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Disaster preparedness

Recently we had a conversation with the new President & CEO of the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh (ULGP) to gain perspective on the impact of disasters on the Black Community and the bias that exists.

What is your perspective on disasters and how Black People are impacted?

The unfortunate reality is that families and people who are in marginalized communities often do not fare well when disasters and emergencies occur. A tragic illustration is Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the devastation of New Orleans' Black community. There were more than 1,800 fatalities and many could have been prevented with disaster preparedness.

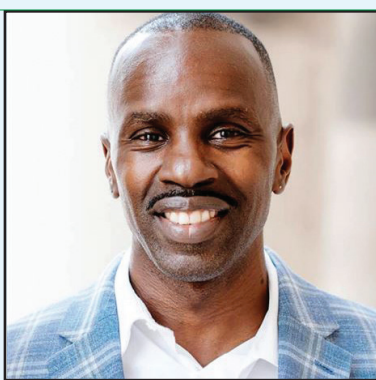
This tragedy is one of many that demonstrates the dis-

proportional impact of disasters on the most vulnerable whose lives don't appear to be as valued as others. The sad thing is that Black people do not receive the same level of support as White people due to poverty, oppression, and structural racism.

This underscores the need for governments and organizations to make sure that marginalized communities are prepared and have the resources to support the most vulnerable communities.

What role should Black organizations play in helping to address this issue?

Given the bias in disaster preparedness, it is critical that Black organizations are involved to make sure that our voices are heard and that critical resources are equitably distributed. The ULGP



CARLOS T. CARTER

provides information to help our clients/community save the lives of family members, maintain their property, and survive a short- or long-term emergency leveraging community resources.

We provide emergency preparedness information to per-

sons who attend our monthly homeownership sessions. These items are covered as part of the post purchase segment.

Program participants receive information that includes preparing a home and vehicle safety kit, emergency escape plans, disaster basics, inspections of appliances, gas/electric and heating/cooling systems on a yearly basis.

We also aid with housing via the Allegheny Link and leverage our emergency food pantry to support families during emergencies.

What can be done to address bias in Disaster Response and Preparedness?

Given the bias in disaster preparedness, it is important that we increase diversity in public health as a career. When this happens, there

will be more leaders who represent and value Black people as they help to mitigate inequities. To start, we need to expose young people to the field. Pitt, for instance, has the Public Health Academy, which provides young people with exposure to careers in public health. Offering these opportunities to our youth will increase the probability of having more Black voices involved in disaster response and create better outcomes for Black People in emergency situations in the Greater Pittsburgh Region and beyond.

Carlos Carter is President and CEO, Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh

Light of Life is a hub of outreach and hope during disasters

For 70 years, Pittsburgh's Light of Life has been helping people who are experiencing homelessness, living in poverty, and/or suffering from addiction. The goal is to transform lives through the love of Christ.

The organization is also part of the city's "hidden" public health infrastructure, providing street-level assistance during emergencies and disasters.

That help consists of everything from passing out hygiene products and essential clothing to victims of the recent Shady Park Place apartment fire in North Braddock to on-going efforts to address the inequities of the pandemic. All without red tape.

In late February 2020, Light of Life's skills were put to the test. Reverend Jerrel T. Gilliam, Executive Director, was attending a meeting for emergency shelter providers

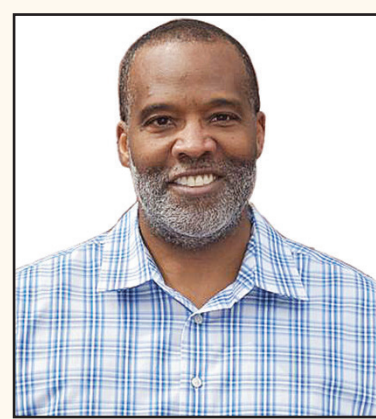
in Washington, D.C. when he learned about COVID. "I came back waving the red flag about infection," he remembers.

When outbreaks occurred and Pittsburgh went into quarantine, Light of Life began planning. How would they protect — and contain, if necessary — their clients and themselves?

As the pandemic unfolded, Light of Life served as a hub of help to underserved communities. Here are highlights:

Partnering with a local business that donated water buffaloes that Light of Life used to set up hygiene stations and hand washing.

Supplying Allegheny County's Dept. of Human Services with food and hygiene kits for the dept's emergency COVID shelter. Some of Light of Life's clients quarantined and received care there.



REVEREND JERREL T. GILLIAM

Setting up a large tent in a lot next to the mission where clients received emergency shelter services during the pandemic. (Ten of Light of Life's employees also volunteered to live in an enclosed area at the mission for quarantine purposes.)

Distributing hand sanitizer to clients during a nationwide

shortage. (Pitt chemistry students created the gel in labs.)

Spreading information to homeless communities and clearing up any misinformation.

Working with community organizations, including Pitt, to identify and vaccinate high-risk individuals, such as elders.

Coordinating vaccine pop-up clinics in neighborhood churches and community centers.

Meeting with community influencers, including bringing together African American mothers/grandmothers and Black doctors for Q&A sessions about vaccine safety.

"We couldn't have done this on our own," says Jerrel. "Many partner service providers, foundations, and faith-based agencies came together to make things happen during the pandemic. That includes Alcosan, Buhl's One

Northside, Goodwill, North Side Christian Health Center, and others," he adds. "Our role was to coordinate their efforts."

One good thing did come out of the pandemic, Jerrel notes. The Black Equity Coalition (BEC) is a network of mostly Black professionals, executive leaders, medical doctors, researchers, and community stakeholders. Their goal is to make sure black and brown communities receive accurate and reliable COVID-19 information.

"All of us on the BEC are determined to eliminate pandemic health inequities," Jerrel states.

Jerrel's input on the BEC is another example of Light of Life's belief in the power of people working together for racial justice. He adds, "When each of us does our little bit of good for our fellow humans, big things happen."

Addressing racism in disaster management

Wherever you turn — TV, radio, newspaper, or smartphone — there's news of human, ecological, and economic disaster.

In 2021 alone, the U.S. was impacted by 20 weather and climate disasters, each costing a billion dollars. (climate.gov)

Whether disasters take shape as hurricanes, flooding, chemical spills, mass shootings, or the pandemic, Black communities suffer more than White communities. (National Institute of Health)

While disasters affect everyone, they often reveal systemic racism in all its ugly forms.

The good news is that disasters can be managed in a way that minimizes their impact on Black communities — and may even lead to full, and better, recovery.

However, this can only happen if diversity and inclusion take priority in the process on the local level.

What is a disaster? "There's often a misunderstanding about the differences between emergencies and disasters," explains Dr. Maureen Lichtveld, Dean of Pitt's School of Public Health and the Jonas Salk Professor of Population Health. "An emergency is an event that a town, city or county can manage on its own, such as roads closing due to snow and ice.

"A disaster is an event that's too big to manage locally. The capacity simply doesn't exist."

To receive federal aid in the city of Pittsburgh, for example, the mayor, in collaboration with the governor, must

declare a State of Emergency, which allows the federal government to step in with help.

Federal responders manage disasters using a five-stage cycle of 1. detection, 2. response, 3. control, 4. mitigation, and 5. preparedness.

"Unfortunately, there's unfairness in each of the stages," says Dr. Lichtveld. "But, in Pittsburgh, and other cities, we're working together with underserved communities to change that."

The detection stage is about quickly and accurately identifying the disaster in terms of forecast, warning system, impact, and equipment.

Inequality in this stage stems from people not recognizing — or not wanting to recognize — vulnerable populations.

"If we know a neighborhood 'always floods,'" says Dr. Lichtveld, "why don't we take steps to prepare that neighborhood first before a hurricane hits?"

The response stage takes place when federal government agencies step in, such as FEMA.

In this stage, unfairness happens when those who need help most may not get it early enough. As a result, in parts of a neighborhood where resources are scarce, people must often fend for themselves until help arrives.

The control stage focuses on how fast authorities contain and deal with a disaster — and what displaced people do in the meantime.

This stage is about personal resources.



DR. MAUREEN LICHTVELD

"Do you have flood insurance, for example," Dr. Lichtveld asks. "Do you have an emergency fund you can tap into? Do you have family or friends you can stay with? If you don't, can you afford a hotel if your home is contaminated with mold?"

This is where underserved communities are most vulnerable.

The mitigation stage is about community resources. How can key spots in a community become less vulnerable during a disaster and in future disasters?

"How can we protect schools, community centers, and health clinics so they can reopen quickly after a disaster?" says Dr. Lichtveld.

"These places are touchstones in a community especially for children and elders."

The preparedness stage serves as the hub of the disaster management cycle and is most important for Black communities.

"This stage is about getting

ready for the next event," says Dr. Lichtveld. "We tend to spend too little time and money on this when we should spend more."

What can Black communities do to help end racism in disaster management?

People of all colors can start by changing disaster language.

"We need to shift from using the term 'disaster management' to 'all-hazard management,'" Dr. Lichtveld states.

"When we think about disaster in terms of natural hazards only, we miss opportunities to prepare for other types of disasters, such as the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, which are man-made. "Climate disasters can also be just as devastating to underserved communities with the same health concerns and mental health trauma."

A shift is also needed in how a community takes inventory before a disaster strikes.

"Instead of making a 'needs' assessment, we should focus on an 'asset' assessment," says Dr. Lichtveld.

Assets include Black churches; small businesses, such as beauty salons and barber shops; little leagues; and other local organizations.

Ideally, these organizations will come together as part of a community advisory board and work with city officials to gain trust and establish ownership of a preparedness plan.

There's also the role of Black youth.

Dr. Lichtveld points to this summer's first annual Public Health Science Academy,

a University of Pittsburgh program that builds bridges to younger generations and provides a path to a career in public health.

The 2022 academy included 10 juniors and seniors from CAPA, Pittsburgh Science & Technology, and Taylor Alderdice.

Each student logged 120 hours working directly in underserved neighborhoods on a variety of health-related projects, including one studying urban heat and health inequity.

"It's time to get our children thinking about and understanding the role of public health in making life better for everyone — but especially people who live in vulnerable communities," Dr. Lichtveld states.

Pitt's School of Public Health is also offering a bachelor's degree in Public Health — the first new bachelor's degree in almost 30 years at the university.

"We're hoping some of the amazing students who worked with us in the academy will become frontline public health leaders."

While our country is experiencing more disasters, especially due to climate change, Dr. Lichtveld reminds us we can't lose hope.

"If we look to Black community leaders to lend their expertise and assets to the planning process, our neighborhoods can recover from disasters with resiliency," she states. "Everyone deserves a healthy home. That's our motivation."