

**Community Conversation: Low Income Individuals - Resilient NJ**

**MEETING MINUTES**

**DATE:** 5-15-21

**SUBJECT:** Community Conversation Summary: Low Income  
Resilient NJ - Atlantic County Coastal Communities (ACCR)

A meeting was held on May 15, 2021 at 5:00 PM with Family Success Center to discuss the Resilient NJ Project. The meeting was held via Zoom. The following were in attendance:

Name	Organization	Email
Nieves Garcia Pimienta	Rutgers-POET	Nieves.pimienta@rutgers.edu
Miriam Salerno	Rutgers-POET	Miriam.Salerno@rutgers.edu
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Bert Lopez	Hispanic Association Atlantic County	<a href="mailto:bert.lopez@atlanticcityelectric.com">bert.lopez@atlanticcityelectric.com</a> haacnj@gmail.com
Jessie Keedy	Salvation Army	jessie.keedy@use.salvationarmy.org

**Part 1: Introductions and Welcome**

- Facilitators and participants briefly introduced themselves. All participants worked or lived in Atlantic City and had limited resources and low incomes.
- Rutgers POET partnered with Family Success Center to recruit participants for this group. Staff from the center participated in the focus group by describing the challenges that clients of the center have faced.
- Nieves Pimienta gave a short presentation on resiliency and disaster preparedness. Ms. Pimienta also explained the structure of the community conversation and how the discussion would be divided into three parts: past disasters, community assets, and visioning for the future. She described the importance of community input in the resilience planning process in order for policymakers and technical experts to understand what is truly important to residents and how residents experience disaster events and resilience measures on the ground.

**Part 2: Past Disasters and Related Challenges**

The facilitators guided the participants in a conversation about their experiences with past disasters and how these disasters have impacted low-income residents in the area.

Participants shared first-hand experiences as well as the experiences of clients, customers, and volunteers. Below is a list of challenges described during the conversation:

- ***Conflicting information:*** Participants felt that officials poorly communicated evacuation and disaster preparedness information leading up to and following Superstorm Sandy. There were mixed messages and conflicting information from various sources. Participants shared the following details:
  - Officials did not adequately communicate the seriousness of the evacuation order. Many residents did not understand that danger was imminent. The mixed signals and conflicting information from officials contributed to resident ambivalence about evacuation.
  - There was conflicting information from city hall and the state government. This problem was so severe that the resulting confusion made it to Saturday Night Live and was a source of embarrassment for the region.
- ***Proactive information sharing:*** Participants suggested that organizations need to share information through social media rather than wait for residents to visit a website. The information shared must be clear, accurate, and reliable.
- ***Language barriers:*** There was not sufficient information provided in Spanish. Language barriers contributed to poor communication overall.
- ***Poor treatment of shelter volunteers:*** One participant noted that volunteers (many of whom were interpreters) at shelters were not treated well and did not feel welcomed or readily embraced. One participant recommended providing incentives for volunteers to compensate them for their time. The Red Cross has paid staff but relies on the work of volunteers who should also be compensated in some way.
- ***Lack of renters' insurance:*** Renters did not always have insurance to cover the loss of their homes and personal belongings.
- ***Challenges for people with autism:*** People with autism and other special needs were not adequately considered in the disaster response. They felt completely left out of the planning process.
  - One participant stressed the importance of having a designated shelter for children with special needs. During Superstorm Sandy, they were placed in crowded buses and taken to crowded shelters that were overstimulating and challenging for them. The food provided in shelters was not necessarily suitable for them.
  - Many kids and teenagers with autism experienced cascading challenges with long-term impacts as a result of leaving their homes, being relocated, and witnessing the stress felt by their families and caregivers.
  - Disaster situations can trigger unwanted and unhealthy emotional and psychological responses in autistic kids and teenagers. After enduring these challenges, they are expected to quickly bounce back, return to school, and exhibit good behavior.
- ***Disaster preparedness education for parents:*** One participant noted there is funding for preparedness education, but it never reaches Atlantic City. Parents can be educated before a

disaster event happens as a way to supplement the preparedness and evacuation activities of organizations like the National Guard.

- ***Applying for disaster assistance:*** The documentation required to access assistance can be challenging to complete for disadvantaged and vulnerable populations. For example, challenges in accessing unemployment and rental assistance in order to weather the COVID-19 pandemic continue to persist. Help with rental assistance is a major need right now as some renters have gotten very far behind in payments. Currently, it is challenging for them to go through South Jersey Legal Services for aid and assistance.
- ***Digital divide and accessing assistance:*** During the COVID-19 pandemic, many people, particularly older adults and Hispanic residents, were unable to apply for unemployment assistance because they did not have access to a computer or smart phone. Participants had several suggestions to mitigate this digital divide:
  - a. A special team should be available to help community members access social service programs. They could provide information about assistance programs, assist with completing paperwork, and assist with using technology. The participants, and the organizations they represent, received many requests for help from seniors, including the need for alternative methods to submit required paperwork.
  - b. The Hispanic Association of Atlantic County is looking to provide training on how to use smart phones. They are offering a “how-to” course to maximize smart phone use.
  - c. Many residents who are immigrants do not qualify for unemployment payments and other assistance. Volunteers were able to distribute food to this population, however, they did not qualify for other assistance and many were not tech-savvy. There is a need to distribute information through non-digital channels, improve knowledge about resources, and better distribute aid. One participant suggested a specialized bilingual team should provide assistance.
  - d. The pandemic is a present issue that many residents are still dealing with. There is a high rate of unemployment and many residents are in need of legal services and support.
  - e. In their work with homeless populations, the Salvation Army relies on word of mouth. Most of the people they serve do not have access to the internet or smart phones, so the Salvation Army relies on relationships with other grassroots organizations to promote their services and receive referrals. During Superstorm Sandy, residents visited the local Salvation Army site to ask about available services, and the organization advocated and searched for additional funding to continue servicing clients affected by Superstorm Sandy.

### **Part 3: Community Assets**

Participants shared their ideas and thoughts about what community assets and important places were most important to protect from future disasters. The responses from participants were diverse, ranging from physical infrastructure, to services, to cultural assets. Assets mentioned by this group included:

- Housing

- Being able to get to your job via transportation infrastructure
- Being able to access social services at government offices and churches
- Social and cultural assets are also important. They provide an important sense of togetherness and make the community feel connected and secure. Schools, libraries, and churches are examples of these types of assets.
- Access to the internet, phones, and social media keep people in contact during a disaster. It is important to have a place to charge your phone and access the internet.
- Banking services
- One participant mentioned that identifying what assets are important really depends on the duration, type, and timing of the disaster event. When the disaster first hits, physical safety is most important (housing, infrastructure, etc.). However, depending on how long the disaster lasts and the trajectory of recovery, other assets, such as financial assets, become more important.
- Residents need to have all of their important documents handy so they can apply for services when needed.
- Low-income and minority residents may not understand the need for home visits in order to receive benefits and they may not allow these visits to occur. This can hinder them from receiving assistance.

#### **Part 4: Vision for the Future**

Participants considered what they want their community to be in five or ten years and described their visions for a safer, more resilient future. They shared the following visions:

- A community that is counted and considered, especially for members of the Latino community who often feel secondary. Preparedness and resilience messaging must be distributed at a grassroots level in order to build awareness in the Latino community, many of whom lack information and resources.
- A community that is fair, exhibits equity and is well informed. Atlantic City is often left out because of residents' lack of understanding.
- A community that is together, all on one page.
- Atlantic City should be in the same "playing field" as other communities.
- A community with access to resources.
- A community that is more informed.
- Social services, especially homeless shelters, should be more accessible outside of Atlantic City. When someone in the region is homeless, they are sent to Atlantic City. Some people come from different states because Atlantic City is known for providing services. The dense population of vulnerable residents makes it very difficult for Atlantic City to recover from disasters.
- The community applies for and receives assistance in a timely fashion.
- An organized and informed community. Have a repository of information that is easy for the community to access.
- The Salvation Army serves as a hub for information and more residents are aware of its services.