

Community-building while preparing for disaster

by Maureen McGarry



“Do you have a map of the neighborhood?”

“I think the city does.”

“Does anyone have a Vial of Life?”

“What is that?”

There were many questions floating back and forth across the table at a brainstorming session in a Bayside home. Jude Power, Maggie Banducci, and Katy Allen joined Lorraine Miller-Wolf to organize their neighborhood for disaster preparedness. These Neighborhood Disaster Planners were holding their first meeting to decide what to do next. Someone volunteered to print up 40 copies of a neighborhood survey. There was much discussion about tsunamis, and lots of talk about camping gear.

Miller-Wolf had attended one the Neighborhood Disaster Preparedness Training Workshops offered jointly by the American Red Cross and the Volunteer Center of the Redwoods (VCOR) at the Area 1 Agency on Aging. There have been 4 such workshops since October with a total of 42 community members learning how to organize their neighborhood to be prepared for various disasters.

VCOR is encouraging this neighborhood organizing approach after lessons learned from previous disasters. One of the most important lessons is to plan for the possibility of emergency services being overwhelmed and areas of the county being without any services or help for several days, or even weeks. Utilities,

communications systems and transportation are things that are taken for granted but can't be counted on during a serious disaster.

Being prepared to take care of yourself in cooperation with your immediate neighbors in a team effort is the goal of this approach. Many cities across the country have various models of neighborhood disaster plans that promote self-sufficiency. Having enough water, food, fuel and shelter alternatives are essential.

"I'm old enough to remember the flood of 1964. We were cut off and needed to be self-reliant," shared Allen.

The Area 1 Agency on Aging wants neighbors to look out for frail elders or people with disabilities in their neighborhoods in the event of a disaster. Assessing and planning for their particular needs is vital. The training includes suggestions such as packing a suitcase full of necessities for a senior that is easy to locate in their home if evacuation is necessary.

The Vial of Life is a program that allows individuals to have their complete medical information ready for emergency responders, or helpful neighbors, to reference in the event of a medical emergency or to help that person remember what medicines they need and when to take them. It is recommended that this information be kept in the senior's freezer or refrigerator.

All participants in Neighborhood Disaster Training receive eight pages of worksheets that provide common sense, practical ideas on how to get organized. Topics cover defining your neighborhood and learning about each other's special skills and resources, creating a neighborhood plan and assigning roles, and developing a checklist of what to do ahead of time. There are emergency preparedness worksheets for elders, children, and pet and animal needs, an emergency supply list, and a worksheet for developing an evacuation plan.

This Bayside group wants to eventually have a larger meeting at Jacoby Creek School so that neighbors have a chance to meet each other and have a voice in the process. There was some talk about planning a neighborhood party. As Miller-Wolf pointed out, "The more you know the people around you, the better off you are."

Allen agrees. "A side benefit of this is that, although we do know our immediate neighbors, we'll get to know our other neighbors as well."

Disasters can be great equalizers. They can bring groups of people together that might not otherwise be likely to associate. This Bayside group understands that it is important in the event of a disaster to be able to help others. They also understand the need to be prepared themselves so that they are able to help.

For more information about Neighborhood Emergency Preparedness trainings, contact VCOR at 442-3763 or email vcor@a1aa.org.