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Assesing Northwood's Recovery from Disaster

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Overview

On August 26, 2007, the City of Northwood, North Dakota was struck by a EF-4 tornado. The tornado was five miles long and 0.8 of a mile wide, and had peak winds of 120-150 miles per hour. One person was killed and eighteen people were injured by the tornado. There was widespread damage to the residential and business areas in town. About 90 percent of the 362 single-family homes, and 80 percent of 110 multi-family homes were damaged. All of the 20 mobile homes in the trailer park were destroyed. About 90 percent of municipal buildings were damaged. The fire station and the public school were destroyed. Electric, telephone, and cable utilities were destroyed. The downtown district suffered major damage, and the only grocery store in town was severely damaged.

In such a situation of all-encompassing devastation, how was a small rural community ever to accomplish the overwhelming task of recovery? Two years later, however, during the weekend of July 24-26, 2009, the City of Northwood celebrated its 125th Anniversary as well as its almost complete physical recovery from the tornado. That so much had been accomplished in two years was cited by the speakers at the celebration as a testament to the character, hard work, and determination of the community and its residents. These were definitely factors in the recovery; however, community characteristics no doubt also played an important part.

What community characteristics are important in helping a community recover from a natural disaster? Do these characteristics act independently or in conjunction with other community characteristics? Is one particular community characteristic more important than other characteristics? Does one community characteristic facilitate the activation of other community characteristics to assist in recovery? These were questions asked by a Rural Sociology class at the University of North Dakota in 2008.

Project Description

The data for the research was collected through a disaster recovery web-based survey of 22 community informants knowledgeable about the recovery. Newspaper articles from the Grand Forks Herald dealing with Northwood's recovery were also gathered into an electronic database. Official publications from City of Northwood were also included in the database: First Anniversary Fact Sheet; Anniversary Booklet; Environmental Assessment for Northwood Schools; Environmental Assessment for Northwood Infrastructure Improvement Project; FEMA Historical Buildings Inventory. The methodology for the research involved examining the data to determine what role various community capitals played in Northwood's recovery, and how a specific community capital leveraged other community capitals. Upon the completion of the analysis, the class constructed a community capitals analysis framework table.

Results

A final report was prepared and submitted to the city manager in Northwood as well as to the citizens who participated in the survey. The research results provided insight to the long-term recovery process, especially concerning how to access and facilitate the community capitals that are central to the recovery process and can trigger an upward spiral of asset building and accumulation.

Lessons Learned

Communities tend to act collectively in the recovery from natural disasters. Social interaction and social infrastructure facilitate community organization and community action, and this process enables community development and long-term recovery. These interactions and infrastructures can be interpreted as "community capitals."

Students in sociology have much to learn about and from communities that have recovered from natural disasters, about how people come together and use community capitals to make their locality a livable place again.

Results

