

A Center for Louisiana Called Uno-Chart

New Orleans, LA - A mission of safety, sustainability and pursuit of resilience – with a focus on mitigation – defines the Center for Hazards Assessment, Response, & Technology (CHART), an applied social science research center at the University of New Orleans (UNO). UNO-CHART (as it is known) develops best practice projects that recognize and assess hazards (environmental/natural or man-made, including technology), supports practices to reduce risks of hazards, and encourages behaviors that promote resilience. At the present time, UNO-CHART's projects are usually in south Louisiana, but have included other regions of the state and parts of Texas. As more funding becomes available, they plan to keep expanding services.

UNO-CHART began in 2001 by sociologist Shirley Laska with only four student researchers, one being the current director, Monica Farris, Ph.D., who was pursuing her degree in Political Science. Upon Dr. Laska's retirement in 2009, she recommended Dr. Farris take the position of director. Being involved from the inception and working on many of the original projects made Dr. Farris uniquely qualified to lead.

Student researchers (four to twelve per term) function as the Center's driving force to keep projects moving forward, along with research faculty/staff members from various departments. UNO-CHART's researchers are primarily graduate students at UNO who are selected from a variety of academic programs – sociology, public administration, political science, urban studies, engineering, etc., bringing a cross-section of skills and perspectives to the research. Their duties include conducting research, collecting data and developing relevant analyses, publishing and presenting findings at conferences, as well as participating in outreach to the communities and parishes they serve. Recently, the Center received recognition from the city council of New Orleans for training over 100 students since its beginning in 2001.

UNO-CHART's funding is provided almost entirely through its grant work and collaboration with other entities; only office space utilized by the Center and 20% of the director's salary comes directly from the university. Collaborations and partnerships in developing projects between UNO-CHART and Louisiana communities, parishes, other universities and state/federal agencies has helped provide a wide scope of influence for the Center during design and research.

A major project of the Center has been to provide user group support for communities/parishes that utilize the Community Rating System (CRS) – a voluntary government program available to communities participating in the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP). CRS allows a participating community to earn points towards a reduction in flood insurance premium costs. Engaging in a variety of activities lets a community add points to their rating and increase their insurance rate discount (ranging between 5% and 45%). The types of activities communities can choose to undertake include such efforts as: providing public information by making flood awareness publications available at venues such as local libraries; enforcing mapping and regulations by requiring open space preservation; engaging in flood damage reduction efforts by performing structural acquisitions; or improving flood preparedness with implementation of a flood warning/response system. Overall, the lower the risk of damage and the more information made available results in a higher discount rate for flood insurance. This serves as an incentive for communities to learn more about CRS.

"The Community Rating System (CRS) User Group Support has been a very popular project," said Farris. "When officials and residents learn more about the risks facing their communities, it helps them make better, more informed decisions for reducing those risks."

UNO-CHART realizes community officials with responsibility for CRS activities often wear many hats within their position. To assist these communities, researchers hold regular meetings for interested CRS users within a specific geographic area to review elements useful for CRS achievements, help develop data, answer questions, and provide a forum for those with like needs and problems. UNO-CHART is currently assisting three groups in southern Louisiana: Baton Rouge area, Lake Pontchartrain area, and Jefferson Parish. Additional information on the CRS User Groups may be found at <http://floodhelp.uno.edu/Portal.aspx?ContentID=90>.

Intertwined closely with CRS User Group Support is a project regarding Repetitive Flood Loss (RL) and Severe Repetitive Flood Loss (SRL) properties, all of which are linked to the NFIP. A repetitive flood loss property has had at least two flood insurance claims of more than \$1,000 each during a 10-year span. A severe repetitive flood loss property is designated as having four claims of at least \$5,000 each (or two claims totaling more than the value of the property). Neither of those designations require that the property have a current flood insurance policy to retain that designation.

UNO-CHART's Repetitive Flood Loss Reduction Project for the States of Louisiana and Texas was designed for researchers to help guide local officials in mitigation planning, developing grant applications to fund planned changes, and organizing general floodplain management activities in maintaining/mapping those designated properties to assist compliance with NFIP and CRS. To date, UNO-CHART has assisted at least 16 communities/parishes within the two states.

"This project began in 2004 and is funded by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)," said Dr. Farris. "Researchers are now (May, 2016) working with the newest participant, St. John the Baptist Parish, including its largest city, LaPlace."

The project has several major deliverables – a website and web-based data portal that allows local officials access to accurate repetitive loss data (including property portfolios), in-depth area analyses (flood mitigation plans), and education/outreach for homeowners in repetitively flooded areas.

Project participants learn how to use this flood loss data in writing CRS applications and developing a repetitive loss area analysis for their community. The value of this project was demonstrated in 2008 when it received the John R. Sheaffer Award for Excellence in Floodproofing from the national Association of State Floodplain Managers (ASFPM).

Evacuation & Return: Increasing Safety and Reducing Risk is one of UNO-CHART's newest projects. This is a collaboration between UNO, the city of New Orleans, and the Regional Transit Authority. Current planning for city-wide evacuation has UNO-CHART focusing on evaluating city plans for vulnerable populations – those who have low vision; are deaf or hard of hearing; who have a mobility need; are older adults; have limited English reading/communication skills; and/or have no vehicle, and/or are transient.

In addition to these and other projects, UNO-CHART prepares print materials about hazards and reduction of risk. Some are designed in collaboration with adult literacy providers for children (including flash cards), and some for family preparation at home (a booklet providing emergency phone numbers and explaining how to make a supply kit and a food supply kit – presented in English and Spanish). Other materials are oriented towards adult literacy (written at a 3rd grade level and easy to use) with sections on preparation, evacuation, return and protection). Others who have expressed interest and/or requested copies include faith-based organizations and businesses.

<http://www.fema.gov/mitigation-best-practices-portfolio>



A number of the Center's publications involve crafting lessons for students at UNO which are woven into their academic curriculum areas. Even if a student is working on a degree in public administration or business, the student using these lessons will learn basics of hazard awareness and response. The common focus of all the print material is the content, which is about hazard awareness and risk, response, and mitigation.

UNO-CHART serves the communities of Louisiana by keeping them informed of advances in hazard mitigation and by involving communities and parishes to keep their residents safe from harm. The Center remains sustained by the dedication of its faculty, staff, and students, who in turn, are trained and then supported by the vibrant, fierce enthusiasm of Director Farris and faculty/staff. The valuable outcome for Louisiana is that UNO-CHART uses its projects to help examine and resolve issues caused by the dangerous world of disasters.