dupart, 1994).

Drawing from ecological principles, it is readily apparent that the contradiction between the centrifugal force of segregation and the centripetal need for cooperation is the central problematic for recovery. The fractionation of the city along race, class and religious lines works to inhibit inter-neighbourhood cooperation, while those who stand to benefit from inter-group hostility may be unwilling to undo it. Even if there is general agreement to cooperate, it can be very difficult to overcome the habits associated with isolation, particularly the tendency to think from within the subunits of the city, rather than from the perspective of the larger, collective good. How is this impasse to be breached? One possible solution is through the efforts of organizations.

Louis Wirth, one of the leaders of the Chicago School, postulated that organizations had a key role to play in city affairs as a result of their situation intermediary between the political superstructure and the segregated subgroups of city residents (Wirth, 2000). Organizations not only connected people in the upper echelons of political power with those at the base, but also they were likely to be in contact with each other, creating horizontal linkages across lines of segregation.

It is well established that organizations have the following characteristics: they have the ability to identify and respond to the needs of their constituents; they exist throughout the city and every citizen is in contact with one or more organizations; their routine methods of operation contain within them the potential for addressing one or more aspects of collective recovery; and they stand to benefit from rapid recovery of their constituents and collaborators, as well as from the rapid recovery of the city (see, for example, Williams, 2002).

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, working with ecological assumptions about the nature of the cities and the targets for recovery, it was decided to create an alliance of organizations to promote collective recovery of the metropolitan region. In the case study described here, those efforts will be outlined.

Methods

Site

New York City is a major metropolitan area in the United States that was struck by disaster on September 11th 2001 when aeroplanes hit the towers of the World Trade Center, precipitating their collapse. Nearly three thousand people died, tens of thousands of people were displaced from their homes and workplaces, the work of the financial markets was temporarily suspended, travel lines were disrupted, and hundreds of thousands of people were traumatized by watching the disaster first-hand or on television. Yet the magnitude of the disaster was much larger than is suggested by these figures. The World Trade Center's two towers were the iconic image of New York, displayed on logos, murals and souvenirs everywhere. The World Trade Center

contained 13,000,000 square feet of Class A office space. Major lines of transportation crossed there, bringing hundreds of thousands of people through the area each day. The World Trade Center was, both symbolically and logistically, a keystone centre of the region. As ecologists have noted, the destruction of a keystone is catastrophe for a system, because the keystone holds the system together. The immediate job loss, long-term budget deficits, and strain on the population were all symptoms of this devastating loss.

Thesis of intervention

Using ecological concepts to describe the disaster of 9/11, it is posited that the destruction of the World Trade Center represented the destruction of a keystone structure central to the economic and social organization of the metropolitan area. Thus, the disaster needed to be considered a major ecological catastrophe, touching organizations of all kinds in the area. It was hypothesized that the only intervention of sufficient scope to meet the enormity of the disaster was a mobilization of the millions of affected organizations, ranging from local Boy Scout troops, to religious organizations, to small and large commercial enterprises, to government agencies. While the mobilization of organizations is also recommended by researchers interested in the role of natural support systems in the recovery of the traumatized individual, ecologists are concerned with the role of organizations in the recovery of the traumatized ecosystem. The project that was started, NYC RECOVERS, was designed to aid the social and emotional recovery of the greater New York metropolitan area through the mobilization of organizations to promote recovery among their constituents and in the region as a whole.

NYC RECOVERS Coordinating Team

The NYC RECOVERS Coordinating Team consisted of a small group of staff and volunteers of the Community Research Group, a unit of the New York State Psychiatric Institute and the Mailman School of Public Health of Columbia University. Prior to 9/11, the Coordinating Team was engaged in a study of neighbourhood obliteration due to urban renewal, a federal programme of the 1950s and 1960s. The team's work had demonstrated that, prominent among the long-term effects of urban renewal, was a slow but inexorable dissolution of social bonds. In the cases under study, no efforts at social recovery had been made. Because the work on urban renewal was unpublished, and thus unavailable to the general public or the disaster relief community, the team felt an obligation to share the need for social recovery with others who might implement this intervention.

Members of the alliance

NYC RECOVERS sought to mobilize all organizations in the New York Metropolitan area. Organizations of all kinds were of interest, from schools, churches and other non-profit organizations to commercial and government enterprises of all kinds. Organizations and individuals that joined in the effort were called 'partners'.

Organizations and individuals who became associated with the effort, without formally joining, were called 'friends'. About 100 organizations completed a 'Partner Agreement', the formal connection to NYC RECOVERS. As many of these partners were themselves coalitions, with ties to other organizations, the effective range of NYC RECOVERS' network was much larger than 100 formal partners. Counting friends, partners and members of partner coalitions, the effective reach of NYC RECOVERS was about 1000 organizations.

Intervention

NYC RECOVERS functioned as a 'hub', gathering and connecting organizations interested in recovery. It offered its contacts a series of concepts to use as a focus for the creation of events. These concepts were interpreted through the particular social and cultural lens of partner organizations. The concepts are described below.

Data collection and analysis

At the culmination of the first year of work, the Coordinating Team began to work together to create a video describing what had happened and explaining key lessons of the process. This process involved watching hours of footage of events that partner organizations had sponsored, discussing their content and implications, and creating a script for the videos. This paper is based on those conversations, and represents the Coordinating Team's analysis as of September 2003.

Results

The 'bowl' of NYC RECOVERS

The NYC RECOVERS Coordinating Team developed and offered to partners a 'bowl,' that is, a holding structure, or concept, which they might fill as they chose. The over-arching concept that guided the first year of work was that of a 'Year of Recovery', designed to counter two major ideas that emanated from city officials: (1) that the disaster had affected a small area of the city, and a small number of 'heroes and victims', and (2) that the job of the 'unaffected' was to 'get back to normal' within days of the disaster. NYC RECOVERS insisted that all people in the metropolitan area had lost a neighbourhood that was important to them and had a right to consider themselves injured. Furthermore, NYC RECOVERS argued that such injuries did not heal quickly or that it was even possible to get 'back' to normal: rather, people needed to work together to envision and create the recovered city and region.

The Year of Recovery was devoted to tasks that are within the purview of groups in many cultures around the world, that is, mourning losses, learning what had caused the disaster, rebuilding social connections, and preventing the development of scapegoating and prejudice. The shorthand 'remember, respect, learn and connect' was used to keep these core tasks at the forefront of the alliance's concern. The Coordinating Team initially proposed that these tasks might follow the seasons of the year, with winter devoted to conferences for learning and preventing prejudice, spring

to rebuilding connections, and autumn to the first anniversary of the disaster. It became apparent as the year progressed that, contrary to initial predictions, 'remember, respect, learn and connect' was observed in every NYC RECOVERS gathering.

Filling the bowl

It was the partners' initiatives that gave content to the Year of Recovery, and this worked in two ways. In some cases, organizations began activities at the urging of members of the Coordinating Team. In other cases, it was the initiatives of organizations that drew in the NYC RECOVERS Coordinating Team and partners. Whatever the case, it was the organizations that created the events and gave them character and meaning. Through regular meetings, e-mail messages and a large conference, the Coordinating Team worked to help organizations learn about and learn from the efforts of others, thus building a collective knowledge base of how organizations might promote recovery.

A few examples will demonstrate the range of events that were held, and a more complete list is included in Table 1.

- *The Walk to Honor and Heal.* Held on November 12th 2001, to honour the second month anniversary of 9/11, the Walk to Honor and Heal was led by a coalition of organizations active in the South Bronx. The Walk started at a local fire station that had been an important site of community struggle in the past. It covered approximately 20 blocks through three commercial areas and ended in a labyrinth painted in a church parking lot at a major intersection. The Walk started shortly after Flight 587 crashed at Kennedy Airport, killing all on board. The crash created an atmosphere of fear. Despite the tension from the crash, the adults and children who walked together created a joyous and enthusiastic presence in the streets of the neighbourhood. In a culminating moment, participants released white balloons and watched them fly past abandoned tenements into the starkly blue autumn sky.
- *The Novena for Flight 587.* Washington Heights, a neighbourhood at the tip of Manhattan, lost many people in the crash of 587. Alianza Dominicana, an early and important partner of NYC RECOVERS, organized a Novena, which is a nine-day Dominican mourning ritual. In this instance, to honour the community's pain, seven days of public Novenas were organized. Each day, the Novena started in a public park and was followed by a procession to a nearby church. NYC RECOVERS urged leaders of the nearby Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center to join the Novena for the final day. Approximately 200 people from the Medical Center, including many of its major leaders, joined the procession.
- *The Luncheon of Champions.* American Express Open Small Business Network was displaced from its Lower Manhattan offices, which made life difficult for staff already traumatized by the tragedy. Staff used dollars from a community relations fund to plan a special luncheon. They joined with another NYC RECOVERS partner, the Washington Heights/Inwood Coalition on Aging, to sponsor a 'Luncheon of Champions', held at a Lower Manhattan restaurant that had just

Table 1. Events in the Year of Recovery: September 2001 to December 2002

Date	Event	Location	Organizer
10/01	Mother-Baby Playdate	Washington Heights	Columbia Center for Children's Environment Health
11/01	Walk to Honor and Heal	South Bronx	Camino de Paz and Mott Haven ACT Collaborative
11/01	Rally for Recovery	Greenwich Village	NYC RECOVERS All Partner Event
12/01	Holiday Healing	Many locations	Many NYC RECOVERS partners
1/02	Luncheon of Champions	Tribeca	Washington Heights-Inwood Coalition on Aging and American Express Open the Small Business Network
3/02-4/02	Imagine New York	350 locations throughout the region	Municipal Arts Society
4/02	Together We Heal	Morningside Heights	NYC Department of Mental Health, NYU International Studies Program and NYC RECOVERS
4/02	Rhyme, Rhythm and Poetry	Chelsea	AIDS Service Center
7/02	Decorate the City	Inwood	Unidos Coalition Block Party
8/02	Ambassadors to the City	Kennedy Airport	NYC RECOVERS presentation at Taxi Drivers Health Fair
8/02	Decorate the City/Wellness Kick-Off	Washington Heights	Fresh Youth Initiatives, The Hearts and Mind Network, and NYC RECOVERS
9/02	Take A Deep Breath	Many locations	Kripalu Yoga and many partners
9/02	September Wellness	Many locations	Riverside Church Wellness Center 'Wellness Day in Sakura Park'; Mailman School of Public Health of Columbia University 'Rebuilding Hope'; Family to Family and FamilyCook Productions 'Reunion Dinner'; others
11/9/02	Anniversary Commemoration	Many locations	UNIDOS Interfaith Coalition Candlelight Vigil; Camino de Paz Peace in the Community Labyrinth; others
12/02	December 5th Party	Garment District	NYC RECOVERS All Partner Event

reopened after an extensive clean-up (and, as it turned out, did not accept American Express). The American Express hosts planned a delicious menu and a wonderful activity. Most of the guests were monolingual Spanish speakers and most of the hosts were monolingual English speakers. As one of the organizers commented, 'It could have been a disaster'. However, good will and sociability overcame the language barrier. The activity – decorating cakes with New York City themes – created what the organizer called 'a third language' of images which allowed participants to master their pain and reconnect with their love of the city.

- *Together We Heal: Community Mobilization for Trauma Recovery.* The most ambitious activity undertaken by the Coordinating Team was the organization of a conference on community resilience. The conference was sponsored by Project Liberty, and organized with support from the New York City Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation, and the New York University International Trauma Studies Program. It brought together 200 people from organizations of all kinds. The concept of community mobilization was presented and its application to planning for the anniversary of 9/11 was discussed. Out of the conference emerged the concept of 'September Wellness': an effort to embed the anniversary in a larger period of healing mind, body and spirit through wellness activities.
- *Decorate the City/September Wellness.* Within the September Wellness effort was a focus on children. Remembering the 'Missing Person' posters that had plastered the city in the aftermath of 9/11, the Coordinating Team proposed that children might plaster the city with visions of its recovery one year later. Children made wonderful posters that depicted a diverse groups of themes. Some children were still preoccupied with images of the aeroplanes hitting the towers, while others offered images of world peace. These posters were hung in schools, stores and businesses. For this work, NYC RECOVERS and all the children artists were named 'New Yorker of the Week' by the local television station, NY1.

Learning from each other

A major finding of the work of NYC RECOVERS was that organizations learnt from each other. As communication and trust developed, people examined each other's ideas, and freely adopted and adapted those that seemed to suit. Walking labyrinths appealed to many people, hence Camino de Paz, the South Bronx labyrinth builders and one of the sponsors of the Walk to Honor and Heal, was invited to events around the city, such as the Riverside Church September Wellness Festival. Organizations might copy an activity for a first effort, but then return to report something they had originated for a later event. Thus, a body of experience was created that helped identify 'best practices.' In general, what emerged from the Year of Recovery was a distinct preference for recovery events organized according to a 'festival model' – featuring activities, fellowship and food – rather than a 'heroic model' – featuring honours and ceremony.

The barriers of the city

The Coordinating Team was interested in engaging many kinds of organizations, hence outreach was made in a great number of directions. A surprise to the team,

which was previously occupied with research in poor, minority communities, was that the usual barriers of race, class, occupation, religious preference, sexual orientation, etc. were minimized in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. It was possible for the coordinating team to meet with the very rich, as well as the very poor, and it was possible for them to meet with each other.

Major barriers to free exchange remained. Most important among those were the barriers erected by the officials of the City. For example, the Coordinating Team had initially proposed a 'Walk for Recovery' but it was extremely difficult to connect with the officials who would have to grant permission. At the same time, city officials took down the communications that citizens had spontaneously posted in the parks. Despite the temporary hold on inter-group prejudice, the city did not make efforts to promote new exchange while this unique window of opportunity existed.

Certain conceptual and institutional barriers had specific meaning for the work of NYC RECOVERS. First, it took 4 months for NYC RECOVERS to establish a linkage with the Department of Health. While that linkage resulted in a very successful April conference, other initiatives that partners and team members deemed equally important were stymied. Second, the official 'heroes and victims' formulation focused spending disaster aid on delivering individual psychotherapy to 'traumatized' people. Community mobilization, as an intervention in the well-being of the city, was neither understood nor funded.

Battle fatigue

One of the reasons partners developed the concept of 'September Wellness: Healing Mind, Body and Spirit' was the broad recognition of the onset of fatigue related to a long series of crises beginning with 9/11 but quickly expanding to include the fear of new attacks, the city budget deficit, the anthrax scare, the war on terrorism and the threat, followed by the reality, of war with Iraq. All of these problems were complicating lives already lived at the fast and demanding pace of New York City. Furthermore, some of the post-disaster sources of solace, like comfort food and psychotropic drugs, had their own side-effects that needed to be countered. September Wellness opened a door to self and community care, but also clearly revealed the need for long-term support for managing the new regional situation. Hence, a second year of recovery, called 'Take Heart', was initiated.

Healer, heal thyself

The Coordinating Team of NYC RECOVERS consistently implemented its own advice, working hard to help its parent organization, the Community Research Group, remember, respect, learn and connect. Like other organizations, the Community Research Group felt the strain of new tasks relating to launching NYC RECOVERS while completing other work. Using events to sustain and nourish the group, the Community Research Group was able to weather the significant challenges it faced post-9/11, while continuing to produce scientific papers and community educational materials and to compete successfully for new funding.

Discussion

NYC RECOVERS was launched in the immediate aftermath of the disaster of September 11th 2001, to address the social and emotional recovery of New York City. It was developed from an ecological model that identified a central problematic of city subgroups competing, rather than cooperating, in the aftermath of a major disaster. Three major findings emerge from the work done during the Year of Recovery. As postulated, it was observed that organizations could respond creatively and effectively to fulfil a disaster recovery role. Second, there were numerous official obstacles to such organizational activity, including an official rhetoric that hindered broad mobilization for trauma recovery. Finally, the time period for organizational mobilization was much longer than initially anticipated.

P. A. Sorokin, in his 1942 book *Man and Society in Calamity*, examined hundreds of calamities caused by war, revolution, famine and pestilence. He emphasized repeatedly that societies faced with calamity are at a crossroads. Good, creative management can repair the disaster and optimize the potential for it to improve the society's functioning. Poor management, by contrast, can lead to collapse, and even disappearance of the society.

While the judgment of history is a long way off, in the short-term the management of 9/11 reminds us of the power that lies in naming situations. The official concept of the disaster emphasized the losses suffered by victims and the courage displayed by heroes. Official actions followed this official line, implementing programmes for the 'affected' and asking the 'unaffected' to get back to normal quickly. The competing understanding – that this was an ecological catastrophe of enormous proportions – affected the thinking and actions of many, but never became the guiding policy.

The effectiveness of organizational actions, as observed by partners of NYC RECOVERS, turned on the creative application of the 'festival model', in which food, activity and fellowship were used to bring people together. Organizations demonstrated the ability to apply that model in culturally appropriate ways to their own constituents. They also demonstrated the ability to identify and respond to local conditions that might not have been apparent to others from outside the area. Finally, organizations were keen observers of each other's practice, and quickly adopted 'winning' solutions.

The long-term application of an organizational recovery effort has much to offer in the post-disaster setting. The implementation of this tool for recovery will depend, however, on the incorporation of the concept into the official strategy for disaster management. As has been observed with epidemics, other priorities, such as the neglect and exclusion of stigmatized groups, may well mitigate against the full utilization of this exceptionally democratic and empowering model of post-disaster intervention.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by grants from the Macy Foundation and the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee as well as by a Robert Wood Johnson Health Policy Investigator Award to Dr Mindy Fullilove.

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