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### Report on Reports: Review of Disaster Resilience: A National Imperative

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# Review of Disaster Resilience

## A NATIONAL IMPERATIVE

by Claire B. Rubin

While there are many reports and studies about resilience, the work of the committee convened by the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) represents more than two years of effort by an expert research panel with the input of many other interested parties. Titled *Disaster Resilience: A National Imperative*, the final report of the committee was published in late 2012 and is available at: [http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record\\_id=13457](http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=13457). Since the report was sponsored by eight federal agencies and one community resilience group, each with an interest in and responsibilities for disasters and emergency management, the report and its recommendations are expected to have their backing.

The National Research Council's charge to the committee was to:

- Define “national resilience” and frame the main issues relating to increasing the nation's resilience to disasters.
- Provide goals, baseline conditions, or performance metrics for national resilience.
- Describe the current state of knowledge about resilience.
- Outline additional information, data, gaps, and/or obstacles that should be addressed to increase national resilience.

The committee has capably met that challenge. The document clearly defines resilience, provides an excellent description of what a resilient nation would look like, and argues convincingly

for placing the topic on the national agenda. As defined in the report, “Resilience is ‘the ability to prepare and plan for, absorb, recover from, and more successfully adapt to adverse events.’” This broad definition

*reflects the many facets of resilience and its relevance before, during, and after a disaster. While resilience is rooted in the local community affected by disasters, it involves a wide variety of stakeholders, including families, the private sector, governments, academic, nonprofit groups, and faith-based groups—on local, state, and national scales.*

The committee's vision and recommendations are far-reaching and bold. Its vision for the future is “a more disas-

*The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers begins residential demolition and debris removal of houses fully destroyed by Hurricane Sandy in Breezy Point, New York.*







Construction crews rebuild the beaches in front of homes damaged by Hurricane Sandy.

ter-resilient America in the year 2030.” Achieving this vision “requires a new national culture of disaster resilience in which everyone takes responsibility for resilience to both natural and human-induced disasters. All communities and levels of government know their roles and responsibilities in building resilience, and they act on them.” And to this end, the committee makes six major recommendations:

1. A national resource of disaster-related data should be established that documents injuries, loss of life, property loss, and impacts on economic activity.
2. The public and private sectors in each community should work cooperatively to encourage commitment to and investment in a risk management strategy that includes complementary structural and nonstructural risk-reduction and risk-spreading measures or tools.
3. Federal, state, and local governments should support the creation and maintenance of broad-based community resilience coalitions at the local and regional levels.
4. Federal government agencies should incorporate national resilience as an organizing principle to inform and guide the mission and actions of the federal government and the programs it supports at all levels.
5. All federal agencies should promote and coordinate national resilience in their programs and policies. A resilience policy review and self-assessment within agencies, and the establishment of a strong community among agencies, are keys to achieving this kind of coordination.
6. The Department of Homeland Security, in conjunction with other federal agencies, state and local partners, and professional groups, should develop a national resilience scorecard.

By using the word imperative in the title of the report, the study team emphasizes its belief in the urgency of the subject. While pushing for action in the near future, however, the authors are quite frank about the likely obstacles to achieving greater disaster resilience in the United States. They also explain what is needed in the way of data and infor-

mation; in this regard, the report sets the baseline so that the responsible parties can proceed in a coherent fashion to develop the laws, regulations, policies, and funding needed to carry out the tasks that will produce a resilient nation.

My personal perspective on resilience has been formed by my experience as an emergency management researcher and consultant—someone who works with public officials and others to understand, adopt, and implement new policies, programs, and recommendations. From an intellectual standpoint, I believe the study findings and recommendations are commendable and credible. The report provides a substantial foundation for the formulation of mandates and funding streams to achieve resilience nationally. My concerns are practical ones, relating primarily to governance, as discussed in Chapter 7, “Putting the Pieces Together: Linking Communities and Governance to Guide National Resilience.”

I see governance issues as paramount going forward. Currently, there are no mandates (legislative, regulatory, or directive) or funding streams for resilience activities in the main federal agen-





*Aerial image from a helicopter near downtown West Liberty, Kentucky showing tornado damage from an EF3 tornado. Areas of the American Midwest were hit hard by a tornado outbreak on March 2, 2012.*

cies responsible for emergency management. It remains to be seen who would be held accountable for efforts to accomplish, measure, document, and evaluate examples when they occur. How will those persons on the front lines of emergency management actually accept and internalize the philosophy and guiding principles and then acquire the power

the federal agencies that funded the NAS study, as well as major national organizations that are expected to take the lead in resilience, do not have the authority, ability, or funding necessary to assume a leadership role. Nor are emergency management agencies the appropriate drivers to promote resilience, although

and funding to implement the needed actions in their organizations and communities? In my view, it is up to the eight federal agencies that sponsored the report to step up and develop the laws, regulations, policies, guidance, programs, and funding to implement the report's findings and recommendations. The results of the committee's work should provide not just a challenge but also a significant foundation for efforts by the sponsoring organizations.

Moreover, who will assume the leadership roles?

they would certainly benefit from resilience activities in that the damage from disasters would be relatively less severe and costly. But local and state offices of emergency management are typically placed relatively low within their government hierarchies, and their directors do not have a lot of political or policy clout. The best that might be hoped for is that emergency managers might be one of the levers that push other actors to take the lead.

Resilience will be difficult to achieve because its relatives—mitigation and recovery—are difficult to achieve. Yet, in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, we have already seen some examples of positive actions and pending changes:

- FEMA officials are reviewing their existing enabling legislation and regulations to see how they can foster activities that contribute to resilience within the confines of their mission.
- New York Governor Andrew Cuomo created three new blue-ribbon commissions to “undertake a comprehensive review and make specific recommendations to overhaul and improve NY State’s emergency preparedness and response



*This home was destroyed by the March 2012 tornado near Chickamauga Lake, Ooltewah, Tennessee.*



capabilities, as well as examine how to improve the strength and resilience of the state's infrastructure to better withstand major weather incidents."

- Mayor Michael Bloomberg announced a visionary, detailed, and far-sighted set of plans for the rebuilding and long-term recovery of New York City. What remains to be worked out, however, is funding for the ideas and projects mentioned; it is assumed that a substantial amount of federal funds will be needed.
- Congress is considering a \$60 billion request to fund Hurricane Sandy recovery. The legislation states that rebuilding should take into consideration "future extreme weather events, sea level rise and coastal flooding."

These examples of "spontaneous ignition" indicate that people at many levels are extending themselves to achieve national disaster resilience in both the near term and the long term. These are the people who recognize that failure to act means continued perils in terms of lives and property lost. The findings and recommendations of the NAS study should be an invaluable resource for the nation as long as public officials and others become committed, and stay committed, to carrying out its recommendations.

**Claire B. Rubin** is president of Claire B. Rubin & Associates, LLC, a small firm engaged in research and consulting in emergency management, located in Arlington, Virginia. She is the editor of the recent book *Emergency Management, The American Experience, 1900–2010* (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2012).

*New Orleans, Louisiana, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.*



AP Photo/U.S. Coast Guard/Kyle Niemi



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