

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.

“The Big One: Your Survival Guide” Podcast Team – Storytelling to Promote Action

The Big One podcast team works at Southern California Public Radio. The team consists of host Jacob Margolis, producers Arwen Champion Nicks and Misha Euceph, and editor Megan Garvey. [The Big One: Your Survival Guide](#) is a nine-episode series released in early 2019, and by April 2019, it had been downloaded more than one million times.

In their PrepTalk, the team shares why they developed “The Big One: Your Survival Guide” and how storytelling can help compel people to take action and prepare for disasters.

We told them what was going to happen, gave them practical information on what they could do, and wrapped it up in a story.

— Arwen Champion Nicks

Partners for the Discussion

Motivating citizens in your jurisdictions to think about and prepare for local hazards requires the expertise of emergency responders together with media and communications professionals. Developing relationships with reporters, editors, and producers from local newspapers and radio and television stations helps you communicate preparedness messages more effectively. Bring emergency responders together with media representatives to watch The Big One podcast team’s PrepTalk, then discuss ways to work together to connect with community members, using storytelling to help them prepare for a disaster.

Discussion Topics

Topic 1: Testing Your Assumptions

The Big One podcast team explains how important it is to test your assumptions about people’s awareness of potential disasters and what their concerns are. Don’t assume you know their concerns – listening to people in your community will focus your outreach and communications efforts and tailor your information to answer real questions from community members.



For example, by talking to people at a local park, The Big One podcast team realized most people in L.A. were not thinking about the next big earthquake. When the team mentioned a potential earthquake, people said they didn't know how to begin to get ready and then quickly moved to whether they should get a gun to keep the people they love safe. These discussions in the park helped the podcast team understand that previous preparedness information campaigns did not work.

When we questioned our assumptions, we had to face a very sobering reality — that all the coverage we had done might not be working, [that it might not be] resonating with people.

— Arwen Champion Nicks

Questions for Discussion

- ☐ What are some ways to test your assumptions about what people know about potential disasters in your area? What questions would you want to know from the people who live in your community?
- ☐ What existing community forums can you use to get feedback? How can you record the feedback to explore recurring themes? Who might be a neutral representative to ask questions in your community, especially with communities that distrust government representatives?
- ☐ Getting community feedback does not need to be highly structured or formal, but does your community have social science professors or students who could help develop key questions and conduct feedback sessions?

Topic 2: Storytelling as a Preparedness Tool

The Big One podcast team's research for the podcast led them to the work of [Dr. Sarah K. McBride](#). Dr. McBride was a public information officer (PIO) in Christchurch, New Zealand, when the devastating earthquake hit in 2011. Following the earthquake, she received a doctorate and published her thesis "The Canterbury tales: an insider's lessons and reflections from the Canterbury Earthquake Sequence to inform better public communication models." In her thesis, she describes how shocked she was that after the earthquake, all she heard from people was, "How come nobody told us?" when she had been constantly telling her community of the dangers of earthquake. She realized she had to assess how effective those communications had been and consider how to communicate more effectively.

How to Tell Stories

As the Big One podcast team says in their PrepTalk, "You have to tell a story." McBride's research shows that if you can give people a connection to a person they can empathize with, the story is much more likely to stick with them. It's more likely that people will think about it and that they will take action to prepare.

To tell the story we wanted to tell I had to be vulnerable ... I couldn't be an omniscient narrator that wagged his finger and said, "Do better." People don't connect with that.

— Jacob Margolis

Two effective ways to tell stories to promote preparedness actions include telling real-life stories and using visualization to give people context.

Tell Real-Life Stories. Sharing first-person accounts of disaster survivors is a compelling way to convey the actual experience of a disaster. The Big One podcast includes many personal stories told by people who experienced the trauma of a major earthquake. Margolis shared his experience as a child during the Northridge Earthquake in 1994, and the voices of his parents, to convey how the earthquake affected him, his parents, and his family.

Use Visualization. Visualization puts listeners inside the story. Visualization uses vivid imagery to describe the scene and what people will see, hear, feel, and smell. People are more likely to take steps to prepare or understand what to do in the moment if they have a sense of what to expect.

The Big One podcast combined both of these storytelling techniques: they used a fictional persona in a narrative to explain what it looks like to encounter a collapsed building, and then backed that up with the personal story of Anne Brauer, who was trapped in a bus when the brick building next to her started to collapse.

Pair Stories with Actionable Preparedness Information

Every episode of The Big One podcast includes tips. Telling personal experiences of disasters is only effective as a preparedness message if those stories explain the value of specific preparedness actions. Connecting storytelling with preparedness actions shows why the action is useful and important.

The podcast team also celebrated people for taking action to prepare. Through social media, they created a conversation about preparing. One of the big takeaways from the podcast is to SHOW the importance of preparedness, not to simply tell people to prepare. The storyteller's mantra is Show, don't tell!

We knew we had to answer the question, "Where do I get started?" so we gave our listeners practical, actionable items that they could do to prepare.

— Misha Euceph

Questions for Discussion

- ☐ How can you identify people in your community who have experienced disasters? How can you use their stories to highlight preparedness actions?
- ☐ How can you work with media in your community to use storytelling to change the preparedness conversation? How can you work together to highlight preparedness stories and not just post-incident tragedies?
- ☐ In addition to media professionals, who else can help create visualization narratives? Emergency responders have a wide range of experiences that a skilled writer can translate to a compelling, effective narrative.

- ☐ Review your preparedness materials to couple preparedness recommendations with real-life stories or fictional narratives to help community members visualize why the recommendations are important.
- ☐ Is there a high-profile person in your community who has experienced a disaster? Do first responders in your community have compelling stories about why they choose a career in emergency response?

Topic 3: Partnering with the Media

The success of The Big One podcast, reaching more than a million people within a few months, demonstrates how effective media can be in promoting preparedness. In addition to working together during a disaster, emergency managers can partner with the media year-round to increase awareness about disaster preparedness and protective actions. The media—television, radio, newspapers, the internet, and others—can be invaluable resources to build community resilience.

Develop a Media List

Identify media contacts before disasters hit. For example:

- Identify reporters who cover subjects related to emergency preparedness in your community, such as science, weather, transportation and other community lifelines, zoning and building codes, and human interest stories.
- Connect with local meteorologists to engage with their social media followers.

Whether it includes a crucial half-dozen local press contacts or is an extensive database of reporters, producers, and programs, your media list is one of your most important tools.

Build the Relationship

Once you have a media list, contact the news outlets and reporters to discuss ways you can support their reporting by being a source of information. For example:

- Instead of relying solely on press releases, build a personal relationship by contacting reporters and producers directly about important public meetings or press conferences scheduled and open to media or the public.
- Let them know if you have events happening that provide a visual interest, including firefighter training, emergency drills, or Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) exercises.
- Hold a CERT training or “You Are the Help” training for employees of the news outlet. Providing training to members of the media and answering their personal preparedness questions gives them a personal connection to the stories they produce.
- Share your recommendations of important social media sites they should follow when a disaster happens.

- When reporters contact you for background information or for an on-the-record comment, be responsive, be accurate, be useful to them.

In today's era of online reporting, the pace of journalism has changed. Providing your contact information and being a trusted source will help journalists meet their deadlines and build your relationship.

Be an Expert AND Help with Storytelling

Emergency managers can help journalists find real people to tell personal stories of preparedness and disaster experiences. Help journalists write stories that go beyond the facts, to provide the human perspective—those stories will become your “real life stories” for preparedness.

Emergency managers can also help with stories about anniversaries of past disasters in the community and help journalists translate media stories of disasters happening in other parts of the country (or other parts of the world) to have local resonance and meaning.

Questions for Discussion

- ☐ Do you have a list of journalists who cover relevant topics in your community? If not, do you have an intern or perhaps a local journalism student who can help you build your list?
- ☐ In addition to the Public Information Officer, who else in your emergency management network should build a relationship with reporters in your area to focus on preparedness?
- ☐ What are ways you can build a relationship with reporters? How can you partner with them and work together to improve the preparedness and resilience of your community?

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

<https://www.fema.gov/blog/preptalks-big-one-podcast-team-storytelling-promote-action>