

**Community Conversation: People with Disabilities - Resilient NJ**

**MEETING MINUTES**

**DATE:** 6-16-21

**SUBJECT:** **Community Conversation Summary: People with Disabilities**  
Resilient NJ - Atlantic County Coastal Communities (ACCR)

A meeting was held on June 16, 2021 at 5:00 PM with Unmask Joy to discuss the Resilient NJ Project. The meeting was held via Zoom. The following were in attendance:

Name	Organization	Email
Nieves Garcia Pimienta	Rutgers-POET	Nieves.pimienta@rutgers.edu
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**Part 1: Introduction and Welcome**

- The facilitator and co-host introduced themselves. Participants gave brief introductions stating their first name and town of residence. Towns of residence included Atlantic City and Pleasantville.
- The facilitators gave a short overview of Resilient NJ and its purpose. The facilitator explained how the community conversation would support the planning process, stressing the importance of learning from the events and challenges residents have experienced on the ground.
- The facilitator thanked Donna McClary from the organization Unmask Joy for partnering with the Resilient NJ team to recruit participants.

**Part 2: Past Disasters and Related Challenges**

Participants discussed past disasters, the challenges they experienced as people with special needs, and how they were able to address or cope with these challenges. Participants noted the following experiences:

- One participant stressed the importance of having a designated shelter for people with disabilities. When Superstorm Sandy hit, residents were taken to crowded shelters that were unhealthy environments for some autistic people.
- The food provided at shelters should observe dietary restrictions and food allergies.
- The cost to raise a home is not always fully covered by insurance and can be unaffordable, especially if the homeowner already has limited resources.
- One participant is still paying \$150 per month on a loan she received to pay for repairs to her house, which did not include having the house raised. She wished that there had been more transparency around how much she would need to pay for the repairs, because it is difficult for her to make that monthly payment while retired. “They should be honest with you and tell you exactly how much you need to put to whatever they’re giving you. I will probably die before paying it off.”
- There should be more transparency about how long repairs will take. If home repairs take a long time to complete, the circumstances of the homeowner can change in the middle of the construction project. One person could not be in her home for 3-4 years while it was being raised, and the staircase had to be redone in the middle of the project because she developed a knee issue while waiting for the repairs. Participants also described seeing their neighbors’ home repairs never completed.
- Two participants stated that there were not enough evacuation vehicles. Residents had to wave down trucks to find these were at capacity. Often trucks did not return. Consequently, some residents were left behind despite the call to evacuate.
- Not all evacuation vehicles can accommodate people with medical issues or medical devices (like a walker). Even when advance notice is given, sometimes the medical transport service cannot accommodate these needs.
- Evacuation personnel should be trained in how to properly move medical devices and people with disabilities, including how to lift a person with a disability and how to lift move a wheelchair into an evacuation vehicle.
- Have an alternative transportation system for the after math. One participant was in high school during Superstorm Sandy period, and she had to be driven instead of taking school bus; school buses were not doing pickups at hotels.
- One participant noticed that many homes smelled of mold, suggesting that no repairs were made after a flood. There should be more property inspections to identify and minimize this type of situation, including holding property managers accountable for making repairs. A map of communities that need repairs or have negligent managers will help in improving negligence.
- During Superstorm Sandy, people in wheelchairs and with special needs were put in hotels that were not accessible and many ended up returning to their homes despite flood conditions.

- Participants felt that the government was not effective in assisting with emergency housing. Agencies would create programs and quickly discontinue them. One participant lived in four different motels before moving to a FEMA hotel. One participant was helped by a government office to put a security deposit on an apartment.
- There was no supervision of contractors.
- People with special needs need to evacuate with their medical records and equipment, in addition to clothes and medicines.
- Shelters should have power outlets for medical devices and accessible bathrooms. The food available should accommodate people with special diets and allergies.

### **Part 3: Community Assets**

The facilitators led participants in a discussion about what community assets they feel are most important to protect from future disasters. Responses included:

- Utilities, cell towers, power plants, and anything that would support having access to the internet.
- Libraries, books, and important documents that can be destroyed during a disaster. Residents should use the library to scan and digitize important documents. There could be outreach and education programs showing people how to digitize documents in case of a disaster.
- Continuity of therapy for people with special needs is important. One participant works as a therapist for kids with autism who can be disturbed by missing an appointment or having their schedule changes. Even having therapy online rather than in person can still be helpful.
- Medical facilities
- Government buildings and services. It is difficult to get through to the IRS to file documents during a disaster.
- Housing

### **Part 4: Vision for the Future**

Participants considered what they want their community to be in five or ten years and described their visions for a safer, more resilient future. They shared the following ideas:

- ‘To have knowledge and information provided to them as in other communities’
- Have the same resources as in other communities.
- Better communication and resources during and after disasters.
- Community drills to practice what to do in an emergency.
- The community is all on the same page.
- Everyone is prepared before a disaster based on education and practice drills.

- More information available about where people can access vital things like food, oxygen tanks, insulin, medicine, blankets, and showers in the event of a disaster.
- Prepared hospitals, a community with established relationships. Hospitals only have 3-4 days of supplies. They need a plan, perhaps including an agreement to borrow supplies from other states in the event of disaster.
- A community that is prepared for people with disabilities.
  - Need a plan for sheltering people in a place that is safe, clean, and healthy, especially for those with special needs.
  - “Just like they stockpile ice for the roads, you know a hurricane is coming up the coast—at least put some plans in place to get people somewhere safe.”
- Hold monthly information sessions about resources and programs available for disaster preparation and assistance.