

Disaster readiness in Bay Area assessed MEETING TO FOCUS ON AID TO THE POOR

By Jessie Mangaliman

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The Bay Area may have experience in disasters, but is it prepared enough for the next one -- particularly when it comes to helping the region's poor?

A group of the country's top experts on disaster preparedness will join with Bay Area leaders in a private gathering in Sebastopol over the weekend to assess how well-equipped -- in training and resources -- local communities, businesses and charities will be when another earthquake or similar disaster strikes.

"It's a statistical probability that we'll have a major disaster, because of geography and geology, in the next 30 years," said Anisya Thomas, managing director of the Fritz Institute, a San Francisco-based non-profit organization that helps communities prepare for and respond to disasters.

With a \$208,000 grant -- \$158,000 from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and \$25,000 each from PG&E and the San Francisco Foundation -- the institute is convening disaster experts this weekend along with Bay Area community, civic and business leaders. Thomas said the institute will later issue a report from the conference that could be the basis for critical planning for Bay Area communities.

Palo Alto Mayor Judy Kleinberg will be participating in the conference, which begins Friday.

"The government can only do so much in major disasters," Kleinberg said dur-

ing a telephone news conference Tuesday. Disaster-preparedness at the neighborhood level can help communities "have the knowledge to recover swiftly."

Kleinberg cited "Neighborhood Watch," a police-assisted program to protect communities from criminal activities, as a model for mobilizing neighborhoods to prepare for disasters.

Hurricane Katrina tested the limits of government capacity in disaster response. That disaster's most important lesson is that communities and businesses, with the help of experts, could be better prepared to help themselves and others, said Kathleen Tierney, director of the Natural Hazards Center, a University of Colorado-based research center.

"We know from experience that the first responders in disasters are the residents in affected areas," said Tierney, who has been studying disasters and emergency response for 25 years. "But we also know that the neediest communities are the least prepared."

Small businesses in poor communities, such as food banks that serve the poor, are ill-prepared to cope in a disaster, said Tierney. In her research, she has found these groups don't have enough insurance coverage, contingency plans when the power goes out or employees who are trained in disaster response.

Anne Wilson, CEO of the United Way of the Bay Area, noted other kinds of

businesses that can be vulnerable when disaster strikes. "What about senior centers where the frail are being cared for? Child care centers? Are they prepared to survive the next 72 hours after a disaster?"

These are scenarios that played out with tragic consequences when Katrina struck New Orleans.

Companies and businesses, with help from experts, can find "a higher order of collaboration" with government, communities and other charities, Wilson said.

The weekend's summit can help Bay Area civic and community leaders identify gaps in the region's emergency response plans, said Ophelia Basgal, PG&E vice president for civic partnerships and community initiatives.

Thirty five people -- academic experts on disaster relief and emergency preparedness, state officials, leaders of leading non-profit groups, municipal government officials and business leaders -- are expected to participate in the two-day conference at Quail Hill Conference Center in Sebastopol.