PrepTalks Discussion Guides provide a framework for community leaders to translate insights from the PrepTalk into community planning and outreach. Community leaders can use the PrepTalks materials at meetings, workshops, and conferences to address critical emergency management topics with whole community partners.

James Gore – Forging Resilient Community Through Imperfect Relentless Progress

James Gore is the Sonoma County District Four Supervisor in Sonoma County, California. He also serves on the Executive Committee of the California State Association of Counties and is the Chair for the Resilient Counties Advisory Board. In addition, he is the Chair for the National Association of Counties Resilient Counties Initiative.

Gore focuses on lessons in leadership and collaboration from the 2017 Tubbs Fire response and recovery. He issues a wake-up call, to elected representatives, government officials, and everyone who will listen, that "this is the most importantwork you can do in your community: resilience, preparedness, community safety." He calls resilience a movement, and he tells us to"own your link in the chain."

> *Replace resilience with the word, BETTER, just say "better every day." And the only way to achieve better every dayis through ... imperfect relentless progress.*
>
> — James Gore

Partners for the Discussion

Every whole community partner can learn from Gore's experience and recommendations, including elected officials and their staff, first responders, public affairs personnel, and other people or organizations involved with educating, informing, and training the public in disaster preparedness and response. Watch the video to hear Gore's passionate plea to wake up, wake up others, and stay woke. Use the discussion guide to identify strategies and tactics that can help forge a resilient community through imperfect relentless progress.

Discussion Topics

Gore shares his belief that one reason government response in disasters can be "flat-footed" is the unreasonable goal to achieve perfection in planning and execution—the belief that progress must be perfect. Risk aversion must not stop progress towards serving the needs of the community.

Topic 1: The Essential Role of Elected, Appointed, and Civic Community Leaders in Disasters

Emergency responders risk their lives to save others, while elected and other government officials provideleadership in disaster response and recovery. Gore shares lessons learned from his experience regarding the role of elected officials.

> *Emergency management is a thread that runs through every department; it is not a department in and of its own.*
>
> — James Gore

- <u>Ensure emergency management is a thread that runs throughout every department</u> of government, including socialsafety nets, housing, economic development, watershed management, etc. Identify specific actions for each departmentwith results you can measure and achieve.

- <u>Be honest, transparent, and build trust in government</u>. Gore underscores the importance of sharing government flaws and limitations with the community. By being transparent and accountable, elected officials will build trust in government that will be advantageous in a crisis. As an example, he says we need to change the public's assumption thatemergency responders will be there and take care of them in large-scale events. As he says, "it's a sobering message [to tell people that] in your time of most need, you might be alone." But by being honest, the government and the public build partnerships to strengthen the social safety nets that will help communities be more resilient.

- <u>Ensure broad community engagement</u>. Gore shares that when they began holding town hall meetings, he realized that some population segments of the community were not attending, so he went into the community to meet with them (in his case, this involved Latino, Sikh, and First Nation populations). Knowing who is in your community and ensuring they are engaged means you will better serve them with information, outreach, and tailored support.

- <u>Adapt and move forward</u>. Elected officials must be flexible and adapt to changing circumstances, but always move forward. Gore describes the need to embrace "imperfect relentless progress" and focus on taking action to "get better every day." After disasters, elected officials must jump into the chaos, listening to community needs, examining local laws to expedite permits, advocating for disaster assistance, and bringing in third parties, such as legal aid, to provide direct services to the community. Established community connections with strong feedback loops allow elected officials to use their position for the greatest good.

Questions for Discussion

☐ How can elected officials and other government leaders in your community advocate for emergency preparedness and "imperfect, relentless" progress? Are all departments of government engaged in emergency management, and do they make preparing for disasters a priority? Do your elected officials and other government departments actively participate in disaster preparedness exercises?

☐ How can you leverage existing community outreach activities to include disaster preparedness education? How are government communication channels used to solicit feedback from the community?

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❑ Do you have an accurate picture of the people who live in your community and their challenges to resilience? Do you have a community planning group of stakeholders from across the whole community to bring the voices and needs of all community members into planning for disaster preparedness, response, and recovery processes? FEMA's Community Resilience Indicator Analysis GIS-tool can give you county-level data on 20 community resilience indicators identified by analyzing peer-reviewed research. Go to http://bit.ly/CommunityResilienceIndicatorAnalysis to view and download data for your county.

Topic 2. Crisis Communications

As Gore explains, communication is always difficult to get right during and after a disaster, whether it is the timing and multi-layer review of content for emergency alerts and other critical community information; difficulty including people whose first language is not English; or creating overly complex sources for information as opposed to a centralized location. Communications is a critical area where Gore urges emergency responders to practice imperfect, relentless progress.

> *You can't sit in an emergency operations center and have public information officers review every press release until it is perfectly sanitary and stale. You have to get out of the bunker.*
>
> — James Gore

The speed of the Tubbs Fire contributed to the challenges in sending wireless emergency alerts and using the emergency broadcast system. The fire saw 100 wireless towers destroyed, a lack of situational awareness, and other reasons not to send alerts. Gore shares that the 911 system was already overwhelmed, but also that they did not think about backup systems such as a 211 system or a process to physically canvas areas at risk.

As Gore describes, the decision not to send the wireless emergency alert message quickly turned to finger-pointing and blame. He acknowledges that, in retrospect, they should have "woken up the world." But his bigger point is to be accountable and then continue to move on and make imperfect, relentless progress.

Sonoma County recently conducted a wide-scale live code wireless emergency alert and emergency alert system test which identified several areas for improvement. Plans for community notifications are now more robust and include backup notification systems.

Questions for Discussion

❑ Does your jurisdiction have clear plans and protocols for alerting your community? Who has the authority to send alert notifications?

❑ Have you tested your 911 and other systems to identify capacity issues? Does your planning team include the public safety answering points (PSAPs)? Are your 911, 311, 211 systems integrated to handle surges in call volume? How will these call centers be staffed? Do your disaster exercises included stresses on your emergency communication systems?

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- [ ] Have your emergency managers, elected officials, and public information officers worked together to develop pre-scripted message templates to expedite release? Are the clearance processes for alerts, social media messages, press releases, and other public communications designed for timely release of critical information? Do your disaster exercises test the timeliness of public messaging?

- [ ] Do you have partnerships with community leaders and the media to deliver messaging to the public?

Topic 3. Mobilize and Organize Your Community

Gore shares the success of Sonoma County's Block Captain program to create community activists and force multipliers for the recovery effort. The Block Captain program turned large cacophonous town halls into more intimate meetings focused on specific community needs. Block Captains are self-selected members of the community who help their neighborhoods recover after a disaster by meeting weekly with builders, surveyors, utilities and other community stakeholders, sharing rebuilding needs and resources, and reporting updates to their community. By tapping these community leaders, and meeting with them on a weekly basis, Sonoma County more effectively supported neighborhood re-building and could quickly hear the ground truth about the issues and challenges facing community members.

In addition, the Block Captain program builds social cohesion and social capital in the community. As one Block Captain explained, "We didn't really know our neighbors. Now I know every stinking person who lives in this place. And they're my friends now, and it's great. And I feel that sense of community." Building this kind of social capital before an incident is indicator of resilience in response and recovery. Those with stronger neighbor and community ties are more resilient to disasters, as Dr. Daniel Aldrich describes in his PrepTalk "Social Capital in Disaster Mitigation andRecovery."

> *The reason we are still caught standing flat footed in communities ... is because we think we have to be perfect ...we don't embrace imperfect, relentless progress.*
>
> — James Gore

Having seen the benefits and the success of the Block Captain program in the recovery phase, Gore strongly encourages all elected and government leaders to mobilize and organize their communities now. Activities such as the National Fire Protection Association Wildfire Community Prep Day, the Red Cross "Sound the Alarm" program, San Francisco's Neighborfest, and Community Emergency Response Team training are ways to organize and mobilize your community around emergency readiness.

Questions for Discussion

- [ ] What programs does your community have that could be used to organize and mobilize your community around disaster preparedness? Does your jurisdiction have an existing network of neighborhood leaders? If not, how can you work with community stakeholders to identify people who may we willing to serve as neighborhood leaders?

☐ How can you help these local neighborhood and community organizations take on wildfire and other preparedness activities such as identifying local evacuation routes and clearing brush to reduce fuels in areas at the threat of wildfire?

For the companion Facilitator Slides and Resource List for this PrepTalk, visit:

https://www.fema.gov/blog/preptalks-james-gore-forging-resilient-community-through-imperfect-relentless-progress