



NEWPORT  
**HEALTH EQUITY**  
ZONE

## **LESSONS FROM THE 2019 NEWPORT GAS OUTAGE**

The Experience of Newport  
Health Equity Zone (HEZ) Residents  
& Recommendations for the Future

## **LECCIONES DEL CORTE DE GAS DE NEWPORT 2019**

La Experiencia de Los Residentes de  
Newport Health Equity Zone (HEZ)  
& Recomendaciones para el Futuro



**NEWPORT  
HEALTH EQUITY  
ZONE**

**MISSION**

The Newport Health Equity Zone is a city-wide coalition mobilizing residents and resources of the Broadway and North End neighborhoods to make Newport a place where everyone can thrive.

**VISION**

We envision a city where:

- structural, financial, and environmental barriers to health and well-being are eliminated;
- public policy fosters the good health of all residents; and
- residents feel empowered to control the health of their families and community

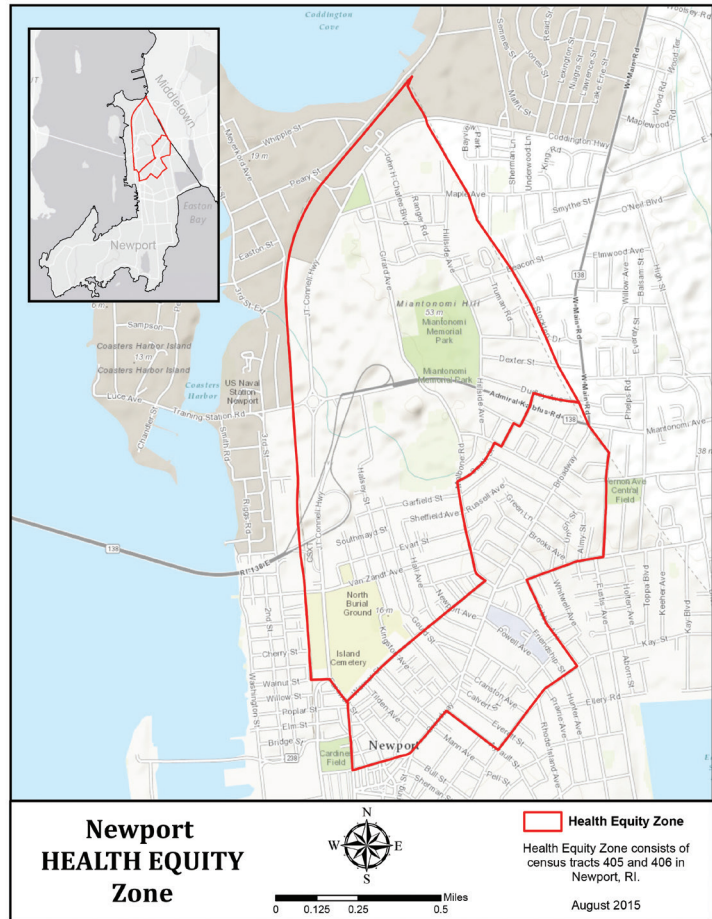
The Newport HEZ works with residents to activate their leadership on issues that affect the health of the community, including:

- Food Access
- Transportation
- Housing
- Greening Urban Spaces
- Arts & Culture
- Civic Engagement
- Maternal & Child Health
- Collective of Phenomenal Women
- LGBTQ+ Health

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HEZ's lead community partners are our Resident Consultants and Community Health Worker Fellows, Alliance for a Livable Newport, Aquidneck Community Table, Aquidneck Land Trust, Arts & Cultural Alliance of Newport County, Bike Newport, Boys & Girls Club/Working Cities Newport, Church Community Housing Corporation, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Community Center, Fab Newport, Newport Mental Health, Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence, Sankofa Community Connection, and Worldways Social Marketing, with other contributing local organizations.

This report is an outgrowth of a Community Climate Resiliency project funded by the Rhode Island Department of Health and launched in early 2019 – just before the gas outage that began suddenly on January 21, 2019 presented an unexpected case study of the city's emergency planning and preparedness for residents of the Newport HEZ's neighborhoods. Because ongoing climate change is going to bring more frequent and more intense storms and other extreme weather events to the city, residents' recommendations propose next steps to emergency planners and policymakers at the city and state level, including resident participation in emergency planning as well as support for community-based resident-led emergency preparation and response.



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The week-long January 2019 gas outage in Newport revealed key weaknesses in the current systems for emergency planning, preparation, and response system that limited its ability to serve all city residents equitably and effectively. For those in the North End and West Broadway neighborhoods of the Newport Health Equity Zone (HEZ), the frustrations, hardships, and potential dangers during the outage were heightened. Learning the lessons of that week are vital to protecting safety and health—and lives—in and beyond the HEZ community.

The report's findings highlighted:

- Gaps and barriers in the city's ability to serve all HEZ residents, provide timely and consistent information, and meet their basic human needs (shelter, food, transportation, and childcare),
- Assets within the HEZ including deep local knowledge, social cohesion, and skills that enabled communication, collaboration, and creative solutions to emergent problems during the emergency,
- The extra financial burdens and differential treatment that HEZ faced during the emergency,
- The Florence Gray Center's key role as a community hub,
- The HEZ office's key role as an information exchange, a convener for problem-solvers, and a source of advocacy for HEZ residents, and
- The need for meaningful community involvement and leadership to make sure that future emergency planning, preparation and response is equitable and effective.

Because ongoing climate change is going to bring more frequent and more intense storms to Newport as well as other extreme weather events, residents' recommendations call on emergency planners and policymakers at the city and state level to work directly with the community in emergency planning, preparation, and response, as well as providing support for community-based, resident-led emergency preparation and response at the neighborhood level.





## Lessons from HEZ Residents' Experience During the Gas Outage & Recommendations for the Future

As an unexpected test run of the current emergency planning, preparation, and operations, the weeklong January 2019 gas outage in Newport revealed key weaknesses in that system's ability to serve all residents equitably and effectively. The outage left 7000 households and businesses across the city — an estimated 10,000 people — without heat and many without hot water. Affected Newport residents had disparate experiences, depending on their resources and vulnerabilities. For many residents of the Newport Health Equity Zone (HEZ), gaps in and barriers to access to basic information as well as shelter, food, transportation, and childcare led to a series of frustrations, hardships, and potential dangers.<sup>1</sup>

Because ongoing climate change is going to bring more frequent and more intense storms to Newport as well as other extreme weather events, residents' recommendations call on emergency planners and policymakers at the city and state level to work directly with the community in emergency planning, preparation, and response, as well as support for community-based resident-led emergency preparation and response at the neighborhood level.

***Learning the lessons of that week are vital to protecting safety and health — and lives — in and beyond the HEZ community.***

This incident may not have had all the features for modeling a future catastrophe; compared to a powerful hurricane, for instance, it was far from a worst-case scenario. But as a precursor of future climate-change-related disasters, it pulled back the curtain on the fragility of the city's emergency protocols for its most vulnerable residents. Learning

the lessons of that week are vital to protecting safety and health — and lives — in and beyond the HEZ community.



The response of HEZ residents and staff during the crisis demonstrated the assets already existing in the HEZ community: deep local knowledge, solidarity, and skill sets that enabled creative and targeted problem-solving when other systems faltered. This experience demonstrated both the capacity and the imperative for meaningful HEZ involvement and leadership in emergency planning and preparation in substantive ways that reduce risk, increase equity, and promote effectiveness in emergency response. The key lesson from the gas outage is that community-driven emergency planning and preparation in collaboration and coordination with public agencies will be necessary to improving outcomes during (and after) the deeply disruptive and dangerous extreme weather events that lie ahead.

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<sup>1</sup> A note of clarification: the phrase "Health Equity Zone" (or the abbreviation "HEZ") tends to be used interchangeably in three ways, referring to the geographical area where HEZ residents live, to the HEZ office in the Florence Gray Center in the North End and its staff (some of whom are HEZ residents), and to the HEZ collaborative of partner organizations. This report makes every effort to keep those references distinct.



## Equity & Community Climate Resilience

HEZ's work is embedded in a public-health framework, recognizing that disparities in health outcomes in different communities are the result of the social determinants of health—that is, the underlying systemic inequities of race, economics, gender, and other sources of injustice that increase both individual and community vulnerability. Those vulnerabilities are heightened by climate-crisis-related impacts and their consequences—not only during acute emergencies but daily as seas rise, heat climbs, and altered weather patterns begin to affect water and food supplies as well as human health. In addition, vulnerable communities

*are often the last [ones] supported in the event of an emergency. These communities also generally have less access to resources to respond and recover. Achieving community resilience requires equitably supporting all members of the community, and prioritizing those who experience greater risk to their homes, their jobs, their communities, and their health.*<sup>2</sup>

The tragic experiences of the most vulnerable New Orleans communities during and after Hurricane Katrina still serve as a touchstone for the human cost of the absence of emergency planning, preparation, and management for lower-income residents and communities of color.<sup>3</sup>

A brief portrait of who lives in the HEZ illustrates Newport's demographic disparities. The HEZ district encompasses two census tracts, corresponding to the North End and Broadway neighborhoods, with the city's highest concentrations of poverty and most of its Latino, African-American, and mixed-race residents; about 15 percent of HEZ residents are Spanish-speaking. Infrastructure barriers, most visibly the elevated Pell Bridge entrance and exit ramps, isolate the northernmost end of the district from downtown Newport, leading some observers to regard it as a “frontier” rather than a neighborhood of over 4000 residents (the HEZ district as a whole is home to just under 8500). Even though

<sup>2</sup> *Resilience Hubs: Shifting Power to Communities and Increasing Community Capacity*, by Kristin Baja, Urban Sustainability Directors Network (2018), p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> These residents were left to suffer the worst of the storm, with resulting loss of life. Areas with high economic value had been protected with reinforced infrastructure, but not the low-lying historically-black neighborhoods; delays in rebuilding those devastated areas continue, and many displaced residents have not been able to return.

the North End hosts Miantonomi Park, the HEZ has the least open space and the least tree canopy in the city. The prospect of intensive development in the North End associated with the city's “Innovation District” (and the federally-designated Opportunity Zone) has raised concerns about pressure on existing affordable housing and future displacement through gentrification, as well as lack of access to potential future well-paying jobs or amenities.

“Resilience,” and particularly “community climate resilience,” are terms not always used with precision. A helpful definition comes from the *Urban Sustainability Directors Network's 2017 Guide to Equitable, Community-Driven Climate Preparedness Planning*, explaining, “Community resilience is the ability to anticipate, accommodate, and positively adapt to or thrive amidst changing climate conditions, while enhancing quality of life, reliable systems, economic vitality, and conservation of resources...[It] can be enhanced through greater social cohesion, strong partnerships, and greater access to resources such as food, transportation, shelter, and other services.”<sup>4</sup> Resilience requires “community capacity to plan for, respond to, and recover from stressors and shocks,” which themselves have important distinctions:

*Shocks are major disruptions such as storms, heat waves, or other extreme weather events—often intensified by climate change—that can disrupt a variety of critical systems. Stressors refer to the everyday issues that make people and communities more vulnerable to those shocks, including...poverty, aging infrastructure, and unemployment—all of which are intensified by shocks and make it more difficult to respond and recover.*<sup>5</sup>

The shocks of disasters also may lead to other consequences: an elevated risk of domestic violence, the individual and social impacts of disruption and displacement, a sudden jump in financial insecurity for reasons outside any individual's control.

Thus an equitable approach to community climate resiliency is indispensable to the public emergency-planning and -preparation process before the shock of a climate-intensified disaster—as well as management during and recovery after—adds pressure to existing

<sup>4</sup> *Resilience Hubs*, p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> *Resilience Hubs*, p. 6.

stressors. Moreover, community climate resilience is fundamentally linked to an equitable approach to development, because “[a] more resilient community also includes basic elements of community quality of life, such as greater access to jobs, more affordable housing, strengthening infrastructure, and stronger social support systems.”



***An equitable approach to community climate resiliency is indispensable to the public emergency-planning and preparation process before the shock of a climate-intensified disaster adds pressure to existing stressors.***

### ***Equity & Effectiveness in Emergency Planning & Preparedness: A Framework***

At the onset of the gas outage, emergency interventions seemed to rest on the assumption that all Newport residents had the same options for protecting themselves and their families during a public emergency. However, these responses did not take into ample consideration the specific needs of more vulnerable residents, resulting in gaps in and barriers to key resources. HEZ assets were mobilized spontaneously to help fill those gaps and overcome those barriers, and could be mobilized in the future in a more intentional way. In pursuit of both equity and effectiveness in future emergency planning and preparation, it will be critical “to establish a more community-focused approach to emergency management by willingly inviting to the table a wide array of key stakeholders, including citizens as legitimate and equitable partners and assets in the process.”<sup>6</sup> Meaningful community involvement will require substantive changes in traditional top-down government-centered “silo of emergency management” and the “how” of emergency-planning policies and practices:

*Engaging the community entails more than an invitation to the discussion. Inclusion must acknowledge and emphasize community knowledge and other assets, as well as enact a truly collaborative process between all stakeholders. This requires early and sincere outreach, reflective listening, demonstrating patience in relationship-building, acknowledging deficits, practicing transparency in process, sharing the true rationale behind policy, and equitable evaluation of progress toward mutually agreeable goals.<sup>7</sup>*

The magnitude and frequency of climate-crisis-driven events will present an ever-growing threat to communities unprepared at both the neighborhood scale — with the likelihood that local residents may well be on their own for some period of time — and uncoordinated with other levels of emergency management. In anticipation of this hazardous environment,

*[g]overnment emergency management agencies must learn to let go of the need to control and micromanage community[-]preparedness activities and instead find ways to incentivize citizen participation to ensure a creative flow of ideas during problem solving as well as enable community ownership of solutions.<sup>8</sup>*

HEZ residents have already begun a conversation about emergency preparation and mutual aid at the community level, in collaboration with public agencies.

<sup>6</sup> Paul A. Biedrzycki and Raisa Koltun, “Integration of Social Determinants of Community Preparedness and Resiliency in 21st[-]Century Emergency Management Planning,” *Homeland Security Affairs*, Vol. 8, Article 14 (August 2012), <https://www.hsaj.org/articles/228> (retrieved September 23, 2019), p.1.

<sup>7</sup> Biedrzycki and Kolton, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Biedrzycki and Kolton, p. 3.



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## CORE PRINCIPLES OF EQUITY IN EMERGENCY PLANNING & MANAGEMENT<sup>9</sup>

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Basic human rights — as well as environmental and climate justice — demand that policies and practices:

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➔ **ENSURE**

that principles of **equity, justice, inclusion, transparency,** and **accountability** govern all aspects of emergency management.

➔ **EMBODY**

a **spirit of care and cooperation** among people and communities: sharing knowledge, resources, and mutual aid.

➔ **ASSURE**

that **community leadership** informs every aspect of the emergency planning and management, including community-designed planning, response, and recovery.

➔ **RECOGNIZE**

that **people have a right to the resources** required to create productive, dignified, and ecologically-sustainable livelihoods.

➔ **UPHOLD**

**peoples' rights to land, clean water, food,** and **other resources** needed to survive and live well.

➔ **DO EVERYTHING POSSIBLE**

to **prevent climate disasters** from happening.

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<sup>9</sup> Excerpted from the 2018 “action toolkit” published by the National Association for the Association of Colored People (NAACP), *In the Eye of the Storm: A People’s Guide to Transforming Crisis & Advancing Equity in the Disaster Continuum*, p. 21 (emphasis added).

## The January 2019 Gas Outage Experience in the Newport HEZ

On Monday, January 21, Aquidneck Island customers of the utility company National Grid began losing their natural-gas service. National Grid shut down gas lines to 7000 buildings in Newport as a safety precaution, and Newport City Manager Joseph Nicholson declared a state of emergency. Soon after, Governor Gina Raimondo held a press conference and, emphasizing that it was the coldest night of 2019 so far, announced that the island's official shelter had opened and that National Grid would reimburse residents who checked into hotels and used ride-hailing services.<sup>10</sup>

The process of shutting down and then re-opening gas lines for the 10,000 affected residents took a week to complete.<sup>11</sup> During that time, emergency arrangements for shelter, food, transportation, and childcare took multiple forms with changing means of access. To publicize and track these evolving measures, public officials relied on traditional and social media as well as the city's voluntary alert system, assuming that the information transmitted would be universally available, clear, and accurate.

On the outage's first full day, National Grid announced that it would make hotel vouchers available, rather than requiring affected residents to expend their own resources and await reimbursement. Transportation options were set up through the United Way's 211 line or the 800 number for the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority (RIPTA). Midweek, RIPTA shifted one bus route to reach the shelter, and made certain routes free for affected residents. The Red Cross provided meals at the shelter, although few residents ultimately slept there, and gave out gift cards underwritten by National Grid and others. A patchwork of other meal sites and food trucks was organized over the next several days, and some donors — including caterers and Mayor Jamie Bova — provided food, some delivered to the hotels where residents were staying.

It was a challenging week for affected HEZ residents. Paying for lodging up front even with the promise of reimbursement was burdensome or impossible for many HEZ residents, putting those funds out of reach for other expenses such as food. At the hotels, they also reported being asked for widely varying deposits on their cards (even within the same hotel — as much as \$310 or as little as \$50). When hotel vouchers became available, the two distribution points — the island's shelter and a downtown hotel — lacked a public-transit connection. At the same time, getting the access code for Uber or Lyft meant going through 211, which did not always pick up the phone or return a message. Not all bus-drivers were aware of RIPTA's free-ride policy for affected residents on selected routes.

***On Monday, January 21, Aquidneck Island customers of the utility company National Grid began losing their natural-gas service. National Grid shut down gas lines to 7000 buildings in Newport as a safety precaution, and the Newport City Manager declared a state of emergency.***

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/GinaMRaimondo/videos/389216158306753/>

<sup>11</sup> Some gas lines serving Aquidneck Island were not interrupted: the high-pressure lines were not affected, but low-pressure lines lost most or all their pressure and had to be shut down and emptied. This sequence required National Grid to make two trips to each customer: first to turn off each meter and close off the service (as a safety precaution); then again, after the system was re-pressurized, to reconnect each building and do a safety check as heat was restored and appliances such as furnaces and stoves turned back on.

Another housing-related issue arose at the outset. According to residents, housing managers at some Newport Housing Authority properties and other privately-managed local housing developments did not have reliable information about the status of their buildings and whether residents should seek shelter.<sup>12</sup> However, starting on the first night of the emergency, Housing Authority staff began circulating throughout their properties, checking on residents' safety and making sure they had information about where to find shelter and other resources. Throughout the week, Housing Authority staff continued to knock on doors, keeping a close eye on residents who chose to shelter in place, giving out gift cards (and sometimes hot meals), and delivering copies of HEZ-generated flyers with updated information.<sup>13</sup>

Food access was highly problematic for many HEZ residents. As noted, relying on reimbursement from National Grid for expenses meant spending money first.<sup>14</sup> Hotels had different policies about providing a complementary breakfast. A public (but inaccurate) announcement that any affected resident could be served a meal at one particular hotel created confusion about who would or would not be fed. In a decentralized system, serving the Red Cross' prepared meals at the island's shelter was not a way to meet the need. By the end of the week, food trucks paid for by National Grid were stationed downtown to serve displaced residents, but sometimes ran out of food. Both the schedule and the locations were subject to change, and residents in the Middletown cluster of hotels had a longer wait for that service.

In addition, even if they were not displaced, many HEZ school-aged children and youth who ordinarily ate breakfast and lunch at their schools (and snacks or meals at after-school programs) were cut off by school closures. The Newport Public Schools made two meals a day available at the North End's Florence Gray Center, through the schools' food vendor, and a catering company donated regularly there as well, although food safety became an issue. Keeping the building open for at least part of the weekend and food available was a logistical scramble for local organizations, which pulled together at the HEZ office to make arrangements.

With the public schools closed and limited childcare sites in the HEZ district (for example, the Martin Luther King Jr. Community Center could operate only in the half of its building that had electric rather than gas heat), many adults faced a difficult choice, if their workplace was open: between being able to supervise

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<sup>12</sup> Residents reported that in some cases, the Housing Authority turned off electricity without explanation, leading residents to believe they needed to seek shelter although their gas lines were unaffected.

<sup>13</sup> Procedures already were in place for frail elderly, disabled, and homebound city residents. National Grid had a list of medical "critical care" customers and the city and state had access to a voluntary Special Needs Registry for wellness checks carried out by the National Guard, State Police, and trained volunteers. In this case the emergency was concentrated in one part of the state and a subset of one city, and that support might not be available during a more extensive crisis on the island or across Rhode Island (or beyond). Also, some staff in local social-service agencies had to cope with their own displacement – a situation that could be easily repeated in another disaster.

<sup>14</sup> Users of the Supplementary Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) faced other bureaucratic hardships. Besides the extra pressure on food purchases, the SNAP monthly benefits schedule had been disrupted by the federal government shutdown in December 2018 and January 2019. Funds for February appeared on Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) cards 10 days early—coincidentally, just before the gas outage—but had to last until March.

children or missing work.<sup>15</sup> Finding alternate spaces was difficult for social-service agencies, which had to meet regulatory and liability standards, although East Bay Community Action Program (EBCAP) ultimately did succeed in setting up a location at one of the hotels. EBCAP staff also noted the signs of stress in both children and adults who were displaced.<sup>16</sup>

A common theme among HEZ residents was that they experienced differential treatment at the downtown hotels. Residents with vouchers were aware of the wide variation, within the same hotel, on credit- or debit-card “holds” required at check-in, without a clear policy. They also described being made to feel conspicuous and unwelcome, or being urged to check out of the hotel early, before National Grid had confirmed that heat at home had been restored. Because of the pattern of these incidents, Newport state senator Dawn Euer contacted the Rhode Island attorney general’s office, which has interviewed HEZ residents about their experiences.

***The scarcest resource during the outage seemed to be timely and reliable information.***

The scarcest resource during the outage seemed to be timely and reliable information. Not all residents were reached by the traditional or social media outlets that public officials and National Grid relied on, such as newscasts, televised or livestreamed press conferences, local radio, and official Facebook sites; in particular, some elderly residents without phones or an internet connection were less able to follow the changing availability of key resources. In addition, contradictory reports and announcements throughout the week from a variety of sources (including public officials, websites, and rumors) created confusion. City officials expressed frustration that residents had not signed up for the Code Red emergency-alert system, but even one such official admitted not to having subscribed beforehand.

Meanwhile, only some materials were translated into Spanish on the city’s Facebook page, and National Grid distributed one brochure in Spanish. Newport Public Schools reached out to its Spanish-speaking families with translated robo-calls and EBCAP staff working in the schools made direct contact in both languages with families in their food program; thus Spanish-speaking families connected to the school system had a better opportunity for receiving information and support.

The HEZ office at the Florence Gray Center became a key point of contact for residents seeking information and help, as well as a communication channel to and from public officials. HEZ staff and residents used these informal networks to find out and let others know what was happening on the ground. On the outage’s second full day, HEZ launched a Facebook “Gas Outage: What We Know” group as an interactive venue for sharing, updating, and correcting vital information. HEZ staff and residents also assembled, printed, and delivered daily flyers for residents at the hotels, with Spanish translation.

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<sup>15</sup> Several days into the outage, state officials announced that displaced workers could apply for unemployment benefits without delay (and that employers’ costs would be absorbed by the state).

<sup>16</sup> Focus-group Interview, Feb. 20, 2019.

...I was in the apartments of those that lived there with a very small old tube TV [who] don't have the Internet. Some of them don't have phones...[W]e kept saying, "Well, if you look for the updates..." "How am I going to get those updates?" So HEZ's [information] sheet that they put together, we kept hand-delivering it as it was updated. Good old-fashioned knocking on doors: "Here's the latest and the greatest. Do you need someone to come back and help connect you with this?" "Can we arrange for a ride to a shelter?" "Do you need food?" Just grassroots every door repeatedly, 235 households until the event was over. And it worked.

– Housing Authority of the City of Newport staff <sup>20</sup>

...I called 211 on the first day...And they didn't call me back at all, at all... nothing, radio silence.

– HEZ resident <sup>18</sup>

When HEZ posted, I immediately shared.

– HEZ resident & Martin Luther King Jr. Community Center staff <sup>21</sup>



**INFORMATION**

It was word-of-mouth the whole time with me. It was word-of-mouth the whole time.

– HEZ resident <sup>17</sup>

Nothing was in Spanish. That was the principal issue.

– Bilingual advocate at St. Joseph's Catholic Church <sup>19</sup>

That [first] night... we have to sleep [at home], my family had to sleep together...in the same bed because we were freezing, it was really, really cold.

– HEZ resident & Working Cities staff member <sup>22</sup>



**SHELTER**

[On the first day, a staff member at the front desk at one of the hotels], he never told me that they had vouchers [being distributed on site] and that they were giving out room stays. Never, ever welcomed me to that...I had been there twice with no line, and they still didn't give me a room... So I could have been checked in and ready to go at 1 o'clock when I went in there versus waiting until almost 6 o'clock to get my family settled [at a different hotel].

– HEZ resident & staff member <sup>23</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Interview, March 1, 2019.

<sup>18</sup> HEZ focus-group Interview, February 13, 2019.

<sup>19</sup> Interview, March 10, 2019.

<sup>20</sup> Interview, February 14, 2019.

<sup>21</sup> Interview, February 26, 2019.

<sup>22</sup> Interview, February 12, 2019.

<sup>23</sup> Interview, February 5, 2019.

We broke up all the hotels and tried to figure out which hotel had breakfast, which hotel was offering some type of dinner. We were making phone calls. We were also looking at the location of each...[W]e knew four of those hotels were on West Main [Road in Middletown, where some NHEZ residents staying with vouchers] right near each other. [There] doesn't need to [be] a food truck at every single hotel there. [There] can [be] one food truck for the four hotels that are all in walking distance. Then we had reached out to the hotels and they were all gonna be willing to open their doors. Even if [those residents were] not staying at that hotel, [the hotel staff] would be willing to have them sit in their eating area if it was closer, wherever you wanted to walk into.

– HEZ staff<sup>26</sup>

It was really hard to get food because my car wasn't working, so luckily the Newport Housing Authority delivered some snacks to us [at the hotel]...The food trucks that came, they ran out of food early so my kids and I went without for a lot of time. We were told that there were shuttle buses over to [another hotel] to eat, then we were told you can't go eat at [that hotel] – it was super-confusing. I would ask front-desk staff at the hotel if they knew when Red Cross is coming or food trucks were coming they didn't know and then the National Grid staff that was supposed to be there was not there most of the time and they didn't know any information either. My kids and I had one meal, sometimes two per day on a good day.

– HEZ resident<sup>24</sup>



## FOOD

...[T]he third day there was a pregnant mom in the waiting area who was crying because she had no food for herself and her three children...She was afraid to ask because she didn't want to feel like — she was just embarrassed to ask. So I said, "If you don't mind, I will advocate for you." So I go to the front desk and I tell them what she told me. He comes back with one parfait. I said, "I'm sorry, but am I supposed to give a pregnant mom and her three children one parfait?" And he was, like, "Well, that's all we can give her." I said, "You have a whole kitchen. I'm not gonna argue with you. Perhaps you're just doing your job..." [She] got food because we sent her some bananas and granola and yogurts to her room...But it just made me extremely uncomfortable.

– HEZ resident and staff<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Personal communication, February 13, 2019.

<sup>25</sup> Interview, February 5, 2019.

<sup>26</sup> HEZ focus-group interview, February 14, 2019.





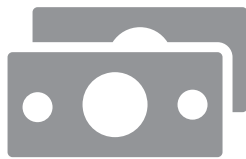
**TRANSPORTATION**

*I tried calling the RIPTA 800 number. As far as I know, I still have a message hanging out there.*  
 – City official<sup>27</sup>

*I had [home visiting staff saying that the] number one [issue was] emotional stress and kids just being off the wall, basically, and the stress that that has on the parents.*  
 – East Bay Community Action Program staff<sup>28</sup>



**CHILDCARE**



**FINANCIAL BURDENS**

*A friend posted about the possibility of getting a hotel room voucher ...[A]ll the other sources kept saying that you could get reimbursed and I knew that I could not afford that at the time so that message didn't apply to me.*  
 – HEZ resident<sup>29</sup>

*Some families spent their whole winter budget at the hotel.*  
 – Spanish-speaking resident<sup>31</sup>

*We were told at the [Gaudet] middle school [shelter] that [the hotel] required a \$50 deposit. When we got to the hotel we were asked for \$150 instead and I let them know that they told us it was only \$50 and that's all I had in my account.*  
 – HEZ resident<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Interview, February 22, 2019.

<sup>28</sup> EBCAP focus-group interview, February 20, 2019.

<sup>29</sup> Personal communication.

<sup>30</sup> Personal communication.

<sup>31</sup> Interview, March 10, 2019.

*[T]hat morning the phone [in our hotel room] is ringing...It's one of the employees... portraying like he was National Grid. I don't know his last name. He works at the [hotel]. He's front desk...stating that he was National Grid and that we needed to go home to check to see if our gas was on. Now I know because National Grid is contacting us through e-mail. But he was going around calling all the other rooms. The same thing happened with my friend — stating that his name was [X] and he works for National Grid. When questioned about it, that's when he had stated, "Well, my name is [X]. I'm an employee of [the hotel] calling on behalf of National Grid," when that's not what was said the first time when we answered the phone... —just, "Go home. Your gas is on. So you can go home."*

– HEZ resident <sup>34</sup>

*The hotel asked us to leave on Monday at 3 PM when they deactivated our room key. We were told that we can stay until Tuesday morning originally so basically we had no place to go. So we went back home without a visit from National Grid to turn on our heat for us and get our appliances done. [At] about 11 something p.m. that night we were able to get a representative to come and help us out but we went home in the cold.*

– HEZ resident <sup>35</sup>

*It was — the feeling that you had was like really not supposed to be there, you didn't pay. That's the kinda feeling like — nobody said it, but you could feel it. Even with the cleaning staff...like it was just a free ticket. It's just the way you felt 'cause nobody really...said anything to you.*

– HEZ resident <sup>32</sup>



**DIFFERENTIAL TREATMENT**

*One VISTA [volunteer] went to check the number of residents registered [at one of the hotels]. A manager checking in a couple ahead of her said, "There are a lot of people who are not normally here," in a condescending way. Written down, it could be interpreted differently, but the tone was there.*

– Working Cities staff member <sup>33</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Interview, March 1, 2019.

<sup>33</sup> Interview, February 11, 2019.

<sup>34</sup> Interview, February 19, 2019.

<sup>35</sup> Personal communication.



## The gas-outage emergency revealed or highlighted:

- Gaps and barriers in the city's ability to serve all HEZ residents, provide timely and consistent information, and meet their basic human needs (shelter, food, transportation, and childcare),
- Assets within the HEZ including deep local knowledge, social cohesion, and skills that enabled communication, collaboration, and creative solutions to emergent problems during the emergency,
- The extra financial burdens and differential treatment that HEZ faced during the emergency,
- The Florence Gray Center's key role as a community hub,
- The HEZ office's key role as an information exchange, a convener for problem-solvers, and a source of advocacy for HEZ residents, and
- The need for meaningful community involvement and leadership to make sure that future emergency planning and management is effective and equitable.



## Gaps & Barriers

### INFORMATION

- Public officials depended on methods of communication that did not reach HEZ residents who did not use the media that the city and state expected would reach all affected Newport residents, particularly some of the most vulnerable residents who may not have had access to computer or cellphone technology.
- Communication in Spanish to the Spanish-speaking community was episodic and partial, and residents interviewed still did not know after the crisis had passed that they could file claims for reimbursement for expenses or apply for unemployment compensation.

### SHELTER

- The designated regional shelter is not on an existing bus line, and would not have been able to absorb the number of Newport residents affected.
- The original option for shelter that required the use of credit or debit cards at local hotels threatened to create a two-tiered system where Newport residents with greater resources went to hotels while other residents were allocated to the regional shelter.



### *Gaps & Barriers* (continued)

- While the ad-hoc hotel-voucher system was welcome for HEZ residents who had no heat or hot water at home, obtaining them could be difficult, mainly because they were being distributed at locations without public transportation and sometimes because of contradictory information about where and how to get them.
- Dispersing HEZ residents to hotels — without tracking information — created a cascading effect of difficulties in meeting those residents' other needs during the emergency.

### FOOD

- Ad-hoc food arrangements for displaced HEZ residents as well as for affected HEZ residents sheltering in place were reactive and required creative intervention by local emergency managers, agencies, and organizations, beyond National Grid's reimbursement of food receipts, gift-card distribution, and sponsored food trucks (about which residents were not always effectively notified).
- Assorted methods of decentralized food distribution brought on not only logistical but in some instances regulatory food-safety issues.

### TRANSPORTATION

- The United Way's 211 line and RIPTA's 800 number were not always successful connections to mobility.
- The range of RIPTA services advertised as free were more limited in practice (available on only some routes, and depending on driver awareness).
- Instructions for using ride-hailing services were confusing and shifting over the course of the week.

### CHILDCARE

- With schools and many childcare sites closed, many adults faced a difficult choice if their workplace was open between being able to supervise children or missing work.
- Creating alternative sites was a daunting challenge due to regulatory and liability issues.
- Children and families suffered stress during the prolonged outage.

### FINANCIAL BURDENS

- The reimbursement system for shelter, food, and transportation created financial burdens and confusion for HEZ (and Spanish-speaking) residents, some of whom did not know they could be reimbursed or could not wait for reimbursement.
- Supplementary Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) users faced additional hardships, because of extra pressure on immediate food purchases.



### **Gaps & Barriers** (continued)

#### DIFFERENTIAL TREATMENT

- Interviewees described receiving what they saw as differential treatment shared by other HEZ residents also using hotel vouchers, including (a) a wide range of credit-card “holds” asked for at the same hotel, varying from a standard “hold” for incidentals, (b) a sometimes unwelcoming or even hostile atmosphere, and (c) being encouraged to give up their hotel rooms before confirmation that their service at home had been restored.



The Florence Gray Center, 1 York Street, Newport, RI



### **Assets**

#### LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

- The HEZ team and other organizations and agencies that had deep local on-the-ground knowledge were effective in assisting HEZ residents through formal and informal networks, and with targeted *ad-hoc* solutions to emergent problems.

#### SOCIAL COHESION

- The combination of spontaneous and organized work at the grassroots level during the gas outage demonstrated the reservoir of social cohesion that can be drawn on for community-based emergency planning and climate resilience.

#### FLORENCE GRAY CENTER

- The Florence Gray Center was the single place in the city’s North End that HEZ residents could walk in and ask questions, find activities geared toward out-of-school youth, and get two meals a day locally.

## Informing, Convening, & Advocating for HEZ Residents

While this report's goal was to focus not on the HEZ office but rather on the systems that did or did not serve residents well, it is important to document that the HEZ team became a crucial—if informal and improvisational—part of the emergency-management infrastructure, helping both HEZ residents and public officials navigate in real time. HEZ staff (some of whom are HEZ residents) responded as more residents sought reliable information or help with unmet basic needs. As the scale and scope of the gas outage became more evident, the HEZ team stepped in as a communication center for HEZ residents as well as city and state officials; a convener of public officials, other agencies and organizations, and a National Grid representative to address gaps in and barriers to services; and an advocate for residents' immediate issues. One staff member later called this process “heart work”—both expressing and building social cohesion at a moment of crisis.<sup>36</sup>

Residents and staff as well as other volunteers together took on a series of problem-solving tasks, including what became the daily creation and distribution (and translation) of flyers to HEZ residents at the hotels. HEZ staff also created the “Gas Outage: What We Know” group on its Facebook page. This platform was open to the community and displayed the cycles of contact between HEZ residents at the hotels and elsewhere, staff at a range of organizations, and other key informants, as well as other “crowd-sourced” contributions of emergent information. The page was continually updated, cross-posting items from the city of Newport, National Grid, and other sources while also verifying and adjusting information as needed. A HEZ staff member later described this communication as a “natural system,” with the capacity to self-correct.<sup>37</sup> HEZ posts also encouraged residents to persist and advocate for themselves in situations where information was fluid and where access to needed resources was in flux.

This experience strongly suggests that the HEZ team should anticipate playing a similar role during future emergencies, especially during the outset when communication and resources lag. The HEZ team also should expect to support residents in producing an emergency-preparation plan, while working with both HEZ residents and public officials to help frame a new set of policies and practices that integrate emergency planning, preparation, and management at multiple levels. HEZ staff already have met with both the Rhode Island Department of Health Center for Emergency Preparedness and Response and the Newport Fire Department to begin conversations about current procedures and future adaptations.

***This experience strongly suggests that the HEZ team should anticipate playing a similar role during future emergencies, especially during the outset when communication and resources lag.***

<sup>36</sup> HEZ staff focus-group interview, February 14, 2019.

<sup>37</sup> HEZ staff focus-group interview, February 13, 2019.



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## RESIDENT RECOMMENDATIONS



In a series of community conversations, HEZ residents reviewed these findings and reflected further on their own experience of the gas outage. The discussion on future climate-intensified emergencies focused on the need for community self-organization and mutual aid while also demanding that public agencies work with HEZ residents equitably and take on their responsibilities more effectively. Residents also identified the Florence Gray Center as an indispensable resource.

One resident emphasized making sure that community leadership is not “an add-on” during an emergency. She proposed a strategy for building a community emergency team: first to “recognize who’s around you,” including residents who may not already see themselves as leaders, and bring together a core group that wants to be involved on the ground.<sup>38</sup> With hands-on training and support, this group could work on an emergency-preparation plan that would coordinate with (but not replace the responsibilities of) public officials and agencies.

In addition, community feedback emphasized the need to set up a single reliable source of information ahead of an emergency and a system that reaches all residents – both citywide and at the HEZ level.

The Florence Gray Center’s key role as the only community center in the North End (already a warming and cooling center, although not on a 24-hour basis) was another common thread: its place in both the HEZ and the city’s emergency plans, with a restored kitchen facility, strategic use of the gym, enhanced communication capacity, and a well-thought-out coordination function between community-based teams and public officials and agencies.<sup>39</sup>

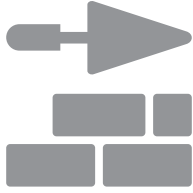
### ***A set of recommendations emerged from these discussions:***

- to lift up community leadership,
- to create community-based emergency planning and response teams,
- to advocate for public agencies to adopt emergency responses that specifically serve HEZ residents, including more effective use of the Florence Gray Center, and
- to challenge public officials to integrate HEZ into the city’s emergency planning, preparation, and response before, during, and after disasters occur.

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<sup>38</sup> Community conversation, Sept. 9, 2019.

<sup>39</sup> Residents were introduced to the “resilience hub” concept proposed by the Urban Sustainability Directors Network (*Resilience Hubs: Shifting Power to Communities and Increasing Community Capacity*, 2018). In this model, “established, trusted, and community-managed facilities that are used year-round as neighborhood centers” become a platform for emergency preparation, planning, and management at the grassroots level before, during, and after a crisis or disaster. They serve as a base for community training, technical assistance, and decision-making about not only local mobilization but also coordination with public officials. Resilience hubs also would be designed to have the physical capacity to run on alternative sources of energy in an emergency and ideally are converted to be carbon-neutral exemplars of sustainability.



In preparation for the climate-related crises that lie ahead for Newport, lessons from the gas outage should be applied to the future actions that will improve the equity and effectiveness of emergency planning, preparation, and response in the HEZ district and with the HEZ community. HEZ staff and residents must have a seat at that table, and be directly involved in the public review of the city's critique of its own gas-outage experience and the proposed revisions to the framework and the content of new plans.

### ***Meaningful HEZ involvement in the city's emergency planning, preparation, and response review and revision***

- HEZ community (residents and staff) learning about existing policies and practices, then recommending changes that will improve equity and effectiveness
- HEZ community designing a local emergency-preparation plan
- HEZ community negotiating the basis for collaboration with public officials

### ***Florence Gray Center as a key emergency infrastructure***

- HEZ community participation in plans for the Florence Gray Center's role in future emergencies
- Resources equal to the demand that could be put on it

### ***Resources for the HEZ community in emergency planning, preparation, and response at the neighborhood level***

- Training in existing city and state practices in emergency planning, preparation, and management, so that HEZ residents and staff can map out and understand them in order to propose changes
- Technical assistance in best practices in community-level planning, preparation, and management
- Support for staff playing key roles coordinating the community's local response with public officials and agencies during emergencies
- Ongoing training in first aid, CPR, and AED
- Ongoing distribution of emergency radios and other supplies

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## NOTES/NOTAS

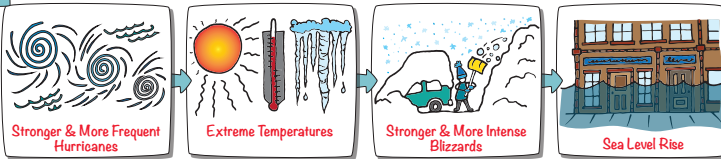
**COMMUNITY REPORT-BACK**  
2019 NEWPORT GAS OUTAGE STUDY



**WHAT ABOUT THE NEXT EMERGENCY?**

After the gas outage, the big question is ... **How prepared are we for large-scale emergencies?** **Our biggest risks are from CLIMATE CHANGE** — the local effects of man-made pollution around the world that are dangerous to you, your family, and your community.

**WHAT CLIMATE-RELATED DISASTERS WILL WE FACE HERE IN NEWPORT?**



**WHEN THESE CLIMATE-RELATED DISASTERS HIT, WHAT IF...**

<p><b>We Lose Power?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No light</li> <li>No TV</li> <li>No radio</li> <li>No Internet</li> <li>No well pumps</li> <li>No home appliances</li> <li>No air-conditioning</li> <li>Limited or no hospital services</li> </ul>	<p><b>We Lose Gas Pressure or Supply?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No heat</li> <li>No cooking</li> <li>No hot water</li> <li>Frozen and/or burst water pipes</li> </ul>	<p><b>There's Widespread Flooding?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Impossible to get off Aquidneck Island</li> <li>Emergency response slow or cut off</li> <li>Isolation — people stuck or stranded</li> <li>Coastal Property Damage</li> </ul>	<p><b>Drinking Water is Contaminated?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Salt water and/or sewage spills over into the city's water supply</li> <li>Drinking water becomes scarce because of over-charging or empty store shelves</li> </ul>	<p><b>Bridges are Closed?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Impossible to get off Aquidneck Island</li> <li>Food, gas, and medical supplies cut off</li> <li>Emergency response slow or cut off</li> <li>Isolation — people stuck or stranded</li> </ul>
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**WHAT WE CAN DO:**

- Prepare to take care of ourselves and our community in an emergency
- Advocate for the resources we need before, during, and after an emergency
- Tell our public officials to plan **WITH** us, not **WITHOUT** us

For more information:  
Newport HEZ Office  
Florence Gray Center  
1 York St., Newport, RI  
jriesman@wrenbo.org  
(401) 236-8344

*Creamos un resumen infografía de dos páginas para ser distribuido a los residentes viviendo en la zona de HEZ, un informe en alentar los residentes en seguir la colaboración y planificación en los casos de emergencias.*

*We created a two-page infographic to distribute to residents throughout the HEZ, summarizing this report and encouraging residents' continued collaboration around emergency planning.*

**COMUNIDAD DE GAS DE 2019**



**¿QUÉ PODEMOS HACER?**

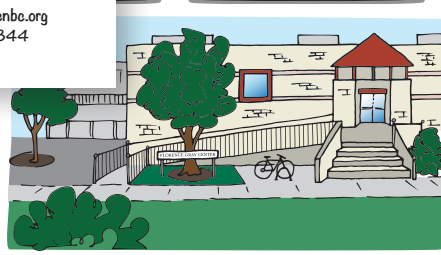
**LAS BRECHAS Y BARRERAS EN LA CAPACIDAD PARA A LOS RESIDENTES DE LA COMUNIDAD Y NECESIDADES HUMANAS BÁSICAS PARA...**



También nos dijeron que algunos miembros del personal del hotel no eran acogedores e incluso hostiles con los miembros de la comunidad cuando necesitaban seguridad y apoyo durante una crisis.

**RECONSTRUIR LOS VALORES DENTRO DE LA COMUNIDAD**

**CENTRO FLORENCE GRAY**



Centro comunitario de información y recursos  
La Oficina HEZ: centro de información  
El único lugar en el North End donde los residentes buscaron ayuda

**HABILIDADES**

- Hacer llegar la información a la gente rápidamente
- Organizando personas
- Solucionar problemas creativamente

En el futuro: Un Centro de Resiliencia — un lugar para que los residentes se preparen y encuentren recursos antes, durante y después

**LO QUE PODEMOS HACER:**

- Prepararnos para cuidarnos a nosotros mismos y a nuestra comunidad en caso de emergencia
- Abogar por los recursos que necesitamos antes, durante y después de una emergencia
- Decir a los funcionarios públicos que planifiquen **CON** nosotros, no **SIN** nosotros

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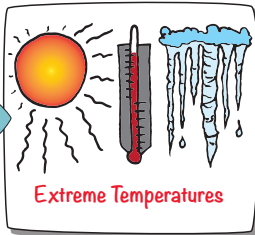
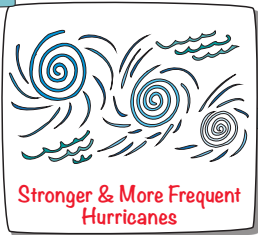
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## WHAT CLIMATE-RELATED DISASTERS WILL WE FACE HERE IN NEWPORT?



# ¿QUÉ PASARA CON LA PRÓXIMA EMERGENCIA?

Después del corte de gas, la gran pregunta es:

¿Estamos preparados para emergencias de gran escala?

Nuestros mayores riesgos son el **CAMBIO CLIMÁTICO** — los efectos de la contaminación producida por el hombre en todo el mundo, y **AQUÍ** en Newport, y son peligros para usted su familia y nuestra comunidad.

## ¿QUE TIPO DE DESASTRES RELACIONADOS CON EL CLIMA PODRA SUFRIR NEWPORT?

