

# Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Recovery

Creating a Virtual Conference for Low-Resourced Communities

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By: Krystle Allen, Marlin Ford, Kiyana E.Kelly, and Angell C. Jordan

*Photo provided by: NASA*

## ATTRIBUTION

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Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Recovery: Creating a Virtual Conference for Low-Resourced Communities

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## MEET THE AUTHORS

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Angell C. Jordan is a Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) assistant area agent at Southern University Agricultural Research and Extension Center in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. She conducts presentations in three parishes of Louisiana on such topics as nutrition, healthy lifestyle changes, and personal health. Angell has worked with the SU Ag Center for over 10 years. She continues to help individuals, from kids to seniors. Her students can expect informational handouts, lots of interaction, and sometimes food demonstrations while attending a session with her. Angell graduated from high school and continued her education at Nicholls State University, in Thibodaux, Louisiana, where she pursued a Bachelor of Science in dietetics. Angell has been married to her husband for 15 years and has two beautiful daughters.



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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**Purpose of the Guide.** This book documents the process we used to develop a virtual conference for low-resourced communities focusing on Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Recovery. We believe this is a model other Extension teams can adapt and use.

## INTRODUCTION

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Louisiana is almost always affected by hurricanes, but these weather events have become more frequent and more severe in recent years. This is a consequence of global warming and how that influences water temperatures in the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico. The effects on Louisiana's communities have been significant. Our Extension team realized that we need to have a stronger focus on community preparedness. We're not politicizing global warming but rather providing facts to help people prepare.

Evacuation is a luxury for many people we work with, but people need to know how to plan and build a kit to be as prepared as possible to weather the storm.

We decided to host a virtual conference to reach community audiences with education focused on emergency preparation. We wanted to empower people to make informed decisions and prioritize preparedness.

We chose the timing of our virtual conference before hurricane season, in part because the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) proposed moving hurricane season up two weeks because of projected activity. As of July 2021, we'd already had five named storms.

We were surprised by the number of Extension educators who participated. There is value in reaching Extension professionals because they can reach their communities and help amplify our efforts. Our conference also became, in some ways, a train-the-trainer model.

Natural disasters and emergencies are not cookie-cutter events; preparedness is not identical for everyone. People need knowledge and resources to make changes. Preparedness saves lives. We think that by reaching both community audiences and our Extension peers, critical information is being shared within community and personal networks.



*Members of the Southern Agriculture team at the Extension Foundation's 2019 Impact Collaborative.*

## Chapter One: Project History

Our team participated in two of the Extension Foundation's Impact Collaborative Summits, held in April and October 2019. The Impact Collaborative is a program that connects Extension teams who are formulating or accelerating projects with key informants who help them with ideation and design. These in-person summits (held prior to the pandemic) connected us with key informants, who helped us with program planning, and also encouraged us to apply for the New Technologies for Agricultural Extension (NTAE) funding. The NTAE funding has helped us accelerate our work in emergency preparedness. The project "pitch" we developed at the Impact Collaborative is included below.



VIDEO

This 4-minute video features the Southern Agriculture team's project "pitch" presentation at the Impact Collaborative Summit Showcase in October 2019. The group's work was selected for Year 2 of NTAE funding.

Video:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bMRF7Ap6TEU>



The COVID pandemic changed our ideas about emergency preparedness and gave us a new sense of urgency. Two months into the pandemic, we hosted a town hall event, supported by the Extension Foundation. We brought experts to the table from Florida, Texas, and Louisiana, and talked about emergency and hurricane preparedness in light of COVID. New kinds of questions arose. How do you evacuate during COVID-19? How could social distancing be observed in shelters? Would people wear masks? Who can go to a shelter? Could everyone be accommodated?



*Krystle Allen shares information about the project at the Impact Collaborative. Credit: Extension Foundation*

With so many things changing—the frequency and severity of hurricanes, the pandemic—we decided to offer an annual event of some sort that focuses on emergency preparedness. We needed to find a format to make that happen since face-to-face meetings were impossible during the peak of the pandemic. This is when the idea of a virtual conference emerged.

## Chapter Two: Designing the 2021 Inaugural Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Recovery Virtual Conference

In this chapter, we'll share our design strategy, the resources and people we consulted, and conference outcomes.

## DESIGNING THE CONFERENCE

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To link the citizens of Louisiana with “Opportunities for SUccess,” the 2021 Inaugural Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Recovery Virtual Conference was designed as an opportunity to add capacity to our programming and increase our impact. Emergency preparedness for our communities is always at the forefront of our minds because the state of Louisiana has had numerous fatal emergencies, including hurricanes, floods, and tornadoes. We branded the event using “SU” in “success” to bring to mind our institution, Southern University.

The Southern University Agricultural Research and Extension Center (SUAREC) provides programming and support to aid communities and Louisiana citizens in the recovery phase. This conference was designed with Louisiana citizens in mind, to mitigate loss of life, mitigate loss of property, and to equip communities with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to aid in the recovery process as it relates to emergency preparedness.

Using the historic 2016 Louisiana Flood as our conceptual lens, we focused on our individual efforts as second responders; SUAREC’s response to help mitigate future losses; and the role and linkage of Extension professionals as second responders. We decided to host a conference to provide education and resources to assist the following audiences:

- rural, urban and peri-urban communities
- families
- farmers
- companies
- community-based organizations
- schools
- faith-based organizations
- first responders
- Extension professionals

Our goals included:

- empowering low-resourced and rural communities to mobilize preparedness initiatives;
- ensuring that emergency responders within these communities have clearly outlined goals/duties to aid in effectiveness (emergency response);
- providing more effective links to recovery efforts for rural, urban, and peri-urban communities;
- providing knowledge about recovery funding for farmers; and
- ensuring that families collectively gain knowledge about emergency preparedness tools.

With a multitude of audiences in mind, we initially wanted to specifically serve audiences within the State of Louisiana. After much deliberation, we decided not to place geographical limitations on attendees, as we acknowledged that every location in the world has experienced an emergency of some sort. Therefore, we decided to expand our reach by soliciting other states, community constituents, Extension professionals, teachers, farmers, faith-based organizations, and emergency response teams.

We discussed presenting a hybrid conference as COVID-19 cases decreased during the planning phase. We planned to host the conference at our Maurice A. Edmond Livestock Arena Multipurpose Building. However, in January 2021 COVID-19 cases began to rise again. We determined that a 100% virtual conference for 2021 would help prevent the spread of the virus. A virtual conference would also enable us to meet people where they were, by bringing the conference to them in the comfort of their homes, offices, organizations, or farms.

We chose the first week of June for our virtual conference because June 1 is the start of the Atlantic hurricane season (which continues until November 30). The conference would last for three days, with each day serving a separate audience. The conference would begin on June 1 and conclude on June 3 and run from 10:00 a.m. until 2:00 p.m daily, Central Standard Time.

Then came the task of deciding which online meeting platforms to use. We assessed what Microsoft Teams and Zoom platforms could offer during a webinar. We decided to use Zoom. As we outlined the conference, we decided to have only webinar-based sessions with question-and-answer sessions throughout. Using what we learned about instructional design and audience engagement, we decided to break up the monotony and base the delivery method on the audience. For the first day, we decided to present an evacuation exercise called "Time to Geaux" for an audience of community members and Extension professionals. That activity required some hands-on work, so we decided to use breakout rooms. Since we knew farmers might have internet connectivity issues and time limitations, we felt they would more than likely prefer a question and answer-based session.

Breakout rooms also enabled participants to network and have dialogue. When using Zoom for webinars, we learned that we would be unable to use breakout rooms.

We determined that each session should last approximately 45-50 minutes with 10- to 15-minute bio breaks between sessions. Below is an outline of our conference sessions.

Day 1 Topics: Emergency Preparedness (Audience: Community members and Extension professionals)

- "Building and Strengthening Sustainable/Resilient Communities
- Preventing and Mitigating Emergencies and Current Threats (Decision Science)"
- "Resources and Tools Available to the Community to Promote Preparedness"
- "Time to Geaux" (an evacuation exercise)
- "Business and Organization Preparedness"
- Engagement activity: Assessing existing knowledge of best practices

Day 2 Topics: Emergency Response (Audience: Second Responders/Extension Professionals)

- “Integrated Approach to Community Disaster Response”
- “Resources and Tools available to aid communities in Emergency Response”
- “Innovative Training Methodologies” (Low-cost, highly effective training/CEUs available)
- “Crisis/Emergency Communications”

Day 3 Topics: Emergency Recovery (Farmers (rural, urban, low resource, peri-urban)

- “Challenges in Rural Emergency Management”
- “How Disasters in Urban Areas Affect Rural Communities”
- “Resources for Communication Planning in Rural Areas”
- “Engaging and Training Community Members in Disaster Preparedness and Response”

We advertised the conference through social media, using our Facebook page.

In 2022, we plan to expand by hosting a hybrid model. We will eventually transition back to in-person programming once COVID-19 rates subside.

## RESOURCES AND PEOPLE CONSULTED

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We were fortunate to have a range of individuals, agencies, and organizations able to collaborate with us on this project.

- We worked with the entire Extension Foundation team. Our catalysts—Dr. Fred Schlutt and Dr. Rick Klemme—were particularly helpful in guiding our work and inspiring us to consider new ways of thinking in a very fluid situation. Megan Hirschman (Extension Foundation) was critical to our work in identifying and establishing partnerships and presenters to help with the virtual conference.
- The Extension Disaster Education Network (EDEN) provided valuable resources, including connections with EDEN’s 1890 institutions advisory committee.
- The United States [Small Business Administration](#) (SBA) also provided resources. The SBA facilitated a session for small business owners on preparedness and recovery after an emergency. This session was especially necessary as small businesses are unexpectedly affected by emergencies, just as families are.
- The Louisiana [Governor’s Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness](#) (GOHSEP) was a critical partner in our work. In addition to aiding our team in developing relationships and identifying facilitators for conference sessions, GOHSEP facilitated sessions on crisis and emergency Communication, as well as tools and resources available to communities for emergency response.

- Texas A&M's Engineering Extension Service (TEEX) also played a critical role in helping us develop our virtual conference. Our catalyst introduced us to Dr. Monty Dozier, who helped us to design day three of our conference, which was aimed at farmers and Extension professionals. In addition to assisting us with the design for day three, he onboarded a panel of TEEX members and TAMU Extension professionals to facilitate a roundtable discussion about resources available to farmers, and disaster response for farmers.
- FEMA participated and will continue to work with us. A joint Facebook Live event has been discussed.
- A USDA Natural Resources Conservation District (NRCS) subject matter expert facilitated a session on resources available to private landowners.

## EVENT PARTICIPATION, EVALUATION, OUTCOMES, & NEXT STEPS

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In this section, we'll discuss conference participation, how we evaluated the event, outcomes (including resources produced), and our next steps.

### Participation

Registration for the event was robust:

- Day 1: 181
- Day 2: 178
- Day 3: 168

As is common with online events, participation varied from the registration and ended up being about half of registrants.

### Evaluation

We collected data for all three days in two ways: through Mentimeter and polls.

We used Mentimeter for a brief qualitative approach to participants' expectations and administered polls through Zoom to encourage participation from all participants. We administered polls as pre- and post-tests at the beginning of days one and two and at the end of day three. We built in time for networking and sharing on days one and two. Participants were assigned to breakout rooms with a facilitator, much like a focus group, and information and field notes were collected and analyzed to assess areas for improvement, impacts, and satisfaction.

## In one word, what are you hoping to receive from today's session?

 Mentimeter




*Results from a Mentimeter Poll taken during the conference.*

## Outcomes and Resources Produced

A majority of the participants indicated that they were satisfied with the conference and would recommend it to others. In the sharing session, they recommended that we create a database of resources and funding opportunities for Extension professionals. In response, SU JAGriculture created a Google Form to encourage participants to sign up to share the resources and grants they are using for emergency preparedness. Nearly thirty people signed up and a registry was created.

There were other outcomes, as well. As a professional development activity for our Extension peers, we presented a webinar for the Extension Foundation on April 6, 2020, about our programming and support to aid communities in Louisiana in the post-disaster recovery phase, as second responders: Answering the Call: The Role of Extension After an Emergency. The video is shown below. This work fed into our NTAE project.




VIDEO

This 1-hour video – Answering the Call: The Role of Extension After an Emergency – explores the role of the Extension professional as a second responder during emergencies, and more.

Site: <https://connect.extension.org/event/answering-the-call-the-role-of-extension-after-an-emergency-southern-university-agricultural-research-and-extension-center>

Video: <https://youtu.be/BJfNmBOVwkY>

We were interviewed by the Extension Foundation team for EF’s podcast. A link to that episode is included below.



PODCAST

**Connect Extension Podcast Episode 15**  
<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/episode-15-southern-university-jagriculture-emergency/id1524711375?i=1000503239381>  
Dec. 22, 2020 Run time: 18 minutes

As a result of our project, we produced a range of resources for those we work with. Our team prepared campaign materials for National Preparedness Month (held annually in October) emphasizing the importance of having an evacuation plan. Sample campaign materials are included below.

We also created a series of informational pieces about preparedness for hurricanes and other emergencies for our constituent groups, including:

- [individuals with disabilities](#)
- [older adults](#)
- [individuals with diabetes](#)

With the pandemic in mind, we also created a resource sheet providing information about [medical shelters for vulnerable individuals](#).

We're continuing to reference and distribute the comprehensive [Emergency Preparedness Resource Curriculum](#) that our institution produced in 2015. This guide emphasizes safety and preparedness at home, work, school, and in the community. Additional resources are available on our [Emergency Preparedness Now](#) webpage.

### Next Steps

The conference will become an annual event, and we hope to scale it up so that other Extension programs and other institutions can use the model. Depending on the situation with COVID, we may have an in-person or a hybrid conference. We need to weigh the pros and cons. We may also develop a specific focus on Extension professionals.

As we focus on community programming, we're thinking about changing our project's name, for branding purposes, because we're the only university in our state doing emergency preparedness programming. We're also working on certifications with FEMA and our state emergency management program so we can continue to increase our capacity and the impact of our work.

## Chapter Three: Lessons Learned

A roadblock we encountered were the restrictions on in-person gatherings because of the pandemic. Our team members were also working at home and had to plan the event remotely. Like others, we faced challenges with internet connectivity, which informed our event planning.

We pivoted to a virtual conference held across multiple days. Experiential learning is at the heart of the Extension experience. We also like to refer to this as "community learning." We wanted to capture this in our event, so we provided a small group sharing experience at the end of the first two days of our virtual conference. These breakout sessions were facilitated by team members and volunteers from our 1890s advisory group and our department at Southern University. These sessions lasted 40 minutes, and each group had about ten people.

These breakout rooms provided a place for people to share the challenges they are facing and what is working for them. We gathered best practices on engaging audiences in virtual settings, in addition to best practices around emergency preparedness and funding resources. People felt safe in these breakout rooms and were also able to share what was not working. This was a good example of community learning and the kind of engagement we hoped to achieve with conference participants.

We also learned this: Whatever the emergency, there are common principles that can be applied to preparation. Here are some of the most important things we learned:

- **Your team matters.** We will soon complete our final team healthy survey. We've been blessed with an amazing team. Everyone stepped up and helped with every task, regardless of who was assigned the task. We grew and developed with the project. We've worked together as a team for some time, so we know each other's strengths and what individuals like and don't like to do. For

example, one person has wonderful graphics talents but doesn't like to speak. So our team strived to play to the strengths of each individual. That moved our project forward.

- **The scale of your project should align with your capacity.** We had to adjust our expectations when we shifted from an in-person conference in communities to a virtual conference. We had hoped to offer CEUs, but that was too complex to do virtually. We eventually decided on a format and scale that our team and partners could successfully implement. The program has to be realistic for the conditions.
- **You have to eat an elephant one bite at a time.** Planning a virtual conference was initially overwhelming, but by breaking it down into smaller steps, we were able to meet our goals.
- **You may reach audiences you didn't expect to reach.** Our primary audience was community members, but we had significant participation from Extension professionals. That was an unintended—and positive—outcome.
- **Engaging virtual audiences is not impossible, but it requires intentional design and planning.** We incorporated a number of strategies to increase audience engagement. The first day of our conference was very interactive. We used polls, Mentimeter, and breakout rooms. The result was high engagement.
- **Engagement strategies should be flexible and reflect audience needs.**
- The final day of our conference targeted farmers. Because we knew some might have limited internet connectivity and would have to dial in, we focused on talking and panel discussion. Presenters did not use slides, and we did not use interactive tools such as polls and Mentimeter.
- **You have to believe in yourself and press forward even if there are obstacles.** Use the resources you have.