After the Flood
Citizen Action Following Natural Disaster

BY AARON LEAVY

In just five days in September 2013, nearly a year's worth of rain fell on Colorado's Front Range. From September 10 to 15 more rain fell on the city of Boulder than in the previous eleven Septembers combined. Even as the rain continued to fall, people began to mobilize and look after friends and neighbors. As the water receded, people stepped forward to act, often as part of informal groups.

Floods, like every natural disaster, upend much of a community's structure and stability, creating the need for individuals and informal groups to step forward and take on roles and responsibilities previously delegated to formal entities. The aftermath of disasters reveals the innate ability of individuals to organize themselves into powerful groups united around a specific and immediate task. But these acute challenges and the reaction of informal groups also create a chance to reflect on how communities organize themselves and take action to address more lasting and chronic challenges as well.

What follows are three case studies of different ways that citizens took action and engaged with their communities following the September 2013 floods in Boulder County. The case studies include an examination of the Relief Exchange, a free store managed by Sarah Martin; the Boulder Flood Relief, an informal group that managed to dispatch volunteers to help homeowners weeks before other more formal groups; and the towns of Jamestown and Lyons, where rebuilding led government to more actively and consistently seek resident input and engagement than ever before.

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The Relief Exchange

The floods destroyed Boulder resident Sarah Martin's home and everything in it, and nearly took her life as well. Her car pinned against a tree by a river chocked with debris, and Sarah and her boyfriend struggled to get out of the vehicle as it was submerged. Heading to higher ground, they clung to each other dodging the railroad ties, lamps, and rocks pouring past them. That night, little more than a mile away, two teens made the same choice to leave their flooded car and were killed.

And yet, less than two weeks after losing everything but the clothes on her back, Sarah Martin was coordinating the Relief Exchange—a "store" providing free home goods ("anything that makes a house a home") to anyone affected by the September floods. The Exchange functions like a free thrift store. Anyone in Boulder or the surrounding communities impacted by the floods could take home anything and everything they need—often with Sarah encouraging them to take more. Within four months, the Relief Exchange helped more than 3,000 people replace what was lost and begin to outfit their homes.

The initial idea for the Relief Exchange came from Helen Dutton, who contacted Martin's boyfriend about helping her find real estate to house a free store. Dutton contacted local merchants and within a few days secured more than 6,000 pounds of clothing. Dutton asked Martin to help run the operation and despite her own calamity from the flooding she felt that taking action was essential, "It was about control and about just putting one foot in front of the other because if I didn't I was going to fall apart. I was going to drown," she said.

Beyond providing material support, Martin saw the Exchange as a safe space for those affected. Pamphlets for counselors, movers, therapists, and other

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support groups littered the store. People would drop in not just to shop but to gossip or share tips about local resources or ask Martin or others about FEMA forms. Martin said,

> We have people come in [who] just didn't know where else to turn. Or they had to get ready to go to FEMA or get ready to go to a funeral—and so we're everything. We're home, we're counselors—we can tell you where to go to get gift cards. Everything. Again this is a population that's not used to having to ask for these things.

The ability to recognize and make use of citizen resources set the Relief Exchange apart from many of the formal relief organizations. Martin is relentlessly opportunistic, as several examples witnessed during a single afternoon in the store attest: A police officer called Martin to follow up on a suspect whose phone records indicated they'd once called the Exchange. Midway through the conversation, Martin asked the officer if they were interested in organizing a group of volunteers to come down and help, or if they might have items to donate. Later, a "customer" mentioned a tip for navigating FEMA forms, and Martin immediately ask if he'd lead a class on the subject. On the spot, they created and scheduled a class, and within five minutes Martin was recruiting others to join the newly created session.

Perhaps the best example of the distinction between Martin's opportunistic and flexible approach and that of some of the more formal (traditional) groups comes from Judy Fishman. After devastating wildfires in 2012, Judy Fishman solicited donations of furniture, appliances, clothing, home goods, and office supplies as part of a fundraiser. When the fundraising effort fell through, she found herself with a warehouse full of items. Unwilling to waste others' generosity, Fishman held on to the donated items, filled with frustration as they languished unused for more than a year. In 2013, after the floods, she desperately tried to find a group or agency that would accept and distribute these donations, hoping that they could finally go to those in need. But time and again formal organizations like the Red Cross and Salvation Army told her "they didn't need it," or could not pick them up.

> I tried desperately to find a home for this stuff and it just was breaking my heart and I couldn't come up with [a home] in the organized operations . . . I'm going around from one organization to another—Red Cross, Salvation Army, all those . . . I went to FEMA, and I went everywhere, to the Police Department, the Fire Department.

Fishman explained it was only because Sarah Martin happened to overhear her talking to the Salvation Army staffer at the Disaster Assistance Center that she was finally able to find a way to donate an entire warehouse of clothes, furniture, and home goods. Fishman said, "If it wasn't for Sarah, I think that stuff would still be sitting in the warehouse." Fishman added:

> When I think of community, I think of the locals such as Sarah Martin's group that pulled together . . . It was like a mom and pop type of situation where the big organizations just sat on their laurels. I'm sure they [organized groups] did a lot of good, don't get me wrong . . . [but] these grassroots citizens are the ones that pulled through and got a lot of this done.

Martin estimates that the clothes and furniture that Fishman donated outfitted nearly 500 families. Martin's efforts and those of others helped Boulder County community members rebuild their sense of home—and by stepping forward and fully embracing and opening herself up to her community, Martin found herself changed. Martin said the flood and her work at the Exchange fundamentally changed how she sees the community.

> This disaster has created the most spectacular sense of community . . . it has so brought us together. I'm just different (now). I have a really open heart and I'm genuinely glad to see anybody that comes in here. And I think that the community itself has gotten kinder. It's amazing. We are happy to see each other. A lot of us just made it out alive. I guess I'm just in love. And it's real love.

Boulder Flood Relief

As rains battered the area, Meghan Dunn, a University of Colorado communications graduate student

began to follow the game plan that she'd helped develop and implement as part of Occupy Sandy the year before. An outgrowth of the Occupy Wall Street Movement, Occupy Sandy was a spontaneous response to the devastation of Hurricane Sandy. Dunn, had been there as part of her research into the communications of emergent groups. In the first hours of the Boulder flooding, Meghan began building a directory of key resources, "the most vital Twitter handles and Facebook feeds, shelter locations, contact numbers and information" and sharing this through social media with her friends and colleagues.

Meghan's directory and communications quickly spread and soon others in the Department of Communication and those connected with Occupy Boulder helped set up a Facebook page, a Tumblr page, and organized an initial meeting of the group that would eventually become Boulder Flood Relief (BFR). Drawing on her experience during Sandy, Meghan thought, "I can at the very least help get a space, articulate, communicate and pass on to you what I learned." The early attention to securing space enabled the group to gain an air of legitimacy and within several days the group moved into the Alliance Building, in downtown Boulder, where a supportive realtor enabled the group to operate rent free. During and after the emergency, having a dedicated space proved critical for enabling organizing efforts but also as a signal to other groups and homeowners about the legitimacy and seriousness of BFR's efforts.

Heavily influenced by the approach of the Occupy movement, the group adopted a nonhierarchical structure and organized themselves around areas of interest—providing an opportunity for individuals to contribute in nearly any way they wanted. The group was opportunistic about using citizen resources, if someone wanted to design posters, create flyers, or help with communications they could do so. The assumption was that people would step up to lead in areas where they were capable, and that the needs were fairly obvious.

> Early on it was completely organic. People just showed up and we didn't even know what roles needed to be filled. People showed up and some had vague ideas of, "Oh, I think we need to do this, so I'm just going to do it. It seems that this is important so I'm going to do it or I have experience doing this, so I'm going to do it." —Thomas Wells

> Usually people that step up in those situations, they know what they're doing or talking about. They don't want to be held responsible for screwing up when people's lives are on the line. So people won't often signal, "I got this," if they don't. —Meghan Dunn

BFR grew quickly because it filled a critical need providing an opportunity for people to take immediate action and help others. The informal structure enabled volunteers to fill any role they wanted. In contrast, official groups and government agencies were unable to use volunteers, even actively dissuading people from acting in the immediate aftermath. These larger groups needed time to thoroughly assess the damage, coordinate with different agencies, and more fully explore issues of liability and safety.

> The other groups were slow, and rightfully so, because they had to complete their assessments, and figure out the best way to do things and make sure they weren't sending volunteers into dangerous situations. We're very fortunate that nobody got hurt. But we were able to help people that needed help within a day or two . . . I think that's what drew me in, they [BFR] were the first place to give me something to do. —Thomas Wells

But, the messages from some groups urging people not to help, or to wait, flew in the face of many people's own experience. As Konieczka explained:

> When the storm first hit, Boulder County probably for legal reasons ran out with their hands waving in the air, "Go back, go back home. Don't help. Volunteers are not needed!" But anybody with a pulse knew that volunteers were needed, much less anyone who just went out and looked around. So Boulder Flood Relief and a few other scattered groups were the first people to begin identifying needs in the community from the flooding and getting the human resources to those people affected.

BFR quickly identified its contribution to the community: helping "to fill gaps that [others were] missing." Wells explained, "We got our volunteers out early, that's because no one else was. And we went and helped people in some of these other places because nobody else was, or nobody else could." This focus on identifying gaps and playing roles that others could not, or would not, became the fundamental organizing principle for the group. As larger groups began to act, it became harder to identify unmet needs, or to be certain that people were best served by BFR as opposed to other groups. To their credit, members of BFR asked these tough questions, and where possible sought to connect residents with the support they need, whether it came from BFR or others.

The vast majority of volunteers—some of whom were affected by the disaster themselves—helped homeowners with initial and ongoing cleanup efforts. Working to shovel mud, tear out moldy drywall, and move debris was the most sought after work. Cleanup work enabled volunteers to get a direct connection to the homeowner and see tangible results from their work. A day's work might be digging a pathway to someone's front door through six feet of mud, but it also meant connecting with another individual, seeing a concrete product from one's work, and, for many, taking action meant regaining their sense of control. As Wells suggested, "the ability to volunteer and help other people fills a need that we have, as people who were not as affected by the disaster, to maybe regain a sense of control over our world."

Once the group began dispatching volunteers throughout Boulder County, word of their work quickly spread. While more traditional groups waited, BFR emerged, took action, and within a matter of weeks demonstrated its value such that the group became a trusted resource for businesses, churches, school groups, and others looking for ways to help with the cleanup effort. The same frustration at inaction that prompted people to initially join BFR also sparked a second wave of volunteers as businesses and others trying to work with traditional nonprofits and agencies were told that it would be weeks before they would start community efforts.

Businesses like Pearl Izumi, Union Bank of Switzerland (UBS), and Keller Realty, as well as local tech companies, began sending volunteers to work with BFR. In addition to businesses, school groups from surrounding counties, churches, and others signed up. The fact that an informal group quickly became a key resource for businesses and others surprised some of the BFR volunteers. Wells remarked that, "I think it's really interesting that we were being contacted by those groups, especially quite early on, without having been established for very long." In fact, when the Red Cross's budget for Colorado ran out, the local chapter called BFR. Konieczka explained, "I got a call from the Red Cross the other day, asking me for aspirin and Band-Aids for Jamestown (a community especially hard hit by the flooding). They were calling me to see if I could find that for them."

One of the most important partnerships was with a local Target store. As Konieczka described it, "Target was remarkably, surprisingly and maybe stunningly helpful." When a BFR volunteer approached Target about using their storage containers to store tools and materials the company agreed—without a contract and without any questions—to let BFR use several empty containers. For the first three months after the floods, BFR used Target's parking lot as a staging area and meeting place to gather, equip, and dispatch volunteers to sites throughout the county. The company allowed BFR to use its loading docks, and incredibly gave ten pallets of water to the group to distribute. Here was one of the largest corporate retailers in the country working with a new, informally organized group of citizens—without so much as a contract or formal partnership. Konieczka attributed much of this flexibility and willingness to work with an informal group to the leadership of local management rather than corporate policy. But this partnership serves as an illustration of the potential influence and power of local, informal groups stepping forward to take necessary action. And this potential certainly seems to be expanded in times of crisis when the need for action is far greater than can be addressed by traditional groups and structures alone—and where informal groups can be exceptionally nimble as compared to larger and more permanent organizations.

All told more than 1,300 people volunteered with BFR, and the group responded to nearly one in four

of all the homeowner requests for the county. In the city of Boulder, volunteers contributed more than 3,000 hours of service.

Developing and Defining a Structure

However, the horizontal organization that enabled BFR to quickly absorb volunteers and work on numerous fronts also made prioritization or coordination difficult. This challenge is not unique to BFR and is likely to be faced by similar informal emergent groups. At the outset, the sheer volume of volunteers was enough to ensure that things got done—even if inefficiently.

> As a whole there wasn't really prioritization. Individual working groups may have allowed people to do things effectively and organize and prioritize within those groups. But there was no coordination, or very little at the higher levels. —Stephen Konieczka

> Sometimes it was a nonoptimal distribution of roles and who was doing what. But I feel that early on we were able to brute force it, we had enough people. Everyone could do what they thought they needed to, or wanted to, and everything got done. —Thomas Wells

Concerns about efficiency and coordination seemed secondary in immediate aftermath, but several members of BFR quickly recognized that even in a nonhierarchical group a certain amount of coordination and administration was essential to leverage the volunteer resources. But, the eagerness to volunteer in the field or allure of the "sexy muddy dance," as Tiernan Doyle playfully dubbed it, meant fewer volunteers wanted to take on the administrative and logistics work necessary to support the larger volunteer effort. Early on, several key people recognized the need to create the structure, support, and administrative backbone to allow BFR to continue connecting volunteers with homeowners. These office "staff" helped form the structure of BFR, playing roles similar to those in more formal organizations including staffing phones, creating databases, printing flyers, coordinating communications, updating information on the website, and dispatching volunteers. The awareness of this need and the willingness of several volunteers to play a more administrative role enabled BFR to achieve more. As Wells said,

> I realized I'd have a greater impact in contribution in the office rather than out in the community with a shovel. Everyone wants to go out and shovel, it's something that's seen as a direct help, but we also needed a lot of people here. And we've done some analysis, and it seems that the work we've done in the office had a ten-fold impact. I could put in one hour in the office and leverage about 10 hours of volunteer work out in the field. So if I would have picked up a shovel I would have just done one hour of work, but the hour of work in the office probably resulted in 10 times as many volunteers being out there. —Thomas Wells

Although BFR began organically and without hierarchy, over time several factors pushed the group toward more organization and structure. Without a full group discussion, someone in the group posted a donation button on the BFR website. Not expecting to raise much money, members were shocked when donations poured in and were completely unprepared for the letter from the Colorado Secretary of State explaining that raising money for charitable purposes without registering as a nonprofit was a felony. Everyone involved with helping to run BFR cites the letter from the secretary of state's office as a key turning point. Dealing with the legal ramifications and subsequent organizational requirements forced them to think about their informal group more like an organization.

> Choosing to incorporate as a charitable organization in the state of Colorado has affected significantly the path that we went down. Because once we did that we had to start doing some other things. Like have bylaws and a board and executive director. And that all stemmed from putting a donate button on our website, it seems. Once we had the money then we had to be able to handle it legally, correctly. —Thomas Wells

> If I was to say there was a point where people started thinking organizationally it would be that document. When we got that, we got a lawyer we started talking about bylaws, incorporating.

> We got a board of directors in place. —Stephen Konieczka

The group created an executive director position to fulfill the state's requirements and to have "someone who could be a public-facing liaison and representative of the work we were doing," as Meghan Dunn explained it. In establishing the role, members sought to avoid creating a traditional executive director.

> I think we were hesitant to recreate the same sort of structures that corporations and businesses used . . . we didn't want to concentrate a lot of power into one position when that's not the way that the operation/organization "worked." [BFR] didn't have a top-down hierarchical process, and so we didn't want the structure to reflect the very opposite of what made our operation "work." —Meghan Dunn

> A structured organization has a tendency to become bureaucracies. They reproduce themselves, only for the purpose of existing themselves. It becomes about getting funding to support the mission. I was cognizant of wanting to create something that wouldn't consolidate power anywhere too heavily. —Stephen Konieczka

But, even with more structure, it was difficult to create, set, and enforce clear group-wide priorities. The all-volunteer nature of the group meant that persuasion or suggestion was one of the only tools to steer action. Wells spoke of the frustration he sometimes felt in working this way:

> It's a slow process sometimes. It's really difficult though when people aren't paid. We're all volunteers. Whether or not that [task] gets done depends on whether they want to or not. —Thomas Wells

Partnering with Formal Groups

Throughout the group's history, balancing the principals of horizontality and a nonhierarchical structure with efforts to establish priorities and make organization-wide decisions has proved challenging. The horizontal structure and more informal approach have made the group open to new ideas and enabled it to quickly react to the immediate aftermath of the floods. But being a volunteer group also made it more difficult to establish rigorous priorities and clear structures for making decisions. This tension between formal and informal structures, of course, is not unique to BFR.

While some groups were quick to partner with BFR others, particularly large nonprofits and government agencies, were not. Larger groups found it hard to understand how to work with BFR; they worried about working with a group that lacked insurance, formal training, and which might not share their concerns over liability. Wells explains, "Early on, one of the barriers we faced was getting recognition or communicating with some of the other established organizations. They didn't want to endorse us or collaborate with us, because they weren't sure about who we were or what we were doing or whether we were doing things safely." Konieczka adds that "the concern was the lack of formality and the lack of insurance, and training and XYZ that [other] organizations had." And as a result, "the city and the county wanted nothing to do with us. They never contacted us . . . the impression I got was they don't want to get too close because they're telling people not to come out and volunteer and if they get too cozy with us then they have some liability or something." And in reaching out to United Way, Konieczka was told, "We really respect what you're doing, but you're untrustworthy." Ultimately, concern about liability and lawsuits made partnerships difficult, Doyle explained that formal groups, "want to deal with people with insurance who aren't going to get sued by volunteers or homeowners."

Not all established nonprofits shied away from working with BFR. Support from one group—Boulder County Community Foundation and its Executive Director Josie Heath—proved particularly critical. While BFR had dispatched nearly 600 volunteers, homeowners seeking help from United Way were still being told that it would be weeks before the organization could do anything. Learning of this delay sparked Heath to lend her support to BFR and to encourage them to keep going. As Doyle recounted, "to hear from them that it would be several weeks, when we could say, 'Hey how about tomorrow?' It was a little bit shocking [to Heath]."

Heath went on to share information about the group and its work with other organizations and officials. Her endorsement helped further legitimize the group in the eyes of many. The Community Foundation also partnered with BFR, creating a donor-advised fund so that donations to BFR could be tax deductible. As Doyle saw it, Heath's support and "endorsement of us as legitimate" led to BFR winning the Esprit Entrepreneur Award from the Chamber of Commerce.

Through the chamber's award ceremony, Thomas Wells and Tiernan Doyle met with Doug Yeiser the president of Foothills United Way. Receiving the award put BFR and Yeiser in the same room and enabled a different conversation. Over time BFR's efforts and staying-power helped enabled them to interface more regularly and somewhat more productively with formal groups as part of the Long Term Flood Relief efforts. But, as Doyle explained, their outstanding work with volunteers, on-the-ground experience, and sustained connections within the community may not have been enough to get them "a seat at the table." Having money to contribute to the effort may have been one of the keys to their acceptance—BFR's money helped buy them a seat at the table.

> To the larger structures we are an ant beneath their sandal. The aspect that we are most involved with is the Long Term Flood Relief. There we are bringing funds. That is an asset for them. They are very conservative about giving out money. Bringing money to the table means you get to stay at the table.

Having money to contribute to the recovery efforts was one of several things that "proved" to formal entities that BFR should be taken seriously. Unfortunately, none of the items on this checklist had to do with the group's actual capacity to support members of the community. The "checklist" as Doyle and Dunn explained included things like having an office, business cards, titles, a board. According to Dunn:

> There was a check list: Board, bylaws, c-3 status, space helps. Funding. Website. Logo. Consistent messaging. Business cards. Oh, and titles help. People want to know where you fit into a hierarchy or within some organizational structure.

The checklist of traits and habits that made a group trustworthy, valuable and "real" was vital to build relationships with more traditional groups. And having an executive director and some of the familiar structures associated with formal organizations also enabled the group to build stronger ties to organizations. Establishing a board and creating a role of executive director were essential for forging partnerships with formal groups. Doyle explains the impact of creating these structures:

> I really think that creating both the board and the executive director role enabled the group to keep working longer than other popup relief groups, and also provided motivation to do so. The ED [executive director] role allowed us to authorize more monetary donations, to interface with local government and other nonprofits and to move beyond just sending out volunteers. Having a titled officer carried weight by showing we were not just flying by the seat of our pants (even if we were), but that we were committed enough to our work and to the community to create and hold to this structure. I think the biggest impact has been on giving us legitimacy in the eyes of other organizations. It didn't mean a lot to the community members with which we interacted, our hands on work did more to establish trust there.

So while having business cards or a logo did not make BFR any more or less effective, those things were taken as symbols of seriousness and legitimacy by formal groups that had invested time and thought into those things. And as signs of legitimacy those items and symbols were important for BFR, if they were to be taken seriously. At a certain point, being effective, and informal was not enough—if they were to continue to help more people they would have to adopt some of the trappings, structures, and symbols of more formal groups.

Jamestown and Lyons

The floods decimated these small, independent, and incredibly close-knit towns, destroying water, electrical and sanitation systems, washing out bridges, and tearing apart the roads connecting them to the

rest of the state. Not only were Lyons and Jamestown cut off from the rest of the state, but the towns themselves were bisected by mudslides, washed out bridges, or creeks that suddenly swelled becoming impassable rivers.

Jamestown

Jamestown sits high up in the Rocky Mountains. Largely isolated from other nearby communities, well before the flooding, Jamestown was a close-knit community where neighbors relied upon one another for help with everything from construction projects to wild fire mitigation to filling out the band lineup for an evening jam session at The Merc—the town's beloved general store/café. So while the town already had strong reciprocal relationships and no shortage of resourceful residents, the intensity of the floods and the devastation they brought were beyond anything anyone could have expected or prepared for.

As the rain continued in Jamestown, movement between different parts of the town became nearly impossible. Jamestowners on the north side were cut off from the rest of the town and the evacuation center by the swollen Jim Creek and from the Fire Hall and Mercantile (The Merc) by a massive mudslide. The mudslide, triggered early in the disaster, slammed into the home of Joey Howlett, killing the former owner of The Merc and the man described as "the town patriarch."

Jamestown's Mayor Tara Schoedinger crossed over the river to "be with bulk of community on the south side of the creek." Only to be completely cut off from the rest of her town. "We were the last truck to go over the bridge before it was overcome with water. At that point the town was divided in half." Cut off from the rest of Colorado, Mayor Schoedinger explained her thought process:

> I thought, we need to get ourselves organized. We could be here for a while, we don't know. It was about coming together as a community. So we had a community meeting. People were really ready to come together and were wanting that. We talked about what we could be doing. We have a lot of natural organizers in our community. They're naturally people that our community goes to.

Shortly after the meeting, Schoedinger learned that the Colorado National Guard would be flying in a group of Chinook helicopters to evacuate the town, and she was expected to ensure that each chopper that landed left with a full load. But the sense of togetherness and community that people felt at that moment made filling the helicopter difficult. As Schoedinger said,

> The scary part about leaving was not knowing when you could come back. If I leave how long am I stuck out? And if I stay, how long am I stuck in? And we were together as a community and that felt good to so many people. But we also recognized that resources are coming and if we don't take advantage of those resources . . . they may not come back for a while. So take advantage of the resource to go now. But it was still hard to get those Chinooks full.

Getting to the helicopters proved just as difficult. A Chinook stands 18 feet tall and is 98 feet from rotor tip to rotor tip, and so there were few places in town that could accommodate landing such an aircraft. Resident Nancy Farmer described what it took to reach the landing pad:

> There was a boulder field we had to cross and they had made a makeshift bridge out of an aluminum ladder over where the water was running. Then you got to the other side of the aluminum ladder and you had to climb up a steep embankment before hiking to the meadow where the Chinook could land. It was amazing.

The evacuation of Jamestown ripped asunder a close-knit community and scattered residents throughout the surrounding communities. To combat the separation and isolation, they relied heavily on social media to stay in contact with one another. Jamestown Connect and the QuickTopic are virtual town squares for Jamestowners—places to share information, stories, and photos, to request or offer help, or even organize town-wide action. Jamestowners used QuickTopic well before the floods, and throughout the disaster the bulletin board helped people track the movement of neighbors. Reading the archived QuickTopic from the days of the flood, you can view a community reaching out to one another, working to create a complete list

identifying the location and health status of every town resident, offering support, resources, and precious information from the outside to one another. These online resources enabled the community to behave a little more like the small town people cherished even when they were separated from their homes and from one another.

While technology created a means to stay connected, Schoedinger worried that the longer residents stayed down in Boulder and elsewhere the less likely they were to return home. Her focus quickly became getting everyone back home as soon as possible.

> I felt it was really important for the community to be able come home by the time school started. The reason for that is that I felt like if people were displaced for another year, or couldn't start school here they would sign another year lease and stay down in Boulder. It's a lot easier to live down there, I've lived down there. You know [in Jamestown] you're 30 minutes away from the nearest hospital, it's not that easy. I think that what makes this place special is the people who live here. Otherwise it's just another pretty community in the mountains.

From the start, Schoedinger focused on what it would take to get people the services they needed and enable them to come home and to ensure that the elementary school was up and running in time for the 2014 school year. The rebuilding targeted not only homes and roads but also key civic institutions, entities like the school, which were essential for the sense of place and for the sense of community. Rebuilding was not solely about property and homes but about those things that weave a community together. Jamestown resident Nancy Farmer described the importance of getting the town back on its feet in time for the start of the school year.

> The mission was to get people home before people had to enroll in other schools. Mayor Schoedinger was very clear that we need to save our school. And that means that people have to enroll. The school is a bulwark of the community, it's cornerstone of the community. When the kids are in school and the parents are in the PTA, they're involved with school activities. They're a part of the community. It's really an anchor. It's the difference between a bedroom community and being a real community.

Starting From Scratch: Rebuilding the Community Based on Resident Engagement. The devastation to Jamestown's public infrastructure was so severe and complete that any hope of bringing people home had to start with rebuilding the water system and roads, getting people cisterns, and resetting or redefining the flow of rivers and creeks. The Jamestown, the town website, declared:

> We not only lost 20% of the homes in town, 50% of the roads, both bridges, our water plant and the JVFD Fire Hall . . . As a result, 90% of our community has been forced to relocate. The event may have changed the landscape of our Community, but our Community is still strong. We will Rebuild Jamestown!

Many of these rebuilding efforts were technical challenges, requiring geologists, hydrologists, civil engineers, and others with a great deal of specific expertise. But Schoedinger's community-first orientation meant that she approached these challenges in a way that made room for citizens to step forward and engage around how the town would recover and what kind of a town it would become.

For months after the flood, Jamestowners held weekly town meetings to discuss the future of the community. Through these community meetings, they created nine guiding principles that are "intended to act as reminders of what is most important to the community, and will act as a guide for future decisions for Jamestown." These principles were publicly shared and helped to shape engineering decisions regarding a new water system, road development, and other infrastructure choices. This is fitting since first of these principles affirms the community's desire to "make planning decisions that promote Jamestown's unique sense of place and distinctive community character," and the clear assertion that "Jamestown residents want to be engaged and unified as a community in decisions that affect them."

In partnership with the contractors and engineers, Schoedinger helped to ensure an inclusive and

open process. Clearly, some questions in the recovery were best decided drawing upon expertise in hydrology, geology, and civil engineering that the community alone could not be expected to provide. But through the mayor's work and that of others a priority was placed on civic engagement with a marriage of technical expertise and resident input. Creating a citizen-focused recovery effort created space for individuals to step forward and engage in ways that they had not previously. This approach enabled people to see in themselves a greater capacity to contribute to the wider community, and, as a result, many in Jamestown who had not previously been part of the public work of the community became engaged.

> The combination of a natural disaster, as well as clear opportunities to shape the future of their community helped some move from residents of Jamestown to citizens of Jamestown—from living there to taking on the responsibility of participation, decision making, and deliberation about the future of the community.

Although Jamestown is a close-knit community, quite a few residents have moved to the mountains for the opportunity to be on their own, or at least, to dictate how much they interact with others. For many of these residents, the mayor's approach to rebuilding, as well as the magnitude of the floods, changed that equation. As Schoedinger explained, "They felt the need to connect. They felt like it was part of their recovery. They wanted to engage and participate. They felt they had skills and talents they wanted to contribute to the community." The combination of a natural disaster, as well as clear opportunities to shape the future of their community helped some move from residents of Jamestown to citizens of Jamestown—from living there to taking on the responsibility of participation, decision making, and deliberation about the future of the community.

> We were a really tight knit community beforehand. But this flood has made us closer. Many people come up here because they want to be involved. Others want to just be on their own, to be able to keep to themselves. This brought many of those people out into the community. I think they feel even more connected to the community. —Tara Schoedinger

In Jamestown, as the one-year anniversary approached, the progress on rebuilding the town's road and water infrastructure allowed the school to reopen and students to re-enroll, which meant the focus could turn to larger questions about the kind of town Jamestown would become. Jamestown received a grant from the Colorado Department of Local Affairs to hire a facilitator to help them determine what kind of a community they want to create in the years to come. Schoedinger explained the new phase saying, "Now we're doing the long-term recovery plan for our recovery. And that's being *driven by the community for the community*." She continued:

> From a community stand point we want to get people together and have a dialogue about what we want our future to look like. We have mostly an empty slate. A chance to do things that people have thought about. We want to continue to help create a community, and ensure that we still operate as a community. We don't always see eye-to-eye, but even when we don't get along, we have a respect for community. I want people to still want to call this place home. Because, we have a culture where people are heard and engaged I think we can come up with community vision that everyone buys into. It may not be everything I want. But I'm not going to leave because my community wants something I don't, because I believe in my community.

Lyons

Two creeks, the North St. Vrain and the St. Vrain, come together and join forces in Lyons, before flowing out to the eastern plains of Colorado. In September of 2013, these creeks coursed down from the mountains before slamming headlong into Lyons. Another close-knit community, invariably described as "funky," Lyons was ground zero for much of the worst flooding.

After a night that sent trailers careening into one another like bumper cars, Lyons residents began the morning of Thursday, September 12th, trying to assess the damage to their town. Nearly all residents

experienced flood damage and the vast majority of the community lacked basic utilities as the water, sewage and power infrastructure were largely destroyed. Some residents who lived high above the center of town were able to remain—as their homes did not flood, and many of them already had water cisterns and septic tanks. One of those residents, Molly Morton described the devastation she saw down in town. Her rental property sat near the junction of the two rivers and at the height of the flooding more than six feet of water coursed through the home. A closer inspection the morning after revealed that when the water finally passed through it left more than four feet of sewage, mud, and debris behind.

Morton's primary residence remained largely untouched, and there she hosted and housed fifteen people. Each morning her "commune" as she called it, would wake and meet with others who had stayed down in town at "Brock's Bar." Morton describes the sense of community and control that those meetings at Brock's Bar provided.

> One of our friends found a bar in the river—like a porch furniture set—a basic bar. So we'd all meet at Brock's house and it became an informal community meeting place (in town). The 30 of us that were left, we would all meet there every morning. I think it's amazing what a team of people can do in the face of tragedy. Everyone came together. We'd meet at Brock's bar and have a focus and a sense of direction and something to do—it's amazing to see how people click together. I think everyone found their own niche. What works for them, what strengths they could contribute? I think it does feel better to be doing something. It is a sense of control. When things are so chaotic and wacky, it's nice to have something to do, a sense of order. We'd say, "Today we're going to go down this block and we're going to empty everyone's freezer so they don't come home to rot."

Becoming Even Closer: Leveraging Social Media to Bridge the Distance. Like those in Jamestown, Lyon's residents turned to social media as a way to connect and organize after the floods. With so many residents forced to leave Lyons, people began to reorganize themselves online. After the flood, Lyons residents created myriad Facebook pages (Lyons Happenings, Lyons Helpers, Lyons Recovery, The Confluence, Evacuees: The Dream Continues, Big Elk Meadows: The Long Road Home, or Pinewood Springs: A Community in Need) to communicate with one another.

Residents used these pages to share updates, request and coordinate volunteer help, and plan "cash mobs." A cash mob occurs when 200–300 people gather and march, in a New Orleans-style parade, to patronize a hard-hit local business. In one case, "mobbers" spent $6,000—the equivalent of several weeks' worth of sales—in less than twenty minutes.

Changing How Residents Engage with the City. As with Jamestown, the destruction in Lyons meant residents faced the challenge of rebuilding the town. In Lyons, 172 houses and 30 trailers were completely destroyed, and of those 202 residences only 30 were scheduled to be rebuilt. The losses represent more than 23 percent of all homes in Lyons, and nearly 40 percent of the trailers—to say nothing of those homes flooded but not classified as "destroyed." The work to be done in rebuilding and determining the future of Lyons was enormous.

Rather than simply engaging experts on the question of how best to rebuild the community and how to address the long-term challenges created by the floods, Lyons relied heavily on its residents to help chart the future. In Lyons, the loss of so many trailers created a major scarcity of affordable housing. Risa Vandenbos, whose trailer was lost in the floods, is part of a citizen advisory board working to help the city and county engage and understand residents' aspirations for affordable housing. She explained that as a result of the flooding and the focus on citizen involvement, "there are all these committees that are rebuilding the town—with the townspeople being involved instead of just the government . . . It's exciting. We're on the ground floor of what it's going to look like in the future."

Molly Morton sees a changed community going forward:

> We've all gotten so tight knit. We're a post-flood family now. So it's going to be nothing but better.

> The fact that the citizens get a voice in what happens in the town is huge. I think that's going to carry on. You know five years down the line it's still going to be a citizen-oriented, active place.

Summary

In each of these cases the magnitude of the floods reshuffled people's expectations about who can and should take action and what is possible. In the moments and months after the floods, people recognized in themselves and their neighbors a previously unseen capacity to tackle critical problems, to forge strong connections, and to shape the future of their communities through informal groups.

> How can communities and organizations create the conditions by which formal and informal groups can work together to leverage their different strengths and capacities in service of the greater good?

Sarah Martin was better able to recognize people's assets and resources than many of the larger, more well-established groups. Her eagerness to find and share resources meant that she saw potential and opportunities where others did not. So while larger groups were constricted by more onerous or strict policies and procedures, the Relief Exchange was nimble. This enabled Sarah to create classes in an afternoon or take a warehouse of furniture from Judy Fishman without having to check with anyone else, without fully knowing how things would play out. This creative and nimble approach can be an incredibly useful supplement to the more established and structured approach which is also critical in the face of disaster. Few would argue that FEMA or the Red Cross should operate informally and without supervision or structure, but in times when the basic order of a community is so fundamentally upended, the value of informal, creative, and flexible actors is clear.

For BFR its early and widespread impact and ability to mobilize quickly set it apart. It undoubtedly played an essential role in Boulder County's recovery. However, the same assets and approaches that enabled BFR to organize and take action quickly—loose, purpose-built horizontal organization with limited structure—were stumbling blocks for more traditional groups and structures. More formal and structured groups were unwilling or, more likely, unsure about how to work with a group that looked and operated in such a different manner. The question is not whether one system or organizational approach is better or worse. A more productive question is: If we accept that informal groups will emerge in the aftermath of disasters, crises or other key events, how do groups with different structures, approaches and mandates work together to advance the broader community goals? How can communities and organizations create the conditions by which formal and informal groups can work together to leverage their different strengths and capacities in service of the greater good?

In Jamestown and Lyons, local leaders saw firsthand how residents stepped forward to be a part of the work of democracy and the work of community building and maybe in those experiences the leaders and residents glimpsed the possibility of a different relationship between citizens and local government. Two questions linger: (1) Can these new possibilities, new expectations, new relationships, and new connections arise without the turmoil and reshuffling that comes from natural disaster? (2) How durable will these changes and ways of working be?

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