

# Coping in Hard Times: Fact Sheet for Community Organizations and Leaders



What happens when a community has been hit by economic hard times? Stores close, buildings stand abandoned, municipal services—trash, police and fire, libraries—suffer cutbacks, and dwindling social supports must be spread among more citizens. People living in the community are laid off, are out of work for months, and may run out of unemployment insurance. When they look for work, they find that companies have stopped hiring.

What ultimately happens to the people in this community? They become anxious and afraid. About what will happen to them and their families. About meeting their basic needs. About losing their home. These worries can cause frustration, anger, and despair—feelings that intensify if their neighborhood seems to be falling apart around them. Citizens look to their community leaders for solutions and for reasons to hope. This fact sheet will explore how economic difficulties may affect the people in your community and give you ways to help.

## Understanding Economic Downturns

When members of a community face financial difficulties, it affects their:

1. Sense of safety
2. Ability to be calm
3. Self-efficacy and community-efficacy
4. Connectedness
5. Hope

## Sense of Safety

### **What is “sense of safety”?**

- A belief that your needs—and the needs of your family and community—will be met now and in the future
- A belief that you are protected from harm and that those around you will stay safe
- A belief that your local, county, state, and federal governments will provide help in times of need.

### ***How can economic downturns affect community members' sense of safety?***

Those without work for months may lack money for food, housing, childcare, and transportation. They may have lost their homes or left the community to find work elsewhere. When their basic needs are threatened, people do not feel safe. They feel even less safe when their community declines, the infrastructure suffers, and there is a decrease in protective services. Unable to meet their needs and believing their community cannot help them, people can become overwhelmed and want to give up. They may avoid friends and family, be irritable or argumentative, or take risks. When people don't feel safe, they find it harder to deal with life's challenges. The stress can be devastating.

### ***What can community organizations do to help?***

- At meetings, educate youth and families about community resources that offer job or training opportunities or supply basic needs.
- Encourage other community sectors to problem-solve ways to address economic and safety concerns. Hold forums for citizens to air grievances and offer suggestions.
- Sponsor community nights where neighbors can meet around common areas of interest, such as law enforcement offering information on neighborhood watch programs, or volunteer opportunities with violence prevention programs for youth.
- Send a delegation of community members to media sites to encourage coverage that depicts community opportunities, safety efforts, and stories of resilience rather than economic threat.



### **Example of community organizations helping:**

In 2010, during the economic downturn, the BP Oil Spill decimated the Gulf Coast, causing huge losses to businesses and laborers in the oil, fishing, tourist, and support industries. The St. Bernard Project Louisiana State University (LSU) Center for Wellness and Mental Health presented a free Family Fun Day and a summer day camp, giving children a safe and fun outlet when coastal recreation was no longer possible, and reducing parental stress. Additionally, the LSU Center and peer counselors linked residents with local resources, including school supplies, food, sundry giveaways, and other practical support.

## **Ability to Calm**

### ***What is “calm”?***

- Self-soothing; the ability to relax mind and body
- Staying relaxed or grounded, rather than numb, shut down, agitated, or overly excited
- Keeping body and mind quiet enough to focus and concentrate

### ***How can economic downturns keep community members from feeling calm?***

When finances are uncertain, people can feel frustrated, afraid, angry, or hopeless. When they see other community members experiencing the same problems, they may have an even harder time believing that things will get better, and therefore keeping themselves or their families calm. They might have trouble concentrating, sleeping, eating, controlling temper, or being with others. They may wonder, “How can I feel better?” or “How can I do what I need to?” They might turn to drugs or alcohol.

If they can't calm themselves, they might have trouble with daily tasks and meeting goals. They may avoid others when upset—not wanting to cause worry or risk being judged.

### ***How can community organizations help community members feel calm?***

- Discuss wellness activities (eating healthy, exercise regularly, good sleeping habits) at community meetings or gatherings.

- Use multiple media outlets to increase dissemination of messages showing how to cope in stressful economic times.
- Have your own self-care plan. Be a role model for those around you.
- Encourage community religious professionals to add “hope and healing” services that focus on resilience and support during hard times.
- Consult local universities for support. For instance, the University of Kansas developed a free Community Tool Box (CTB) of practical information on building, evaluating, and sustaining a healthy community.
- Make an effort to keep or increase low-cost, enjoyable, uplifting, and/or distracting activities for the community.

**Examples of community organizations helping:**

The American Red Cross and the Kansas City Fire Department, and EMS developed a plan that—whenever fire or emergency crews are dispatched—volunteers arrive on the scene within 90 minutes with lodging and food vouchers, replacement clothing, self-care items, and medicines.

With the United Way, these partners support a health nurse and medical social worker team whose responsibility is to assist people who, in desperation, have dialed 911. The program goal is to link at-risk individuals—whose issues might not be addressed otherwise—with the services they need before they face more tragic circumstances.

**Self-Efficacy and Community-Efficacy**

**What is “self-efficacy” and “community-efficacy”?**

- Self-efficacy: the belief that you can do what you need to do to handle tough times
- Community-efficacy: the belief that your community can take care of its members



**How can economic downturns affect self-efficacy or community-efficacy?**

When jobs are scarce, people may despair that they are not “good enough” to get a job and earn the money to support their family. In economic downturns, communities cut back services and lay off teachers, police officers, firefighters, librarians, or other public workers, reducing the community’s sense that it can both employ and take care of it’s members.

**How can community organizations help build self-efficacy and improve community-efficacy?**

- Have the community create a centralized database of available services and resources that is updated regularly.
- Encourage artists and theatres to sponsor events related to wellness and resilience.
- Encourage businesses to offer their employees resilience-building classes such as conflict resolution, anger management, cultural sensitivity, and crisis management, and to increase worker appreciation and recognition programs.
- Find out-of-work individuals volunteer opportunities in their areas of expertise to increase their sense of efficacy and provide leads to potential jobs.

**Examples of community organizations helping:**

Following the BP oil spill, Louisiana’s St. Bernard Project developed a peer counseling program that trained and employed the wives of local fishermen who had lost their livelihoods. The wives were linked to the services they needed, and were trained to provide resources and services to community members. The program increased participants’ self-efficacy, reduced stress within their families, increased family income, and improved their relationships with their children.

## Connectedness

### **What is “connectedness”?**

- Having relationships with others (individuals or groups) who understand and support you

### **How can economic downturns affect connectedness?**

When they lose a job, people can feel ashamed. Without money, they stay at home more, shut off from friends, thinking they don't belong. In isolating, they miss out on receiving understanding and compassion from friends, a sense of well-being from helping others, distraction from worries, a sense of connection to their community, and chances to problem-solve and network.

### **What can organizations do to promote connectedness among community members?**

- Have cultural and faith-based leaders work with persons who lack relationships or mistrust authorities in the community, to introduce them to and integrate them within appropriate activities.
- Partner with various community organizations, nonprofit service agencies, and schools serving diverse ethnic and religious groups.
- Develop PSAs that emphasize pride in the city or community.
- Support area high school, university, and little, minor, or major league sports teams. Fans of winning (or losing) teams instantly connect with each other.
- Support low-cost, artistic, family-oriented, nature-based or cultural activities that provide opportunities for community members to spend time with each other

### **Example of community organizations promoting community connectedness:**

In Houston, a tragic automobile accident killed a young couple, leaving their three children badly injured. The community, in a groundswell of support, responded by holding a large bingo fundraiser, among other events, to generate financial support. Beyond providing economic support, the city's response created connectedness within the community and strengthened the bonds among many citizens.

## Hope

### **What is “hope”?**

- The expectation that things will work out; trusting that everything is going to be alright

### **How can economic downturns keep people from having hope?**

People who can't find work can feel discouraged, hopeless, and angry at those in positions of power. Rather than blame the economy, people may blame themselves, and community and government leaders for their being out of work.

### **How can community organizations foster hope in community members?**

- Convey messages of hope, progress, and success during community gatherings.
- Create media PSAs or provide messages at events that highlight the community's strengths and announce solutions to problem situations.
- Make sure that PSA messages regarding SAMHSA's National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255) are broadcast through multiple media outlets.

### **Examples of community organizations promoting hope:**

After tornadoes destroyed much of Joplin, Missouri, various corporations and businesses made commitments to rebuilding with the first six months to help maintain the hope that the community will rebuild and prosper again.

**In Brief:** Community organizations are in a unique position to take a leadership role, partner with others, inspire individuals and groups, communicate messages of resilience, and bring about changes essential in helping their community overcome hardship.

Hobfoll, S. E. et al. (2007). Five essential elements of immediate and mid-term mass trauma intervention: Empirical evidence. *Psychiatry*, 70, 283-315.

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Suggested Citation: National Child Traumatic Stress Network, Terrorism and Disaster Committee. (2012). *Coping in hard times: Fact sheet for community organizations and leaders*. Los Angeles, CA, and Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress.