2. Roles and Activities of Human Services in the Aftermath of Disasters

Human service organizations and human service workers participate in formal and informal capacities in postdisaster relief and recovery efforts. They are also, albeit often less prominently, involved in predisaster mitigation and preparedness planning. Their tasks are associated with restoring and safeguarding social well-being. Most human service workers are familiar with theories and models for practice that encourage them to consider connections between personal troubles and social, economic, and political issues (Gitterman and Germain 2008; Mills 1959). However, because government funding tends to target microlevel interventions, human service agencies and practitioners focus their activities around meeting the welfare needs of vulnerable people. They provide emergency food, shelter, health care, financial aid, and psychosocial support to individuals and families.

More recently, growing emphasis on building community resilience has led to recognition of a need to engage with communities and encourage citizen involvement in disaster preparedness. This has also led to a limited recognition of the role of community workers.

This chapter examines how emergency relief, recovery, and longer-term disaster related work are assigned to human service organizations and workers in the aftermath of a disaster, and how the organizations and workers go about undertaking this. Not all work that is done is formally assigned and recognized, and not all work that may need to be done is sufficiently resourced to enable it to be carried out effectively.

THE STRUCTURE OF DISASTER MANAGEMENT

Although the immediate days after a major disaster may be chaotic at an experiential level, emergency response systems are highly structured and
organized along similar lines internationally. Standardization is promoted by the United Nations, through the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR), established in 1999. In 2005, after review of the international strategy, 168 countries endorsed the Hyogo Framework for Action (UNISDR 2007). The primary goals of the framework were to assess, monitor, and reduce risks, and to improve warning systems. The hope was that improving knowledge, innovation, and education would increase the disaster preparedness and resilience of nations and communities. The signatories provide progress reports on their implementation of the framework.

Civil emergency management entities, such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in the United States, Emergency Management Australia (EMA), the Civil Contingencies Secretariat (CCS) in the United Kingdom, and the Ministry of Civil Defence and Emergency Management (CDEM) in New Zealand, are all government bodies tasked with coordinating and overseeing disaster planning and response activities. They are responsible for ensuring that committees link relevant organizations; roles are clearly defined; training is provided; and tasks are allocated and practiced in preparation for local, regional, and national deployment. At each level, from the local to the national, specialist committees attend to the natural, built, economic, and social environments, ideally in a way that facilitates interconnections between these domains. Command hierarchies establish communication protocols so that information and decisions made at local, regional, and national levels will be accurately and effectively conveyed.

While more minor hazardous events are addressed at a local level, major events with implications for national security and economic recovery generally provoke higher-level government involvement. When catastrophic disasters overwhelm a country’s capacity to cope, a government may ask for international assistance. Sri Lanka asked for such assistance in the wake of the tsunami that struck the South and Southeast Asian region on December 26, 2004 (Oloruntoba 2005). International aid mobilization also occurred after Typhoon Haiyan devastated the Philippines in November 2013. International relief efforts are usually led by the United Nations, Red Cross and Red Crescent, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that are ready to be deployed within a short timeframe and are significantly experienced in undertaking these roles (Maldonado, Maitland, and Tapia 2010).

International organizations tread a fine line between supporting human rights and avoiding interference in local or national politics, because