

OPENING STATEMENT

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U.S. House Committee on Science

HEARING: The Role of Social Science Research in Disaster Preparedness and Response

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Mr. Chairman, I am pleased to join you in welcoming our witnesses today to this hearing on the role of the social and behavioral sciences in understanding how better to prepare for, respond to, and recover from natural and man-made disasters. The events of the past year bring the importance of this subject sharply into focus.

Greater attention to coping with disasters is prudent when one considers the increased vulnerability of the nation to larger disasters associated with a growing population concentrated in hazardous coastal zones and earthquake prone regions - such as Oregon. And, in addition to natural hazards, including the threat of an Avian flu pandemic, we now have the ever-present specter of terrorist attack.

We certainly need to develop the knowledge base about the nature of risks; what can be done to mitigate them; and how relevant stakeholders can apply that knowledge effectively.

Social science research has a long history of contributing to our understanding of the factors that influence the way individuals, communities, and organizations respond to disasters. The focus of research has broadened over time to tackle various aspects spanning the entire hazards cycle, from pre-disaster mitigation through preparedness, response and recovery.

But in addition to research aimed at increasing understanding, attention must be directed and appropriate processes put in place to ensure that this increased understanding is acted upon by individuals and organizations. The main goal of reducing human suffering and physical damage is linked to the degree success is achieved in applying research results.

Therefore, today I hope to hear from our panel of experts about the important research that has been done in the social and behavioral sciences and the research opportunities that are being pursued. I am also interested in the state of health of the research community that studies disasters and in whether there are important research issues that are not being adequately addressed because of funding shortfalls or faulty priorities.

But equally important, I am very interested in your experiences and thoughts on how research is translated into practice. My questions would be: What is working, and what isn't working? Are there impediments to applying the findings from the social and behavioral sciences to the disaster planning, recovery, and response activities of the responsible public and private sector organizations?

Mr. Chairman, I want to thank you for calling this hearing and thank our witnesses for appearing before the Subcommittee today. I look forward to our discussion.