INCREASING CAPACITY TO BUILD RESILIENT COMMUNITIES

Communities across the country often struggle to anticipate and implement effective resilience strategies. Community resilience is the ability to plan for and bounce back from shocks and stressors, which vary depending on the community. These can range from an aging population decreasing the number of community members actively in the workforce to a major natural disaster that impacts the local economy, resident well-being, and physical landscape.

Identifying the barriers that prevent municipal staff from meaningful preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation is the first step to building resilient communities. Throughout the process of developing the RRC Resiliency Toolkit, three key barriers were repeatedly identified for communities big and small: staff capacity, resources, and adequate funding. This toolkit is designed to help community professionals and champions alike dismantle these obstacles to cultivate a culture of collaboration and empower community members to take ownership of actions toward resilience to help support integrate resiliency efforts to reduce adding additional items to individual staff duties.

INCREASING STAFF CAPACITY
Expanding the Team through Collaborative Partnerships

While some larger communities across Michigan benefit from a dedicated team of planning experts with diverse backgrounds who are equipped to address critical topics like disaster management, economic recovery, infrastructure inspection and maintenance, and public health, many smaller municipalities face staffing and resource constraints. In these smaller municipalities, staff members tend to juggle multiple roles that can be outside of their training or expertise, making it easy to focus primarily on immediate concerns, and addressing issues as they occur versus aligning their daily work with strategic plans. This can become unsustainable, making workloads heavier over time and limiting their capacity to create a strategy for resilience.

By fostering collaboration and sharing responsibility, communities can better position themselves for prioritization of proactive measures aimed at addressing future challenges. Municipalities can connect with non-profit and non-governmental organizations, local businesses, and nearby colleges and universities to increase capacity to tackle a resilience plan without expanding permanent staff. Universities with planning and sustainability programs can be a great resource as they can assist with research hours and planning efforts. Reaching out to professors in these fields and offering an opportunity to collaborate can be incredibly helpful for students to gain real-world experience. It can also help to join regional alliances, where multiple jurisdictions share resources to implement larger scale solutions.

Closing the Knowledge Gap

Identifying common goals and priorities can be a great place to start when choosing key stakeholders and champions who can help to move this effort forward. Reaching out to organizations that are passionate about topics such as civil rights, public health and safety, sustainable development, and disaster preparedness can help begin the process of finding collaborators. Their perspective can enrich the planning process by providing expertise about the topic and what is already being done; they will also have valuable insight into how the community might be able to address enduring concerns and ensure the resilience plan is grounded in authenticity and strategic action.

In addition to providing more capacity to advance resilience efforts, tapping into outside organizations can help supplement technical skill and subject matter expertise. Resilience planning benefits communities by providing an understanding of local socioeconomic and environmental context and vulnerabilities, review of historical events, climatic trends, and projections, and knowing how and when to prioritize actions based on exposure to risk. It can also involve performing economic analysis and gaining a deep understanding of how the local economy relates to existing and future policies. If this knowledge is outside a municipal staff's skill level or experience, it can often be an overwhelming undertaking. By bringing in key experts, staff have a built-in network of resources who are often already working to implement change.

Leaning into these local resources can also provide a great opportunity for educating the public about important topics that highlights all the important work being done by these organizations and give residents a better understanding of how to engage others, become informed voters, and understand how their own actions can have a positive impact on building their community's overall resilience. The better educated the public is about these topics, the easier it becomes to gain support for policy change needed to advance resilience efforts. It may also lead to the creation of more grassroots organizations to help build capacity for planning and implementing action items.

FINDING THE RIGHT RESOURCES
Resources

Effective resilience planning not only requires strong partnerships and access to the right resources to understanding the challenges and vulnerabilities the community faces; the knowledge acquired from these resources is what forms the basis of all strategies that are tailored to the area's unique built and natural environments of the area.

Below are some resources that can assist in the knowledge-gathering phase of planning:

Climate Mapping for Resilience and Adaptation

NOAA's US Climate Resilience Toolkit includes a tool for assessing a range of climate-related challenges such as extreme heat, drought, wildfire, flooding, and coastal inundation. Within each category, the tool provides indicators and projections for early century (2015-2044), mid-century (2035-2064), and late century (2070-2099). It also offers comparisons between lower and higher greenhouse gas emissions scenarios to provide an understanding of how important it is to reduce emissions as quickly as possible to lessen the severity of future impacts.

US Census

The US Census provides important demographic information, including data on population, employment, income and poverty, housing, race and ethnicity, education, and health. Within the website, there is a profile viewer with interactive maps and helpful infographics. Click here to see an example of their ready-made community profiles.

Michigan Housing Data Portal

MEDC collaborated with the Michigan Municipal League and Michigan State Housing Development Authority to create a portal that automatically gathers the latest housing data, trends, and local benchmarks to develop reports about the status of housing for all Michigan communities. This can quickly help identify gaps in local housing markets.

EPA EJ Screen

The EPA Environmental Justice Screening and Mapping Tool provides insight into socioeconomic indicators, health disparities, pollution and sources, climate risks, and critical service gaps.

FEMA National Risk Index

FEMA's National Risk Index measures risk, social vulnerability, and community resilience of US states to natural disasters. This tool provides a map can be viewed from a county level or the more detailed census tract level. By offering granular data, it enables a clearer understanding of how differently adjacent neighborhoods can experience risk, highlighting disparities in vulnerability and resilience.

Strategies

Once data is collected, there are multiple toolkits that provide key recommendations and actions communities can undertake depending on the challenges they are facing.

MI Green Communities Challenge

MI Green Communities Challenge offers a list of action items and metrics related to green initiatives including climate resilience and adaptation, energy efficiency and renewable energy, sustainable land use, protecting and conserving water resources, and more. Participation includes access to additional resources and peer networks.

NOAA Implementing the Steps to Resilience Guide

The NOAA Practitioner's Guide to Implementing the Steps to Resilience takes the reader through understanding exposure, assessing vulnerability and risk, investigating options for reducing these vulnerabilities and risks, prioritization and planning, and taking action. It includes downloadable resources and worksheets for teams to use throughout Resilience Planning.

RRC Resiliency Toolkit

Like the NOAA guide, MEDC's RRC Resiliency Toolkit helps local officials and staff to better understand challenges that face their communities and how to implement effective solutions through vulnerability assessment, goal setting, suggested action items, and metric tracking. The RRC Toolkit focuses on the thematic areas of Place, People, Infrastructure, and Economy, providing a comprehensive guide for achieving community resilience in Michigan.

FUNDING RESILIENCE

Effective planning leads to action, which often requires some form of funding. Communities can obtain funding for planning and implementing resilience strategies through state and federal grants. Universities and students are eager to help with the grant writing process and can help communities through the application stages. Many non-profit organizations also have access to funding opportunities that municipalities may not be eligible for, providing a pathway for advancing important initiatives. These are great opportunities to build new and strengthen existing partnerships.

Collaborating with these organizations is another way to expand resilience efforts beyond municipal boundaries, broadening the scope of planning endeavors. Non-profits and non-governmental organizations frequently collaborate with many cities, townships, and villages across their region, facilitating connections between neighboring communities that can further expand staff capacity. Furthermore, developing a regional resilience plan may have significant benefits, as many challenges, such as natural disasters or economic downturn, often transcend the boundaries of individual communities.

Tips for Successful Applications

- Be sure you are following the grant directions and directly answering the prompt.
- Reach out to the grant coordinator directly, early, and often. They are there to help guide and support you in developing a compelling application.
- When possible, focus on implementable projects such as shoreline restoration, trails, housing developments, etc. which often have project-specific funding sources.
- For larger scale projects such as research, planning, and engagement, seek to form partnerships and apply with surrounding jurisdictions, tribes, or non-profits to have a more inclusive and compelling case.

Click here to learn more about available funding opportunities and grants.

KEY LESSONS

Close the knowledge gap by leaning on local organizations and collaborating to expand awareness of their activities while educating the public on important resilience topics.

Seek funding through grants by focusing on project-based solutions, collaborating with surrounding jurisdictions, and coordinating directly with grant providers.

Use free public resources to quickly obtain data that will help you narrow your focus on the most impactful shocks and stressors your community faces. Use existing toolkits as inspiration for the strategies to mitigate those shocks and stressors.

Increase staff capacity by partnering with local non-profits, non-governmental organizations, universities, and regional entities.