

# Extension Builds on Tradition of Meeting Community Needs by Using Technology in Disaster Recovery

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*This article describes how Extension educators built on traditional community organizing approaches by engaging an advisory board and utilizing new technologies to co-create a video series supplement to Recovery After Disaster: Family Financial Toolkit. The intent was to assist disaster professionals and survivors in making informed decisions. Upon completion, the video series was made available online for immediate accessibility via tablet and smartphone following a disaster. The strategies, methods, and benefits of utilizing video technology to offer “just in time” education, while continuing to meet the Extension mission and address needs of individuals, families, and communities, also is presented.*

## Delivering Traditional Extension Programs

Throughout the years, Extension has provided education to meet critical needs of families and

communities. Engaging community members to address those needs has been constant in Extension education. Methods to involve community members may have changed as communities changed, but input provided by citizens remains critical. The purpose of this article is to share one Extension program as an example of how a program can utilize some traditional approaches and incorporate new methods to adapt and meet the changing needs of families and communities in the 21st century.

The changing needs of families, communities, and issues in society have required that Extension broaden its offerings to meet these needs, including new technology and online learning environments (Gould, Steele, & Woodrum, 2014). In a 2004 *Journal of Extension* article, Bull, Cote, Warner, and McKinnie discussed seven characteristics of engaged institutions as identified by the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (ECOP). These characteristics include: responsiveness, respect for partners, academic neutrality, accessibility, integration, coordination, and resource partnerships. They also suggested an eighth characteristic of relevance to ensure appropriate programming to meet community needs. Extension’s research-based

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information and proximity in communities has allowed educators to become a trusted resource for quality information during times of transition and crisis. Extension specialists who helped address the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina noted that a “. . . feature of the Cooperative Extension Service model that served us well was our service design to identify human and community needs, get local input on potential solutions and strategies, present university knowledge that can help improve lives, and help citizens and communities implement best practices that effectively address challenges (Cathey, Coreil, Schexnayder, & White, 2007, p. 4). What has changed is the immediacy of information needed to help citizens in crisis situations.

### **Extension’s Role in Disaster Recovery**

Extension’s primary role in many past disasters was to provide reliable information through a variety of media (Telg, Irani, Muegge, Kistler, & Place, 2007). In disaster response and recovery, this included information to clean the affected area safely, keep foods safe, and rebuild structures. Extension has built upon these traditional strengths and has adapted to meet the critical needs of families and communities as they have changed.

Following floods in 2007 and 2009 along the Red River bordering Minnesota and North Dakota, the University of Minnesota Extension and North Dakota State University Extension Service interviewed both disaster survivors and helping professionals. From the interviews, it was determined that following a disaster, financial information and an understanding of assistance for disaster survivors were lacking. To address the findings, a Smith-Lever Special Needs Grant was secured to develop the *Recovery After Disaster: The Family Financial Toolkit* (Onstad et al., 2012). The Toolkit materials (information, worksheets, checklists, and resources) assist disaster professionals, volunteers, and survivors in assessing their situation to prevent or recover from financial loss. The Toolkit guides disaster survivors as they struggle to make financially sustainable decisions. The units include information and worksheets related to the following: What are key strategies for financial recovery? What tools do I need to implement key strategies? Where do I start? Where am I financially? Where will I live if I’m a homeowner or

renter? The new normal, and disaster recovery resources for families. Preliminary users found the Toolkit helpful and indicated they wanted information that was easy to access following a disaster.

Our team of Educators from the University of Minnesota Extension and North Dakota State University Extension Service began to investigate ways to make disaster recovery resources more accessible following a disaster. We know that the Internet is often the first place individuals look for information. However, because large amounts of information can be accessed on the Internet, the challenge was how to provide this type of critical information during and following disasters (Paul, 2001). We know that the need for disaster recovery information is immediate and often not anticipated. Information provided by videos can help alleviate such challenges because once developed, they can be accessed whenever needed, used endlessly, and updated easily (Singh, Mangalaraj, & Taneja, 2010).

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A review of other disaster recovery materials available on the Internet found that although there were a number of such resources online, few focused on the financial aspects of recovery or provided materials that were accessible immediately following a disaster. Furthermore, few included video—a shareable, downloadable medium that is a very useful resource.

Funds were secured through an additional Smith-Lever Special Needs Grant to create the *Financial Recovery After Disaster Video Series* (Hendrickson, Croymans, & Scharmer, 2015). This series is comprised of six short, static videos (6–12 minutes) focused on topics in financial

recovery. Because the videos are meant to complement the Toolkit, they encourage viewers to download and print the Toolkit materials. Video titles include: *Finding Help*, *Bouncing Back and Adapting*, *My Finances*, *SBA and FEMA*, *Insurance*, and *Exploring My Options*. The videos are shareable and found on the University of Minnesota Extension YouTube channel, the Family Development Disaster Recovery website, and the North Dakota State University Extension YouTube channel.

### **Modern Methods To Engage Community Members**

Extension educators regularly work with community boards and stakeholders. In the creation of the *Financial Recovery After Disaster Video Series*, an advisory board was engaged in a 26-month developmental process. The board was composed of disaster survivors, volunteers, and professionals. The board members identified content and presenters, created scripts, reviewed and edited video content, and planned distribution of the videos to disaster recovery professionals and volunteers. Videographers suggested a standard 3-column script template be used to identify content, audio, and visuals in the videos. Educators expanded the script template to five columns to include graphic, audio, speaker information, notes, and other. This format proved to be a useful document for videographers, educators, and advisory boards to make sure all intended information had been included. After an initial face-to-face meeting in Fargo, ND, in October 2012, the advisory board members provided guidance, input, and feedback during subsequent virtual meetings. The board's discussions included the importance of hearing survivors' stories and situations that weren't always the best-case scenario; this would allow viewers to learn from them. They determined the videos would take a "just-in-time" approach, allowing the videos to be used immediately by survivors, professionals, and volunteers through smartphones and tablets. Often these devices are the only technology resources people have available to stay connected following a disaster. The input provided through the community advisory board was vital to the successful completion of the video series.

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### **Evaluation Processes**

The educator team, assisted by a member of the University of Minnesota Extension evaluation team, conducted an evaluation of the advisory board process at each stage of the video series development. This ensured that the advisory board process was inclusive and respectful, and that the video content and format reflected the disaster recovery needs identified by the advisory board.

Once the video series was developed, the videos were piloted with both disaster survivors as well as disaster recovery professionals and volunteers to determine the accuracy of the information, that the content was portrayed respectfully, and that the videos were interesting enough to maintain viewer's attention. The videos were modified and completed based on the feedback from the advisory board and pilot participants. A video evaluation form developed by Beaudin and Quick (1996) was modified for board members to use in reviewing videos and providing written feedback; a virtual meeting to review feedback and adaptations followed. After the video series was made public, an impact evaluation was conducted to capture the effect the video series had on financial disaster recovery providers. The results indicated that the videos reached people from all regions of the United States and the Caribbean. Participants represented education (22%), governmental (46%), volunteer (38%), or other organizations (16%). The majority of the sample was from the Midwest region of the U.S. (54%), and others were from

the Northeast (14%), Southeast (12%), Northwest (10%), Southwest (6%), or Caribbean (2%).

Thirty eight percent of the participants indicated they have responded to a disaster within the past year as a professional or volunteer and 8% have experienced a disaster personally. A majority of respondents first heard about the video series through email (40%) and webinars (26%) and they shared the videos electronically. The reach of the videos indicates how the distribution channels in Extension have expanded due to technology.

Participants were asked if they had used or intended to use the videos in the event of a disaster. Fifty-six percent reported they had not had an opportunity to use the videos but intended to do so when needed. Of those who reported using the videos, responses included incorporating the videos into a staff development plan (10%), training staff and volunteers (10%), sharing the videos through social media (8%), for personal use (6%), linking the videos on a webpage (4%), and providing education for survivors following a disaster (4%). Of the actions respondents reported taking, 100% of them were described as successful (Cronin, Croymans, & Hendrickson, 2016). Several community partners later shared comments reflecting their use of the videos including volunteers carrying the materials with them to share with disaster survivors, and Extension Committee members having access to the videos.

### Implications

Disasters happen all over the country and with increasing frequency. Disaster responders have a need to retrieve and disseminate information quickly in the event of a natural disaster (Troy, Carson, Vanderbeek, & Hutton, 2008). During the development of this project, it was found that videos were a viable method to disseminate financial recovery information to disaster survivors and communities after a disaster and to implement disaster support in applied settings. Users of the online videos also were able to recognize Extension as the source of the information provided, which may attract clientele to additional programs. The evaluation results also confirm the importance of engaging community members in the creation of a product for the intended audience.

### Conclusion

As Extension educators move their work into the 21st century and beyond, the themes identified by ECOP (Bull et al., 2004) continue to be relevant. Because technology plays an ever-increasing role in our daily lives, it is imperative for Extension educators to adapt to new technologies and provide educational resources that utilize the best technology available to assist consumers. Extension in many states has transitioned to a regional model and educators may no longer have a physical presence in local communities; therefore, the use of technology and partnerships with community agencies becomes even more important. This project used technology as a delivery method in disaster situations where Extension has had a traditional role. It reaffirms that the traditional Extension mission continues to be relevant to individuals, though operational methods may need adaptation to address societal needs.

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