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A Kansas and Alaska Example of Extension Opportunities in Emergency Preparedness

Abstract
Emergency preparedness and management show great potential as growth areas for Extension programming. This Commentary examines two such programs. In Brown County, Kansas, Extension's decision to get involved in emergency management resulted in significantly increased funding, a renewal of faith by local county government, and a successful response to the 2007 ice storm. In Alaska, the decision to begin teaching emergency response officials and the public how to use Global Positioning System (GPS) receivers resulted in a large new audience in a previously untapped program area outside of 4-H.

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Introduction

The ultimate goal of many Extension endeavors should be to program themselves out of existence. What we mean by that statement is that responsibility for many initiatives should be handed off to volunteers, other agencies, given lower priority, or in some cases discontinued so that new and more pressing issues can be addressed. One such issue that currently stretches across the entire breadth of Extension expertise is emergency preparedness and management. This commentary examines two Extension programs in Kansas and Alaska to reveal how a programmatic shift into emergency preparedness/management has caused a large increase in audiences, relevance, positive image, and funding.

Brown County, Kansas

In Kansas, the typical agent staffing level is two agents per county. In most cases, there is one Agriculture/Natural Resources agent and one Family Consumer Science/4-H agent. Occasionally in Kansas, some county governments (County Commissioners) are forced to fund only one agent position in a county because of local budget shortfalls. In such a scenario, the single agent is responsible for all four program areas. Quite a daunting task indeed! What often results is a county program that can barely keep its head above water and has little opportunity to excel.

Brown County, Kansas, is one such example. In 2003, the County Commissioners de-funded the program, resulting in the elimination of the Agriculture agent position. If anything, Brown County Extension (and Kansas State University, too) had become a victim of its own success. Examples of this success were everywhere. Farm production was at an all-time high, the county had one of the highest adoption rates of no-till farming in the country, and it was common for farmers to have college degrees in agriculture and sometimes even graduate degrees.

So why was Brown County Extension's program funding reduced? Basically, it had failed to evolve.

Other agencies such as the Soil and Water Conservation District and the Natural Resources Conservation Service had taken over responsibilities Extension once had. Much of the traditional agricultural Extension programming had become irrelevant, and the County Commissioners had taken note.

In 2005 that began to change. Brown County Extension became involved with helping the county develop a Geographic Information System (GIS) that could be used by emergency management personnel, as well as other agencies (Brown, 2007). The County Commissioners were impressed and began encouraging Extension's further involvement in emergency management issues by asking it to become a member of the Local Emergency Preparedness Committee (LEPC).

Realizing an opportunity to streamline and improve county government, the County Commissioners invited Brown County Extension to assume all responsibilities for emergency management programming. If Brown County Extension agreed to this, the County Commissioners would provide funding for a new agent position. That is what ultimately happened.

Normally, this would be the end of a nice story. However, Brown County, Kansas was at the epicenter of the record-setting December 2007 ice storm (Figure 1). So, how well did Brown County Extension handle a disaster that left the county without electricity for weeks and forced many into public shelters? The short answer is "extremely well."

Figure 1.
Ice Storm Devastated Horton, Kansas (photo by Jennifer Ploeger)

The things that most successful Extension programs excel at are communicating through media outlets, managing people (particularly volunteers), and coordinating between many different agencies. It turns out those are the most important skills needed in responding to a disaster like the ice storm. Because Brown County Extension was extremely practiced in these efforts, it was not difficult to perform them efficiently and effectively.

An additional benefit of Extension leading the disaster response is that Brown County Extension was already seen as an unbiased entity and one that enjoyed a long history of public trust. This proved especially important when stopping misinformation and rumors that quickly developed during and after the storm.

Kenai Peninsula and Mat-Su Borough, Alaska

In Alaska, the Global Positioning System (GPS) is more than a recreational luxury. For many, it is an absolute necessity. GPS is used extensively by hikers, hunters, snowmobilers, and dogsled mushers, as well as by emergency response organizations. Unfortunately, many of these users are not aware of the subtle complexities that can be magnified by Alaska's geography and extreme cold (Medred, 2008). The result can be life threatening and sometimes fatal (Cejnar, 2007).

In the fall of 2007 an introductory GPS course was developed for the Kenai Peninsula District and marketed towards local emergency response organizations. The focus of the program was to teach agency personnel "what the GPS owners manual doesn't tell you." This included skills such as recognizing different coordinate system formats, identifying appropriate map datums, and special topics unique to Alaska (Figure 2). The class would be a 3-hour hands-on course. It was initially anticipated there would only be limited interest in the class and that the course would thus have low participation numbers of not more than six to seven people. Given the importance of the topic, though, course developers believed that low participation numbers did not necessarily mean low impact.

Figure 2.
Using GPS in Alaska (photo by Michael Lewis)

The program was advertised primarily through word-of-mouth by the Kenai Peninsula District 4-H/Home Economics agent who was a member of the Local Emergency Preparedness Committee (LEPC). Despite such a low-key advertising effort, what was originally to be a single evening course mushroomed into six separate workshops over 2 days. More than 60 members of the Alaska State Troopers, Civil Air Patrol, 911 service, and other emergency responders participated in the program.

As it turns out, there was a largely unrecognized need for fundamental GPS information. According to one of the participants, previous attempts at teaching GPS by other organizations had resulted in programs that were "too simple or far too complex." Cooperative Extension's experience in providing educational programs that considered the audience and balanced content accordingly was the key.

Following the success of the Kenai Peninsula program, a similar GPS program was developed for the Matanuska/Copper River District. Because this district includes a large population center for the state, the program was marketed to the general public in hopes of attracting recreational users of GPS. As happened in the Kenai Peninsula, what was originally planned as a single evening course, instead blossomed into 11 separate classes for over 400 individuals.

Conclusion

Cooperative Extension has been involved in various types of programming with emergency preparedness implications from its very inception. One need look no further than programs in home canning and farm disease prevention to find examples. However, two things have changed that should cause Extension to rethink a stronger emphasis on this role. The first is the new and exponentially expanding part technology plays in emergency response, management, and preparedness. The second is the government's shift in funding priorities in a post-September 11th world.

As evidenced by Brown County, Kansas, local governments are more than willing to fund Extension programs when they meet an important need. They are especially willing to do this when Extension expertise leads to more efficient use of public dollars. The Brown County Commissioners are very eager to brag that the local Extension program had decreased the demand on taxpayer dollars while increasing needed services and leadership for the county.

In Alaska, GPS classes for emergency response personnel helped them better respond to emergencies. GPS programs for recreational users helped those users better understand and apply the technology so they don't become the target of an emergency response effort. In conducting these programs, Extension has carved a new niche for itself in a non-traditional field.

In Kansas and Alaska, the unifying theme of both programs is the need for people to understand and apply technology to current situations. Just as an early 1900's Extension agent was an invaluable resource to the farm family, today's agent could be just as important when it comes to technology, and, in the case of this Commentary, its applications in emergency preparedness/management.

Funding for homeland security programs is immense and will likely be that way for a very long time. Many of the dollars to support these programs will come from existing programs, and Extension is feeling the pinch. In times of trouble it is natural to run to traditional areas of strength. Fortunately or unfortunately--depending upon one's point of view--Extension has done such a good job in its traditional programming areas that those are the weakest places to seek shelter during times of trouble.

Emergency preparedness/management Extension programming across the United States is becoming more and more common. However, so have the voices that say this is not a role for Extension. We would argue otherwise, and offer the Kansas and Alaska programs as successful examples.

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Discussion