



Partners in Prevention

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Partner Spotlight on Resilience – Antoine B. Richards

Q: Can you tell us about your background, education, and what made you want to be involved in emergency management?

A: My introduction to emergencies and disasters started at a young age. As the son of a retired Army veteran, Navy veteran, and immigrant parent, I have been very fortunate to travel this country and see the world since birth. Alternatively, I have been exposed to many natural disasters including earthquakes, hurricanes, tornados, wildfires, flooding, blizzards, and an occasional scare of volcanic eruption at Mt. Rainier while being stationed at Ft. Lewis in Washington. While relatively safe living on base, I often saw the power of nature, firsthand, as soon as we exited the gates of each base, and I wondered why the contrast of disaster impacts were so different literally feet away. As I received my bachelor's degree in communication from Kennesaw State University, and Master of Public Health degree from Morehouse School of Medicine, I volunteered with the American Red Cross Disaster Workforce Team and Medical Reserve Corps which came full circle when I took a public health preparedness course during my master's program. Immediately, I realized that there was a huge disconnect between public health and emergency management while recognizing that our approaches to prevention and health equity would be instrumental to improving disaster outcomes. Without hesitation, I pivoted from aspirations of achieving a DrPH in health policy, to pursuing a Doctor of Science in Emergency Management at Jacksonville State University. Since, I have rooted my research and professional development in exploring social determinants of health/social vulnerability, community resilience, and sustainability within the emergency management enterprise.

Q: How did you get interested in the disaster safety movement

A: My master's thesis was entitled "Factors Related to Health-Related Quality of Life (HRQOL) in Adults Ages 18 and Older in the United States." My research was centered on understanding which social factors contributed to decreased health outcomes and frequent mental distress (FMD) among adults. Through my research, I examined social factors such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, region of residence, level of education, and income, also known as social determinants of health (SDOH), and I was able to pinpoint exactly which variables and combinations of those variables contributed to decreased health outcomes. As I matriculated throughout my doctoral journey and studied topics such as social vulnerability and resilience, I realized that disaster-related outcomes were closely aligned with those same social factors that contributed to decreased health outcomes. Progressively, I began to




examine policies, programs, practices, and standard operating procedures that contributed to those outcomes with the understanding that there were no pre-genetic dispositions or biological reasons for vulnerability, as there were with health, highlighting that vulnerability in disasters are a direct result of our decisions and actions. From both experiences, I realized that improving outcomes, whether health or disaster, required eliminating root causes of vulnerability that contributed to disparities. My mission became rooted in achieving equity, and disaster mitigation, safety, and preparedness were ideal approaches to achieving the outcomes that I wanted to see for future generations.


Q: Can you tell us about specific projects or programs you are working on in the risk reduction and resilience field?

A: Currently, I serve as the Chief of Staff for the Institute for Diversity and Inclusion in Emergency Management (I-DIEM), a global 501(c)(3) non-profit organization established to facilitate change by integrating equity into all aspects of humanity with a focus on humanity and supporting the empowerment of marginalized communities within all phases of the disaster management cycle. Bound my mission, vision, and goals dedicated to diversity, equity, and inclusion in emergency management, I help manage our multitude of programs and initiatives that aim to improve disaster outcomes for vulnerable, underserved, and/or marginalized populations from multiple angles including training, education and awareness, and the design, development, implementation, and evaluation of innovative community-based mitigation and adaptation projects to enhance resilience. Specifically, I help leverage and maintain partnerships while ensuring efficient daily operations of the organization including the deployment of our Equity Response Teams dedicated to monitoring equitable response and recovery following major disasters and advocating for key changes to policy and legislation centered on equity within emergency management.

Q: What do you think are the driving forces advancing the cause of resilience today?

A: I believe that the core of advancing resilience exists within people. From a pure research perspective, we are experiencing a significant increase in the frequency, strength, and costs of disasters despite groundbreaking technological advances. While our approaches to disasters, such as building codes and construction techniques, have been impactful, the outcomes of disasters remain relatively stagnant. We have to understand that the total cost of disasters is not just indicative of those individuals, families, and communities that can afford the luxury of mitigation, but are also inclusive of the those that are vulnerable which far exceeds the small percentage of those that are afforded the opportunity to take requisite precaution. Based on mitigation research spanning years of economic and social evaluation, the evidence is clear. However, there exists a huge gap between academic research and practice. In such, the driving force for advancing resilience relies heavily on humanity. The experiences of disaster survivors, emergency management practitioners, and “on-the-ground” experts collectively provide the necessary input, in tandem with academic research, to facilitate exponential change in policy, programs and practice. Moreover, the willingness of each entity to create change is pivotal. The measure of our success is the ability to not operate in silos, but to connect our siloed approaches towards advocacy coalitions that are inclusive and representative of the people we serve. At the core of this, is accountability. We have to





understand our role in the creation or implementation of vulnerability and operate under a lens of equity to create a resilient nation.

Q: What do you think can be done across the board to improve disaster resilience for areas that lack funding for proper mitigation tactics?


A: To improve disaster resilience for areas that lack funding for proper mitigation tactics, we must take a two-pronged approach. First, we must eliminate exclusionary policies and practices. Through our work with communities, we often learn that the very communities that carry the disproportionate impacts of disasters are the same communities that are not included in mitigation funding opportunities. Whether due to politics, policies, or programs, access to education and awareness of these opportunities are limited. Further, should these opportunities arise, lack of capacity or understanding of complex bureaucratic and administrative policies systematically exclude communities from the ability to improve resilience. We have to be intentional about our processes that engage and support these communities while understanding the true needs of the community beyond our own conception. Second, we have to raise awareness and education for mitigation. Emergency management has historically been recognized for response and recovery. The content and context of emergency management is rooted in a reactive posture. Education and awareness of mitigation and removal of barriers of mitigative practice will support a paradigmatic shift towards prevention and preparedness that supports a more proactive posture. Without removal of systemic, whether intentional or unintentional, factors that contribute to vulnerability our efforts will continually result in a story that highlights the ineffectiveness of mitigation tactics as disaster costs continue to increase.


Q: How can FLASH support your efforts along with the Institute for Diversity and Inclusion in Emergency Management?

A: I believe that there are strong partnership opportunities for FLASH and I-DIEM to collaborate on equitable mitigation initiatives whether through research, policy, practice, or a comprehensive strategy that embodies all three elements. One of the things that resonated most with me during the NDRC, was Leslie's question about why we can't make mitigation accessible for everyone. The answer is, we can! As we explore these opportunities, I truly believe that collaboration and partnership are essential tools for creating change which is why the NDRC is such a powerful conference. It is a connection of many of the leaders and most innovative minds that create significant opportunities and explore approaches that can be fostered into evidence-based strategies. Personally, I look forward to embracing these opportunities and creating a standard that is flexible, scalable, and adaptable globally.

Q: Reflecting on what you have learned throughout your career thus far, what is the most important message you want to leave our readers with?

A: Remember this phrase: "If I am to be anything at all, I must render to service to all." Throughout my career, I have learned the measure of my existence is rooted in servant





leadership. The goal of servant leadership is to serve in all facets of your life whether academic, professional, philanthropic, or civic. Servant leadership differs from traditional leadership where the main focus is on the thriving and sustainability of a company or organization. Servant leadership shares power, puts the needs of the people first, and helps people develop and perform as highly as possible. Our service is not solely to those that can afford it, or those with the highest household value or income, because we can not quantify or place value on culture and tradition. If I can leave readers with one last tidbit, it would be to understand that no matter how hard we work, or develop new innovations, or implement new concepts, our work will never truly manifest itself without addressing the root causes of vulnerability. Until we do, we will continue to see rising costs of disasters as disaster outcomes will be rooted in disparities and inequity which outweigh our contributions. We have to seek equity, where we prioritize those most vulnerable until we reach a standard that supports equality.

Q: Do you have any other comments or additional words of wisdom to offer our readers?

A: Understand that the work you are doing today is laying the foundation for tomorrow. Will your work be in vain, or will your work change the world? It is important to ask yourself this before every decision and action that you take because every little thing that we do today, creates a big difference in the outcomes of tomorrow. We are facing unprecedented times given the climate crisis and the current COVID-19 pandemic. Every peer-reviewed publication, after-action report, or contribution to society will serve as a foundation for future generations that will face these same inevitable circumstances. Who would have imagined in 1918, with the Spanish Flu, that we would see another global pandemic? Yet here we are over a century later attempting to figure out our current crisis without a foundation to stand upon. Today, we are fortunate to have the means to document and lay the strategic foundation for how to handle these situations and the opportunity to do so lies in your hands. Collectively, we have the ability to generate landmark policies, programs and initiatives that can last for generations, but only if we choose to be the change that we want to see. Thank you.

