Transforming adversity into opportunity: Bringing resiliency to every community in America

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Eighteen inches of rain in 18 hours.

The wettest year in 140 years.

Three years' worth of rain in one week.

Four major wildfires in four years.

The snippets above come from local leaders from different parts of the country. Like other local officials, each has had to deal directly with the impacts and consequences of disasters, extreme weather and the other vagaries and consequences of climate change. Because of new and increasing threats and risks, many of our cities and counties are being pushed to the breaking point — some facing challenges unlike anything they've seen before. The only rule is that none of us are immune. We are all vulnerable.

"Just [two weeks ago], NOAA reported that extreme weather events caused a staggering $110 billion in damage in 2012, took countless lives and impacted virtually every part of the country," said World Wildlife Fund Director of Renewable Energy Keya Chatterjee. "As greenhouse gas emissions rise from our fossil fuel use, we know that heat waves, severe storms and rising seas will only worsen."

We're at a crossroads. And the choices we make today will determine whether our cities are more resilient or more exposed.

We need strategies to prevent and mitigate disasters to the extent possible, plans and preparations for the inevitable events that will come, and appropriate tools and resources to rebound smarter, greener and better. And that's the mission of the Resilient Communities for America Campaign (RC4A), launched last Monday at the National Press Club.

On behalf of USGBC, I joined with colleagues from ICLEI-USA, the National League of Cities and the World Wildlife Fund to kick off this national campaign that is focused on infusing resiliency into the fabric of every community in America. Our launch event featured five courageous local leaders who are committed to taking action: Mayor Vincent Gray of Washington, D.C.; Mayor Franklin Cownie of Des Moines, Iowa; Mayor John Cook of El Paso, Texas; Mayor Joy Cooper of Hallandale Beach, Fla.; and Supervisor Salud Carbajal of Santa Barbara County, Calif.

Built on the shoulders of local elected officials, the campaign is leveraging the leadership of mayors and county officials through our Resilient Communities for America Agreement. This historic agreement is a national sign-on letter for mayors and county leaders who pledge to create more resilient cities, towns and counties — and share their challenges and successes to help other local governments.

"By signing the Resilient Communities for America Agreement, these elected officials have demonstrated their leadership, which will in turn inspire hundreds more cities and counties to take action and sign on," said Michael Schmitz, executive director of ICLEI USA.

Already, we have more than 50 inaugural signatories who have signed the agreement. "These local leaders are pledging to take action and not just offer platitudes," said Clarence Anthony, executive director of the National League of Cities. "By participating in Resilient Communities for America Campaign, these leaders are demonstrating great foresight that will save communities long-term dollars and even lives."

With the leadership of local action, RC4A will inspire greater movement on resilience and provide local governments with free resources to help them achieve their goals. As the chair of RC4A, Mayor Kevin Johnson of Sacramento, Calif., said, “A new national movement is emerging, led by mayors who believe that now is the time to take powerful, proactive steps to safeguard our communities, adapt to extreme weather and energy challenges, and transform adversity into economic opportunity.”

By cutting through the pervasiveness of pessimism, these leaders are finding solutions and getting real about readiness and planning. They’re finding new ways to assess and address risk. They’re fortifying critical infrastructure, improving building codes and making planning a priority.

It’s pretty simple: preparedness pays back. It makes business sense and, more importantly, it save lives. For every dollar spent on disaster preparedness, a community saves $4 in avoided costs. That’s a testament to the return on investment of these future-proof solutions.

As I said at the event, this effort helps make us stronger — not because of national policy, but because of local commitment. This campaign is about laying the cornerstone for creating communities built to last.

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