5th World Conference on
Climate Change and Global Warming
07 - 09 March 2025 Vienna, Austria

Promoting Community Resilience to Natural Hazards Through Governance, Education, And Partnership Building

Holly Abeels[1], Alicia Betancourt[2], Monica Wilson[3], Armando Ubeda[4], Ramona Madhosingh-Hector[5], Carrie Stevenson[6], Victoria Hart[7], Emily Powell[8] and Carolyn Cox[9]

[1,3,4]*Florida Sea Grant Extension*
[2,5,6]*University of Florida, IFAS Extension*
[8]*Florida State University, Florida Climate Center*
[7,9]*University of Florida, Florida Climate Institute*

ABSTRACT

This session will explore experiences and lessons learned from a one-year pilot effort that provided technical assistance and support to communities in Florida recently designated as Community Disaster Resilience Zones (CDRZ). Participants will include University of Florida Extension faculty from the Florida Sea Grant and the Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) who served as "navigators" to work with CDRZs in their respective regions and help advance resilience planning and implementation.

The Community Disaster Resilience Zones (CDRZ) Act was signed into law in 2022 to reduce the impacts of natural disasters and climate change in at-risk communities across the United States. The Act requires the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to utilize a national risk assessment, known as the National Risk Index, to identify census tracts most in need of assistance and at risk from the effects of natural hazards. In 2023, FEMA identified the first 483 CDRZs in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The CDRZ designation is intended to provide a geographic focus for financial and technical assistance to communities to plan for and implement resilience projects. CDRZ are eligible for increased federal funding under the Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities program up to 90%, compared to 75%, and receive priority for FEMA's Direct Technical Assistance opportunity. In Florida, 32 CDRZ tracts have been identified that span 15 coastal and inland counties from the Panhandle to central and south Florida. These census tracts are located in rural and urban areas, and many are located near, or intersect with, critical infrastructure such as airports, major roadways, and canal infrastructure, providing an opportunity for lower-capacity communities to build resilience in highly vulnerable areas.

The Geos Institute, a national organization helping communities build climate resilience, launched the Southeast Navigator Network in October 2023 as a one-year project to establish navigators in four states – Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina. The Florida Climate Institute convened a team of University of Florida Extension faculty to serve as

navigators in Florida given the large size of the state and widespread of the 32 census tracts. Across Florida, Extension agents are embedded in all 67 counties, serve as neutral brokers of research-based information, and are well-known by grassroots and grasstop organizations. These navigators have assisted and supported communities that overlap or lie within a CDRZ-designated census tract, helping them take advantage of funding and capacity-building opportunities. The navigators in Florida have been working with the Geos Institute as well as regional and national partners including the Resilient Cities Catalyst (RCC), Project IN-CORE, navigators in other states, and others to assist these communities through direct outreach, education, partnership building, and coordination.

The overall goal of this project is to help each CDRZ community by meeting them where they are and matching them with appropriate resources and technical expertise to secure funding for resilience. According to FEMA's National Risk Index, CDRZ tracts represent some of the most vulnerable communities to natural hazards, exhibiting high risk and relatively low capacity to address resilience from a social, cultural, economic, infrastructural, environmental and/or institutional lens. Navigators have directly engaged with each CDRZ community to better understand their concerns and constraints, assess where they are in the resilience-building process, and identify the best steps forward to address gaps and advance resilience.

Through the outreach and engagement process, the team is testing strategies, identifying lessons learned in engaging vulnerable communities, and assisting them through the steps to resilience. The navigators conducted outreach, provided resources, assessed resilience efforts using national tools and frameworks, and identified ongoing and complementary community efforts. Navigators have collected community intake data, connected with technical service providers, participated in cohort trainings with other states, and contributed to measurement frameworks. Based on the work to date, navigators have received varying levels of interest and responsiveness from CDRZ communities. While some communities have been very engaged and interested in receiving additional assistance and support from state and regional collaborators, others have not engaged with the project. Education and information sharing has been crucial from the outset, as most of the CDRZ communities expressed confusion about the CDRZ designation and what it would mean for them moving forward.

CDRZ-designated communities lie across the resilience planning spectrum, with some in the early stages of planning while others have secured funding to implement and assess local projects to address flooding and other hazards. Regardless, the CDRZ designation offered community leaders an opportunity to address challenges associated with natural hazards relating to economic loss, increased infrastructure costs, and at-risk and in-need communities. The under-resourced CDRZ tracts may experience lack of capacity (i.e., staff, finances), lack of community proactivity and readiness, and changes in political will. The CDRZ Act supports a range of engagement across public and private sector partners, as well as philanthropic organizations, to enable communities to strengthen resilience outlooks at a local level. We will share insights gained from this work that will be invaluable in other communities and offer important lessons for addressing and supporting under-resourced communities in building resilience to flooding and other hazards at a local level.

Keywords: community resiliency, adaptation, capacity building, climate change education