

PREP WORK

HABITAT

MAY 2006

An innovative new program aims to prepare city dwellers for power blackouts, hurricanes, and terrorist attacks.

By Renee Serlin

CAROL WILSON ARRIVED back at her Greenwich Village apartment after a few weeks out of town. She was too tired to start unpacking. “I sat down, had a cup of tea, went through several piles of mail, and then decided it was late and I was going to bed. So, I walked into my bedroom, turned on the light, and saw something awful dripping from my ceiling.” By 4 A.M., everyone in her building had received a knock on the door and had been told to pack a bag and get out fast.

Coincidentally, they had been preparing for just such an event. Wilson was the building’s team leader for an experimental project that has been operating in New York City for the past two years under the title “All Together Now” (ATN). The aim is to see whether it is possible to get households all over the city to prepare for disasters that might hit, from blackouts and hurricanes to terrorist bombs and toxic emanations from the ceiling.

Since the events of September 11, 2001, the power blackout of 2004, and Hurricane Katrina, it is no longer necessary to explain the concept of emergency preparedness. In fact, there are so many different programs out there now – city, state, federal, university, and others – that it is starting to look like a flourishing growth area. There’s a major problem with most of these programs, however. They provide a wealth of important information and advice, but they don’t provide a way to motivate people to adopt any of the suggested practices.

That’s where “All Together Now” comes in.

A Special Program

“All Together Now” comes at the situation from a different angle. It isn’t the information you are providing that is the



crucial element of the process; the nut that you have to crack if you are going to achieve a high level of emergency readiness in a population is how to change behavior patterns so that people will actually adopt some of the practices being recommended.

A 2005 telephone poll conducted by the Red Cross revealed that, in spite of living through 9/11 and the power blackout, more than 50 percent of New Yorkers hadn’t even gone so far as to prepare a basic emergency kit for themselves. As Keith Robertory, head of a team of disaster education planners at the Red Cross, says: “We know that brochures are not a highly effective way of reaching people. We try to steer away from the concept that, ‘You have a problem, we have a brochure.’”

David Gershon, the man behind the ATN program, has been a leader in developing ways of getting groups to adopt new behavior. One of the keys is understanding how new ideas spread through a population. Initially, the target has to be the estimated 15 percent of the population who can be categorized as “early adopters.” These are the people who are eager to try

out new things. In April 2004, New York City’s Office of Emergency Management (OEM) sponsored the first attempt by Gershon to apply the concept to emergency preparedness in the city. Could the strategies he had developed to help communities combat crime and also to cope with Y2K problems in 2000 be employed to get New Yorkers better prepared to deal with terrorism and other emergencies?

The first step in the program was to attract people – the “early adopters” – to become team leaders. Since April 2004, three team leader training sessions have been run to provide volunteers with the techniques necessary to be able to go back to their buildings or block associations and initiate emergency preparation programs. Everyone attending these day-long training sessions was given a handbook prepared by Gershon’s Empowerment Institute. Detailed scenarios were provided for every stage, from posting flyers (included in the book), to detailed time allocations for every meeting.

There were even scripts that could be followed when leaving a message on someone’s answering machine: “Hi (person’s

name). This is your neighbor, (your name). I'm calling about the information meeting at my home/other location on (date, time). I'm really looking forward to seeing you. It's going to be a very important opportunity to learn what we can do to protect ourselves and our families in case of an emergency and get to know each other better as neighbors..."

Team leaders were asked to use these techniques to try and establish small teams of five to eight households who would work with each other through a preparedness program. In four bi-weekly meetings, as structured in the "All Together Now" workbook, every basic preparedness action was laid out for the team to follow. Every meeting focused on one area of preparation, from setting up emergency supplies and go-bags to coping with energy disruptions and providing assistance for disabled or frail neighbors. Households that didn't want to work through the program with a team, were directed by the team leader to a simpler 30-day version that they could work through by themselves. (All the material for the household program is still available on the ATN web site.)

The Seat Belt

On February 13, the conclusion of the first phase was marked by an award ceremony for 71 team leaders who had succeeded in getting households in their buildings or blocks through the program. Joseph Bruno, commissioner of the city's Office of Emergency Management, together with Gershon, presented successful team leaders with a certificate of recognition.

Alan Leidner was one of the volunteers who received special recognition for getting 50 percent of his home's residents to take part in the program. Every floor in his 55-unit co-op had its own team. For Leidner, a specialist in developing geospatial systems, it was "a lot like putting on a seatbelt when you go for a drive. You never imagine that you're going to be in an accident but you know that it makes a lot of sense to have that seat belt around you – it just gives you that little extra margin of security." Even more important, he adds, is that a network is springing up within the building. People that he had once only nodded to in the elevator are now people with whom he is involved.

Leidner's team decided to augment the details found in the ATN workbook. They each took on one item and researched it on the internet so that they could make recom-



DeMaria (top) with windup radio; Sanchez (bottom) with "go-bag": learning to work as a team.

mendations and provide sources for other households in the co-op. All that information has now been incorporated in the material available on the ATN website. Leidner keeps a small lamp and a light face mask on his bedside table. In the morning, these go into his briefcase so that he has them with him when he's riding on the subway. Anybody who wants to find exactly the same items can go on the website and find prices and links to purchasing sources (see box, p. 12).

Pat Sallin and her husband, Al Doyle, are team leaders in one of the Stuyvesant Town buildings on Manhattan's East Side. Like Leidner, they both have time-consuming

jobs – Sallin as a portfolio administrator in an asset management company, Doyle as a project manager in a contracting company. But they attended the September ATN meeting to recruit team leaders and decided this was something they could do.

There are 102 apartments in their building. Six households formed a team and three additional households opted to work through the individual household program. Sallin stresses the value of working this way. When one person was stuck on how to complete an action from the workbook, the others would brainstorm or describe their own approach to the task. Instead of collecting all the items recommended for a go-bag, one team member recommended the packaged go-bag available from the [www. ReadyFreddy.com](http://www.ReadyFreddy.com) site. Another member went to Wal-Mart and bought a large plastic tub to store all the household emergency supplies in one place.

"You get ideas from the other people on the team – you see what they did and you say, 'Oh, okay, I can do that,'" says Sallin. "Or somebody says, 'I have a problem; what food are you storing; how are you storing it; where do you find the expiration dates?' Ideas start kicking around."

Before the ATN program, Sallin had already picked up *Ready New York*, a useful instructional booklet designed by OEM as a guide to preparing for emergencies. "But we just filed it away with the rest of our magazines and stuff and didn't do anything. What this program does is it actually has you do it." Working with neighbors makes the difference: "You form a bond with the other people."

The Ex-Boy Scout

Glenn Wolin, a team leader based in Brooklyn, is a Vietnam vet and a former boy scout. He had already been through an intensive 25-week training course to be part of a Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) group. CERTs are community-based volunteers who make themselves ready to provide emergency help when the first responders (police, firefighters, medical teams) are busy dealing with more critical disaster issues.

Wolin asked his teammates whether they had ever taken any disaster preparation actions before. Very few had. But, he notes, "as a CERT member, this is critical: we're taught to take care of ourselves first, then your family, and then others. If they haven't got a secure situation at home, they are

not leaving their family to help others.” He has been promoting the idea of getting CERT teams to use the ATN program as part of their basic training.

Wolin distributed flyers throughout his neighborhood, inviting people to come to an information meeting to hear about the new city program. The response was minimal. Like almost all the other leaders, he found that to get people interested, he had to make personal contact. Knocking on doors and talking directly to neighbors eventually resulted in the creation of four teams. Wolin ran two of them, and another volunteer led the other two.

The hardest part was keeping people focused. “Their lives kept intruding,” says the ex-boy scout. Getting people to complete the programs wasn’t easy, but without them, they would just “read through the literature but not do anything.”

The ATN guidebook outlines 32 possible emergency preparation actions. On average, Wolin’s teams completed 14 of the 32 (some were not applicable, such as ones that only apply to households with children). So, taking 14 actions is a very good indication of being prepared.

Wolin says that a lot of people told him they couldn’t even contemplate all the potential disasters; it was overwhelming. The workbook, with its structured “recipes,” counters that by leading participants through the process, step-by-step. At the end, you have a sense of what to do in an emergency “and this is empowering.” Those who work through the team program report feeling tremendous relief at knowing that not only are they more prepared, but that they have neighbors to whom they can turn.

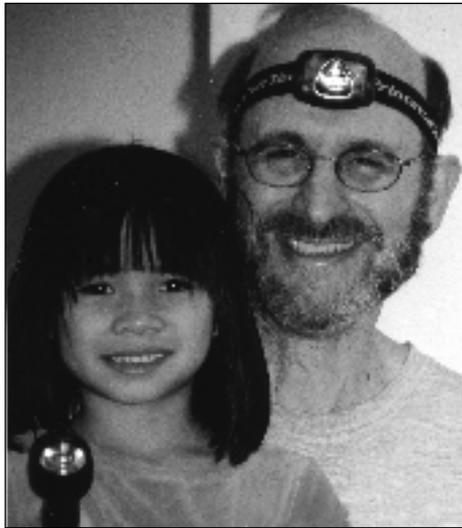
Marathon Man

Will Sanchez is a team leader for an Upper East Side cooperative. He’s also a webmaster for the Galloway Running Group of New York and a graduate of New York University’s Courant Institute of Mathematical Sciences. In addition, he is active in his community board and is a founding member of a local CERT team. In between his work and his huge involvement with his community, he runs marathons. In other words, Sanchez, like every other team leader is a powerhouse of energy and involvement.

Together with Cindy DeMaria, a nutritionist, whose husband Al DeMaria is president of the co-op’s board, a strategy was worked out for engaging people from the 88

apartments in their co-op. Knocking on doors was ruled out as being much too aggressive. Instead, they split up the building between them and slipped a flyer under every apartment door, personalizing the notes by adding an additional message from the two of them. The result? Three residents opted to follow the single household program and six households agreed to form a team.

At the first team meeting, the group committed itself to following through on the program and to arriving on time for meetings and staying until the end. Sanchez committed himself to keeping the meetings shorter than the recommended



Leider and daughter: be prepared.

two hours. The sessions were very productive: some supplies were purchased in bulk for the whole group.

Then, halfway through the program, there was a fire in one of the retail units in the co-op, and everyone had to leave suddenly. The nine ATN households were prepared: they had go-bags ready to grab as they went out of the door. But what did Sanchez’s wife take with her? Her laptop and her purse. The go-bag was just too heavy.

Fire damage was restricted to the retail store but, for Sanchez, the incident emphasized the importance of the ATN recommendation to practice as many of the preparedness actions as possible: pick up your go-bag; find out if you can carry it; try living for a short while without any electricity and see whether your supplies are adequate. His wife now has a much more compact go-bag purchased from an internet site recommended by CERT colleagues.

Sanchez, like the others, emphasizes the huge benefits of making contact with your

neighbors. When the citywide blackout occurred in 2004, he was devastated to find that some of his neighbors refused his offers of help because they didn’t know who he was. Yet he had been living in the building for 15 years.

DeMaria, Sanchez’s deputy leader, has three go-bags in her apartment, one for her husband, one for herself, and one for Lola, her cat. Lola’s go-bag includes enough food for two weeks, water, a bag of litter, and a large aluminum bake pan to use as a litter box. The workbook includes step-by-step instructions for pet supplies. DeMaria, like many other cat-owners, added the makeshift litter box.

A Personal Aside

Now, I have to reveal my personal involvement in this. I believe I am an early adopter. At least, I was intrigued enough to sign up for the leadership training course. However, in my co-op building of 40 units, only one household signed up to attend an information meeting and no one embarked on the ATN program. What did I do wrong? First, it’s clear from the success stories that I didn’t make the invitation personal enough. It went up on the lobby notice board, I spoke to a few people, and I hoped for results. Nothing happened. I was swamped with work and didn’t follow through on the more extensive guidelines provided in the training. I think of myself as one of the failures.

But Gershon has a different take. The pilot project, he believes, was successful in showing, albeit in small numbers, that it is possible to get volunteers to take on the role of leaders and to change people’s behavior. In other words, with the right program structure, even skeptical New Yorkers will take steps to become prepared.

Results from the almost 1,500 households who participated in the pilot program show that there was a significant increase in preparedness among this group. On average, people who completed a team program took 11 preparedness actions. The most common ones were stocking up with food and water; preparing a go-bag; purchasing alternate lighting sources and storing batteries; making sure that at least one landline phone was available; assembling warm clothing; locating a battery-operated or wind-up radio; checking on household safety; putting together a first aid kit; and purchasing a small fire extinguisher.

One thing that has become clear is the

need for much more hands-on support for team leaders. In the pilot program, support for team leaders came from Gershon's unit, based in Woodstock, N.Y., via telephone conferences. Gershon suggests that if I had received local, ongoing, peer support instead of long-distance support from the Empowerment Institute, I might have gone the distance.

This has, in fact, been the route Gershon has followed with projects in other cities. A formal part of those programs was the establishment of local peer support that remained in close and frequent contact with teams. In New York, telephone support was provided but it wasn't peer support, it wasn't structured into the design of the program, and it wasn't enough.

But the pilot program has revealed something even more key to the building of preparedness in the city. Rather than focusing on individual preparation as the ultimate goal, the aim of the program is now seen as building resiliency. So, although the next phase will be exploring the ability of the program to go to scale or spread widely throughout the city, the focus will be on establishing core groups within buildings.

The Future Is Now

Starting in May, a new layer is being introduced into the program: 20 volunteers will be trained for the role of program manager. They will take over the role that the Empowerment Institute performed in the pilot. Volunteers will be selected on the basis of their connections with people in their buildings, blocks, and neighborhoods, and with other organizations throughout the city. Each of the 20 managers will be asked to identify 20 more people to serve as team leaders; between them, they will hopefully reach around 5,000 households. Reckoning on an average of two people per household, the hope is that this phase will scale up the program to contact about a quarter of a million people.

When I spoke with Gershon in March about the new phase, he was still reflecting on whether it would be possible to get the 20 volunteer program managers that he was aiming for. It has turned out to be almost a home run. As All Together Now gets into its stride, he reports that it is creating a wave of interest throughout the city. People are hearing about the new plans and

asking to get involved. At the moment, it looks as though the 20 program manager slots are going to be heavily over-subscribed. But Gershon will be staying with the limited numbers at this stage. To get it right, there has to be a gradual scaling up so that ATN can still be adjusted before it's taken up to a citywide level.

Alan Leidner was one of the first people to sign on as a program manager for the new phase. Through contacts with a multi-block association in his area, he is already in touch with a large group of residents on West 102nd and 103rd streets between Riverside Drive and Broadway in Manhattan. Other block associations have asked to be included in Leidner's new group; he sees his reach stretching from West 96th Street all the way



up to West 110th Street. He is confident that his 20 team leaders will provide the 5,000 households.

Will Sanchez is going to be another of the 20 program managers. He brings with him contacts within a huge Upper East Side multi-block association and the local CERT team.

Glenn Wolin has already established a wide-ranging community of households in his area and will fill the third slot. The 20 volunteers for slots in the new program are turning out to be people with huge contacts throughout the city – with their city council members, community boards, CERT teams, and block associations.

One volunteer sits as the safety chairwoman of her community board. She has access to the 80,000 people within her area, and she already interacts regularly, with her local fire and police departments.

In addition to these individual volun-

teers, Gershon is now hooking up with a number of city agencies. The New York City Housing Authority has formally signed on to be part of the program: they have contact with over 600,000 households. Gershon has allotted them three program manager slots. The New York City Department for the Aging (DFTA) is also working with Gershon to identify volunteer program managers who can reach out to the thousands of people under DFTA's aegis.

Gershon estimates that, through the contacts provided by his 20 program managers, he will have access to around one million New Yorkers, although in this next training phase, the scope is being carefully limited to just a quarter-of-a-million people. The program managers will not only be the link to a broad swathe of the city's population, they will also constitute a think tank for the program, working with Gershon to refine the details and scope of the program.

At the recognition award ceremony that concluded the current phase of ATN, Carol Wilson was asked to relate her story to the other team leaders. Like Sanchez, she experienced a real emergency while her team was working through the program. The

“awful” something exuding through her ceiling in the middle of the night turned out to be highly toxic mercury. Breathing mercury vapor can damage the nervous system and her apartment was almost totally destroyed in the clean-up efforts.

Fortunately, Wilson and her team had already started preparing themselves before the emergency. They'd all bought flashlights and extra batteries and stocked up supplies for a sheltering place. Unfortunately, they hadn't yet set up their go-bags. Wilson was the only one in the building who was able to grab some useful supplies – she still had her packed suitcase. Her upstairs neighbor grabbed the book he was reading and nothing else. When she eventually gets back into her building, she's planning to finally have the go-bag meeting and one thing is certain: “Everybody in my building will be making a go-bag.” **H**

SOURCES



Empowerment Institute
P.O.Box 428,
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www.EmpowermentInstitute.net

All Together Now
P.O.Box 428,
Woodstock, NY
845-657-7788
www.EmpowermentInstitute.net/atn

All Together Now resource list
www.EmpowermentInstitute.net/atn/atn_files/ATN_Resources.html

Ready Freddy emergency preparedness kit
\$149.95
800-731-2860
www.ReadyFreddy.com

Ready New York guide
Telephone: 311
www.nyc.gov/html/oem/html/readynewyork/ready_guide.html

CERT
(NYC Community Emergency Response Team)
Telephone: 311
www.nyc.gov/html/oem/html/programs/cert.html



LED Lamp
Princeton Tec Scout LED Headlamp. Item. 55800. \$19.99
800-525-4784
www.Campmor.com

LED Flashlight
Item: 82954. \$39.99
800-525-4784
www.Campmor.com

One-Person Deluxe Fanny Pack Survival Kit.
\$48.00
(Use the direct link, below, or go to the home page, click on "Customer Service" and enter the reference number: SK1D) 800-277-3727
www.QuakeKare.com
www.quakekare.com/index.asp?PageAction=VIEWPROD&ProdID=2



A VIEW FROM THE TOP All Together Now

BY DAVID GERSON

Our program, "All Together Now," has shown so much promise that funding was secured from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation to help it prepare to scale up citywide. Currently, the Empowerment Institute, originator of the program, is recruiting, training, and coaching 20 volunteer program managers from around the city to lead their communities.

Should we take reasonable steps to protect our families and ourselves against these risks? This choice seems clear. It is better to have a plan for an emergency that doesn't happen than to have an emergency but no plan.

The steps that make the most sense in preparing for an emergency are a good idea, anyway. These actions

will restore the kind of personal and community resiliency to our lives that we never intended to give up. What could be more important in today's world than to live in a building or on a block where the residents are working together to create a strong and resilient social fabric? Living in a disaster-resilient building or block represents the new quality of life indicator for New Yorkers. This is not only the ultimate defense against disasters, but also a great way to build relationship-rich buildings and blocks that can improve our quality of life right now.

The age we live in requires us to radically rethink our urban expectation of dependency and separation. What the future will bring is uncertain, but what is certain is that being prepared and connected will enable us to face that future with greater confidence and security.

David Gershon is founder and CEO of Empowerment Institute. For more information visit www.empowermentinstitute.net/atn

