From Vulnerability to Voice: How Riverside's Emergency Preparedness Alliance Is Redefining Community Resilience

By: Misha R. McNabb, MA-EML, CIP, VT-CEMD, NRP

11/04/2026

What happens when a flood-vulnerable community becomes an active partner in developing its own emergency preparedness strategies? In Woodstock, Vermont, the answer is the Riverside Emergency Preparedness Alliance (REPA), a collaborative grassroots initiative demonstrating how resident engagement, public health preparedness, and community partnerships can transform vulnerability into meaningful action.

Nestled along the Ottauquechee River in Woodstock, Vermont, Riverside Mobile Home Park is a community familiar with flooding. Tropical Storm Irene in 2011 and subsequent flooding events, including the historic July 2023 floods, reinforced the challenges of living in a flood-prone location. For residents, these hazards represent more than geographic vulnerabilities. They threaten housing stability, financial security, personal safety, and the ability to recover from repeated disasters.

Yet Riverside's story is becoming one of empowerment rather than perpetual vulnerability. Through collaboration among Riverside residents, Sustainable Woodstock, the Thompson Senior Center, the Woodstock HUB, Senior Solutions, and the Upper Valley Medical Reserve Corps (UV MRC), a community preparedness initiative evolved into the Riverside Emergency Preparedness Alliance. The project brought residents and stakeholders together to

develop an actionable emergency plan, deliver targeted preparedness education, and strengthen relationships supporting immediate safety and long-term resilience.

The initiative also coincided with a successful $200,000 grant award for engineering and flood mitigation planning, drew attention from state leadership, and was documented by a film crew for a forthcoming documentary. For those of us involved, REPA has become considerably more than another completed emergency preparedness project. It represents a model we hope to replicate throughout Vermont.

Building Preparedness With Residents, Not For Them

The Riverside initiative began with a fundamental recognition. Emergency preparedness plans are only effective when they reflect the realities of the people expected to implement them. Mobile home communities may experience overlapping vulnerabilities, including flood exposure, limited financial resources, transportation challenges, accessibility considerations, and barriers to receiving timely emergency information. Conventional preparedness approaches frequently assume residents have reliable transportation, financial flexibility, and somewhere safe to evacuate. Those assumptions can become dangerous when they fail to reflect the community's circumstances.

The Upper Valley MRC joined the Riverside initiative to support the development of a resident-centered emergency preparedness plan. As the UV MRC lead for preparedness planning, I worked directly with community stakeholders and residents to develop and draft the plan, integrating emergency management principles with the community's firsthand knowledge, priorities, and concerns.

Rather than presenting residents with a predetermined solution, we approached preparedness as a collaborative process. Planning meetings gave residents opportunities to discuss their experiences with flooding, identify concerns, and help develop realistic emergency procedures. These conversations informed planning considerations involving emergency notifications, evacuation, communication, transportation, and assistance for residents requiring additional support. The process also provided opportunities for residents to engage with community organizations and emergency management stakeholders through a broader stakeholder preparedness meeting. The resulting plan reflected more than technical planning expertise. It incorporated the lived experiences of those who would ultimately depend upon it. Residents were not passive recipients of preparedness information. They became active participants in determining how their community could better prepare for emergencies.

Partnerships Make Preparedness Possible

REPA's success demonstrates the importance of relationships that extend beyond traditional emergency management organizations. Sustainable Woodstock helped advance the broader community resilience initiative and long-term flood mitigation conversations. The Woodstock HUB contributed community connections and opportunities for engagement. The Thompson Senior Center and Senior Solutions provided valuable perspectives on aging, accessibility, independence, and the needs of older adults during emergencies. The Upper Valley MRC brought public health preparedness expertise, emergency planning capabilities, and practical experience translating emergency management and health preparedness principles into accessible, actionable information.

Each organization contributed different strengths toward a shared objective: improving the safety and preparedness of Riverside residents. These partnerships also reinforced that

disaster vulnerability rarely exists independently of everyday circumstances. Transportation limitations, housing insecurity, health considerations, financial constraints, and social isolation can significantly influence whether residents receive warnings, evacuate safely, and recover following a disaster. By bringing these perspectives together, REPA helped bridge the distance between conventional emergency management and health preparedness planning and the realities of community life.

The Night Mother Nature Joined the Meeting

One particularly memorable engagement opportunity involved a community meet-and-greet with Woodstock Assistant Fire Chief and EMS Coordinator Rodney Kenyon. The gathering provided residents an opportunity to meet local emergency response leadership, ask questions, and discuss emergency preparedness concerns. Then Mother Nature apparently decided our preparedness conversation needed a practical demonstration.

On June 18, 2026, an EF1 tornado touched down across Route 4 from Riverside Mobile Home Park, affecting the Woodstock and West Bridgewater area. The tornado struck remarkably close to the community. Riverside lost electrical power but was spared the direct impact. The mountain rising southwest of the park appeared to provide some protection, although its precise influence on the tornado's path has not been established. The timing was extraordinary. A gathering intended to strengthen relationships between residents and emergency responders coincided with a severe weather event that demonstrated why those relationships matter.

Although flooding remained Riverside's primary preparedness concern, the tornado reinforced the importance of an all-hazards approach. Severe weather, power disruptions, communication failures, and other cascading consequences can threaten communities regardless

of the hazard that initially motivated their emergency planning. It also provided a powerful reminder that preparedness cannot be limited to a document sitting on someone's shelf.

From Preparedness Planning to Mitigation Investment

While REPA focused on improving immediate community preparedness and safety, Sustainable Woodstock and its municipal and regional partners continued pursuing longer-term solutions to Riverside's flood exposure. In December 2025, a $200,000 Community Development Block Grant–Disaster Recovery planning award was secured to support engineering analysis and evaluation of potential flood mitigation strategies. The funding supports work such as hydraulic modeling of the Ottauquechee River, evaluating floodplain restoration alternatives, and assessing potential relocation options for particularly vulnerable homes.

Although the award funds planning and feasibility work rather than construction, it represents an important step toward identifying sustainable mitigation solutions. The broader Riverside initiative also attracted interest from Vermont state leadership, including the Governor's Office and state-level elected officials. This attention helped bring greater visibility to the challenges facing flood-vulnerable mobile home communities and the importance of investing in proactive resilience.

Preparedness planning and engineering initiatives are complementary approaches to the same problem. Emergency preparedness helps residents understand what actions to take when danger approaches. Mitigation seeks to reduce the underlying conditions that make those emergencies so consequential. Neither approach should replace the other.

For the Upper Valley MRC, participating in a community initiative that developed alongside such significant mitigation investment demonstrated the value of connecting grassroots engagement with broader resilience efforts.

Returning to Riverside: Making the Plan Operational

Completing an emergency plan is an accomplishment. Ensuring residents understand how to use it is where preparedness becomes meaningful. Following its completion, the Upper Valley MRC returned to Riverside to distribute the finished plans and provide public education on their contents. I helped deliver educational components connecting community-level emergency procedures with individual and household preparedness. Residents had opportunities to review the plan, discuss emergency communications and evacuation considerations, and ask questions about what they could do before the next emergency. The educational outreach emphasized flood preparedness and practical household planning as it remains the primary concern for Riverside residents.

Participants also received flood preparedness go-bag starter kits, providing tangible resources to begin assembling their own emergency supplies. The kits were not intended to eliminate the challenges associated with evacuation or displacement. Rather, they provided a practical starting point for thinking about essential supplies, important documents, emergency communications, and the personal needs residents should consider before an evacuation becomes necessary.

Returning to the community reinforced another important element of the project. Preparedness is a continuing relationship, not a one-time transaction. Residents were not handed

an emergency plan and wished well. They were engaged throughout its development, provided opportunities to understand its contents, and equipped with practical resources to support their own preparedness.

Documenting a Community's Resilience

Another exciting dimension of the REPA initiative was the opportunity to have the project filmed for a documentary. The documentary crew captured aspects of the initiative as it developed, preserving a visual record of the partnerships, community engagement, and preparedness activities that helped bring REPA to life. Although details regarding the documentary's completion and eventual distribution have not yet been announced, the filming represents an opportunity to share the Riverside experience with audiences beyond the Upper Valley.

Emergency management success stories frequently focus on dramatic rescues, disaster response operations, and recovery efforts. Less visible are the months of conversations, relationship-building, planning meetings, and community education that occur before a disaster. REPA offers a different story worth telling. It demonstrates what proactive preparedness looks like when residents become collaborators, organizations work across traditional boundaries, and community safety becomes a shared responsibility. The documentary may ultimately help communicate something that conventional preparedness reports often struggle to capture. The human relationships behind successful community resilience initiatives are crucial for its resilience success.

A Legacy Worth Replicating

For me, REPA will forever be a legacy project. After decades working in emergency services and public health preparedness, I have witnessed the consequences of communities repeatedly experiencing disasters without sufficient resources to reduce their exposure or strengthen their preparedness. Across Vermont, many mobile home parks face disproportionate flood risks. Their residents may also experience overlapping financial, transportation, health, and housing-related vulnerabilities that complicate evacuation and recovery. These communities deserve more than repeated warnings, temporary assistance, and another round of recovery following the next flood. They deserve opportunities to participate in preparedness planning, access practical resources, develop relationships with emergency response organizations, and influence decisions affecting their long-term safety.

The Upper Valley MRC hopes to build upon Riverside's experience and explore opportunities to replicate this resident-centered preparedness model in other mobile home communities throughout Vermont. Every community will require an approach adapted to its geography, demographics, existing relationships, and resources. However, the fundamental principles remain consistent. If volunteers are willing to listen to residents, build collaborative partnerships, develop accessible plans, provide meaningful education, and connect immediate preparedness needs with long-term mitigation opportunities, our communities naturally strengthen.

The true success of REPA cannot be measured solely by the number of meetings held, emergency plans distributed, preparedness kits provided, or dollars awarded. Its success lies in the relationships established, the knowledge shared, and the community's growing capacity to participate in decisions affecting its own safety. Resilience is not something we deliver to

vulnerable populations after disaster strikes. It is something we build together, before the next disaster has the opportunity to remind us why we should have started sooner.