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Emergencies involve at their very first outset, lay people: those at the scene, neighbours, passers-by and the non-critically injured. We advocate calling them: ‘zero-responders’ as a reference to their location at ‘Ground Zero’ of an incident and to their embryonic role at the very core of the incident. Well before the official rescue teams send their ‘First’ responders (police, firefighters, EMS), these people are there to react and act. Zero-responders are the local citizens who are the first and last to deal with the impact of such events. Their presence is felt as warnings may be given, during impact and long after rescue efforts have transformed into long-term recovery and restoration. Their role is usually under-recognized and under-facilitated. We propose to augment the visibility of their role, to empower their resourcefulness and to include them in the overarching framework of emergency planning.

Victims and witnesses don’t wait to react for first responders to arrive: they act at time zero. This early public’s response role however, is largely ignored by official responders and often discouraged; yet, it is a vital and critical element in response efforts. What are the basic reflexes of these zero-responders?

History and evidence indicate that: a) initial behavior is critical, b) most spontaneous emergency behaviors are purposeful and pro-social. People

## ZERO-RESPONDERS: EXPANDING THE RESPONDER COMMUNITY

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want to help. These behaviors may not always be accurate or most effective but they represent the raw resources available at T-0. What can we learn from them? How can we improve on them? How can we harness them in a better overall plan?

Every event bears witness to the activities of zero-responders who are often there for extended time before the arrival of the formal first responders. Whether it was the evacuation of victims in the Tokyo, London or Madrid metros, or the recovery of people under buildings in Haiti or Japan, it was the local citizens who helped the majority. The impact of zero-responders has been well documented in emergency research since the 1950s. Unfortunately, they are often considered as part of the problem and not as part of the solution.

The idea that the public is ill-equipped to undertake rescue and recovery is misleading. For example, officials tend to see the public as panicking and engaging in chaotic behaviour when extreme events occur. The evidence shows that public behaviour is not random but purposeful and can be directed. In reality, citizens tend not to panic in disasters; rather, they tend to make decisions that make sense as to what actions to take. Research documents that these zero-responders organize and respond with what they have, and can enhance the overall response despite attempts by officials to exclude them. Given the proper tools and information, their actions can augment resilience rather than diminish it. Spontaneous volunteer efforts occur following a disaster, whether they are solicited or not. During disasters, people do not see themselves as victims. Rather, they take action by initiating search and rescue activities, as well as engaging in other relief efforts. However, it remains that zero-responders should know about some limits and boundaries, if only for their own safety. Hence, we need to foster further public education on hazards, emergency preparedness and response.

The zero-responder focus does not deny or neglect the expert role of emergency professionals. It

restates the importance of preparedness for all and whole-of-community inclusion in emergency planning. For example, the official report on the London metro bombings found emergency plans designed to meet the needs of emergency officials, not of regular people. Examples cited were passengers who had no way to let train drivers know there had been an explosion. They had trouble escaping as train doors were not designed to be opened by passengers. Also, passengers could not find first aid kits to treat the wounded. Based on assumptions about public behaviour, emergency officials believed it would be of only ‘marginal utility’ for the public to know where safety equipment is stored.

Official professional responders increasingly recognize the role of the public. However, to simply state that individuals must take responsibility to prepare for disasters and to shift the burden to them does not fully acknowledge their critical roles as zero-responders. If excluded from the formal process of emergency planning, they will put in place informal ones which may or may not coincide with official arrangements. They need to be recognized as legitimate actors and be included in planning, exercising and public education.

Thus, there is a need to shift official focus from one of risk and vulnerability to community resourcefulness and community resilience. This has begun, yet the new language of resilience still portrays the public as passive participants – YOYO 72 (You are on your own for the first 72 hours) – and “wait ’til we get there” retains the paternalistic approach to citizen engagement.

Assumptions about zero-responders need to be challenged so they can be integrated into emergency preparedness and planning processes. This requires more than involving agencies such as the Red Cross, Salvation Army or other volunteer groups who regularly respond to events. It needs to reach deeper into the community to acknowledge zero-responders who will emerge during an event. This

means ensuring there is a capacity built into emergency plans to recognize, organize and coordinate their contributions.

To integrate zero-responders into the planning, one needs to start by understanding the perception, the feelings, the motives, the behaviors and the decisions of people in emergencies and adversities. To support emergency planners with guidance on how best to integrate these psychosocial considerations into their emergency response plans and processes, research by GAP-Santé at the University of Ottawa led to the creation of a psychosocial risk assessment and management (P-RAM) framework. It provided a structured approach for emergency planners and professional responders to identify psychosocial risks, vulnerability factors, resources and interventions at various phases of an event. The P-RAM framework enabled them to gain insight into what previously had been the black box of psychosocial factors. Based on our research and work with both responders and community groups, we developed an interactive training program entitled *Psychosocial Risk Manager (PRiMer)* which has undergone wide field testing and validation. It underscores the benefits of public engagement and community capacity building.

Zero-responders demonstrate that communities are not completely overwhelmed nor immobilized by calamitous events. The local interconnections and interdependencies are a source of strength to be drawn upon to diminish negative impacts and enhance positive ones. Their role can be enhanced by providing supportive relationships with official responders that are established and maintained prior to events through advanced planning and readiness exercises. Collaboration between institutional response professionals and agencies, albeit already complex in itself, has nevertheless to broaden its scope in order to encompass the interface with the very people it wants to help.

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**Social Media = Social Capital = Disaster Resilience?**

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