

Disaster Resilience Learning Collaborative (DRLC) Pilot

A community-centered partnership



The 2020 wildfires affected rural and low-income communities of color and those with less language access more than other groups. In the aftermath of these fires, the Community Based Organizations (CBOs) who serve these communities identified a need for more equitable disaster resilience and for addressing trauma in their organizations and communities. In response, the Oregon Health Authority (OHA), the United Way of the Columbia-Willamette (UWCW), and Trauma Informed Oregon (TIO) partnered with culturally specific community leaders to develop a pilot program, the Disaster Resilience Learning Collaborative (DRLC).

The goals of the pilot project were to:

- Provide separate spaces where community and public sector leaders could strengthen relationships with one another, feel supported, and experience healing.
- Acknowledge the mental and emotional aspects of disaster and climate resilience work and share knowledge and tools for supporting community leaders and communities
- Identify ways to improve disaster preparedness, response and recovery so that it more equitably meets the needs of all communities.

DRLC partners created and piloted a new model that we are calling a “Healing Centered Social Resilience Framework” that draws from the following practices and frameworks: [trauma-informed care](#), [social resilience framework](#), [healing-centered](#) and culturally grounded practices which place the culture of participants at the center of programs and projects.



Pilot Process and Model

The DRLC pilot included a CBO cohort and a public sector cohort who participated in a series of learning opportunities, community building activities and facilitated discussions.

The CBO cohort met in an affinity space, where all participants, facilitators and trainers represented intersectional Black, Brown or Indigenous ethnic or racial identities. The group chose to continue meeting monthly after their scheduled series of learning circles ended to continue deepening their relationships and building social resilience.

The public sector cohort included government staff whose focus is on establishing community partnerships in disaster resilience work. This group included a mix of racial identities and represented a variety of public sector agencies. OHA reconvened these participants in the spring of 2022 to revisit lessons learned and develop this report.

What we heard from DRLC participants

PERSPECTIVES ON RESILIENCE

- *“Resilience is a fancy word to say, I’m here.”* (CBO participant)
- *“[resilience]...minimizes the struggle, pain, and trauma that most folks go through to be resilient.”* (CBO participant)
- *“Resilience is a displacement of structural problems on individuals.”* (Agency participant)

Resilience is a term that is used a lot and is defined in many different ways. The purpose of this discussion was not to come up with an agreed up on definition, but for leaders working in this area to consider the term could have different meanings and connotations across individuals and communities.

Both groups brought up tensions with the term “resilience” and how it is used. They see the word being used to unfairly shift responsibility to the community, and away from the responsibility of governments to protect all communities equally from environmental threats. Similarly, agency representatives pointed out that the term can be used to avoid questioning and changing oppressive structures (see third quote in this section).

Some CBO participants saw resilience as a word to describe communities who have skills and strengths that help them through adversity, and that cultural heritage is significant to resilience because it encourages a sense of pride and strength.

PERSPECTIVES ON STORYTELLING

- *“And this is so, you need to know that you’re not alone, and that the communities are important. That there are others like you out there.”* – CBO participant
- *“There can be an attitude of if you are concerned or aware of emotions then you’re not getting things done.”* – Agency participant

Storytelling was one aspect of a healing-centered approach that was used with both groups. Other aspects included culturally-grounded tools to support their own well-being as well as personal reflections and sharing of experiences. For the CBO participants, these activities were important for bonding, connection, new perspectives, and mutual learning.

Agency participants were cautiously supportive of incorporating storytelling into their work. They acknowledged that story telling can support people feeling heard and encourage healing but highlighted the need for an intentional trauma-informed approach. The following were identified as important for agencies to consider when using storytelling into their work:

- transparency and honesty about why people are asked to share their stories and how they would be used
- ownership and power over the use of the story had to stay with the storyteller to avoid a risk of exploitation
- discernment of when and where storytelling could be beneficial and when it may be harmful.

Two participants reflected that people who work on disaster resilience are often very action-, rather than relationship- or emotion-, focused. They thought storytelling practices that allow for pausing and reflection could be beneficial for these organizations.

PERSPECTIVES ON COLLABORATION SUCCESSES

- *“Because we have the trust of the communities, we have been able to support them and talk about the different resources and the topics we are facing”* – CBO participant
- *“We developed 100 core winter weather messages, had subject matter experts and community members vet the messages, and then translated them in over 25 languages. We need one consistent list of messages. This type of work should happen immediately ahead of disasters [all over the state]. It needs to be culturally fine-tuned for different groups.”* – Agency participant

The building of trust was identified by both groups as critical in collaboration. CBOs shared that the existing trust among the community members they serve allows them to reach more people directly.

Both groups described successes in collaborative public-sector and CBO work and also recognized increased opportunities for collaboration. CBO and public sector participants expressed a need for ongoing continued funding – both to local city and county jurisdictions and directly to community-based organizations.

COLLABORATION CHALLENGES AND CENTERING COMMUNITIES

“In order for our community to gain trust with government agencies is to have people who represent us and understand us, people who can speak to our communities. That is very important. They will feel more comfortable to go into a public agency for assistance if there is someone there who looks like them and understands them. – CBO participant

One challenge brought up by many participants in both cohorts was related to communication during the wildfire disaster in 2020. Information and notifications were not provided in the correct language for many people who were affected. Poor communication during emergencies deepens mistrust in government. Lacking or broken trust is an issue that came up in conversations in both cohorts as a barrier to strengthening collaboration between governmental agencies and communities of color.

Recommended best practices for local and state government agencies working on disaster resilience

Equitable disaster preparedness, recovery and resilience are dependent on strong partnerships between government agencies and communities and organizational cultures and workforce that support these partnerships.

STRENGTHENING PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN GOVERNMENTAL AGENCIES AND COMMUNITIES

1. **Agencies contribute to ongoing community trust repair** - Acknowledging, apologizing for, and addressing systemic racism and past harm related to disaster resilience.
2. **Partner with communities in disaster planning early and often** - Engage communities as an equal partnership in disaster planning, training, exercise, response, and culturally-tailored messaging.
3. **Prioritize and strengthen community-based organization, Tribal, and public agency relationships related to disaster resilience** - Convene state-level workgroup or team focused on community relationship alignment across agencies.

4. **Secure ongoing funding to local agencies, Tribes, and CBOs to engage the community in disaster preparedness and response work, especially in rural communities** - Advocate to foundations and federal government flexible funding to share power at local levels.

STRENGTHENING COORDINATION, CONSISTENCY AND EQUITY ACROSS AGENCIES

5. **Strengthen Agency Coordination and Consistency Related to Disaster Preparedness, Response, and Recovery** – Empower one State agency/office to oversee the State’s disaster-related messaging.
6. **Clarify, standardize and expand disaster resilience communication:** Consistent statewide inclusive, trauma-informed disaster resilience messaging standards.
7. **Ensure equity is consistently embedded in disaster resilience efforts across agencies** - Establish Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Workgroup focused on Disaster Resilience at the state level building off existing boards and commissions working to address racial inequities in state government.

ORGANIZATIONAL WORKFORCE & CULTURE

8. **Foster a more diverse and culturally- and linguistically- proficient governmental workforce.** This way, agencies will better reflect and be able to better serve the communities who have been historically inadequately served.
9. **Encourage governmental agency culture change that supports strong collaborations with communities and other agencies that work on disaster resilience.** This includes the need for governmental agencies to understand and apply trauma-informed and healing-centered principles internally and externally. Agency culture change that supports flexibility and accountability to communities is also needed.

What has emerged from these pilot partnerships?

- [Disaster Resilience Learning Collaborative Evaluation Report](#). Trauma Informed Oregon conducted a comprehensive evaluation of this pilot project where you can find more details on feedback from participants based on surveys and interviews.
- [Preparing Oregon’s Communities of Color for Disasters](#). The United Way of the Columbia Willamette conducted interviews and focus groups among key organizations and leaders across Oregon to better understand what is needed to prepare Oregon’s communities of color for disasters.
- In 2022, Trauma Informed Oregon and the United Way Columbia Willamette received funding to launch the Disaster Resilience Learning Network, which builds off of the relationships formed and lessons learned in this pilot project.