

## Map Your Neighborhood

Building and Strengthening Disaster Readiness Among Neighbors

The Northridge earthquake shook the greater Los Angeles area at 4:30 a.m. on January 17, 1994. At the Northridge Meadows apartment complex, the first floor of a building collapsed, killing 16 occupants and trapping others. Neighborhood volunteers began search and rescue efforts, and “by the time fire and rescue teams arrived, as many as 180 occupants had already gotten out of the building on their own or with the aid of their neighbors.”<sup>1</sup>

Such reports of spontaneous altruism and self-help are common following disasters. Generally, it seems, people want to help their neighbors in these situations.

How well they can and do help varies, however. Common sense suggests that persons who have prepared in advance for disasters are more likely to know what needs to be done and how to do it—and to do it in a timely manner—than are those caught unprepared. This is the rationale behind the award-winning Map Your Neighborhood (MYN) program implemented by the State of Washington’s Emergency Management Division (EMD).

### Bringing Neighbors Together

MYN is designed to improve readiness at the neighborhood level. The program acknowledges that disasters are events that create many emergencies at the same time. Professional responders, including police, firefighters, paramedics, and utility personnel, are typically overwhelmed and must prioritize their responses. During the hours or days that may pass before they can respond, residents must rely on themselves and their neighbors for assistance.

MYN provides a step-by-step process that groups of neighbors can work through together to prepare their neighborhood for disasters. It takes just one person to begin this process by personally inviting the neighborhood to his or her home for a 90-minute preparedness meeting. At this session, attendees use MYN program materials to (1) learn the “9 Steps to Take Immediately Following a Disaster”; (2) identify the skills and equipment each neighbor has that could help the neighborhood cope with a disaster; (3) create a neighborhood map that pinpoints the locations of all natural gas meters and propane tanks; (4) compile a contact list that includes the names of individuals

who may need extra help in a disaster, such as the elderly, persons with disabilities, or children who are home alone during certain times of the day; and (5) pick locations for a Neighborhood Gathering Site and Neighborhood Care Center.

### The “9 Steps”

MYN participants learn nine steps that begin at home and then reach throughout the neighborhood. Immediately after a disaster, residents check to ensure that their own families and homes are safe and sound. They don protective clothing; check for natural gas leaks and shut off the gas to their house if necessary; shut off water and electricity to the house if needed; tape a placard onto their front door or window signaling their status (“OK” or “Help”); and take their household fire extinguishers out to the front curb for use in the neighborhood.

Those who are able then go to the designated Neighborhood Gathering Site, where they use the skills and equipment information prepared earlier to assemble four teams. One team remains at the site to monitor local radio broadcasts for emergency information; another team uses the neighborhood contact list to check on individuals who may need extra assistance and transport them to the care center if appropriate; a third team checks neighborhood gas meters



Seattle residents practice the “9 Steps” at a Neighborhood Gathering Site. Photo courtesy of LuAn Johnson.

<sup>1</sup>Kathleen J. Tierney, *Social Aspects of the Northridge Earthquake*, University of Delaware Disaster Research Center Preliminary Paper #225 (1995), p. 3, <http://dspace.udel.edu:8080/dspace/bitstream/19716/633/1/PP225.pdf>.

and propane tanks and shuts them off when needed; and the remaining team walks door-to-door to check on homes displaying the “Help” placard (or no placard). As the teams complete their assignments, they report back to the gathering site and make further plans as required.

### Origins and Growth

In April 2008, the MYN program was recognized by the national earthquake community, receiving the Overall Award in Excellence at the National Earthquake Conference in Seattle. Washington’s EMD began offering MYN to local emergency management agencies statewide in 2006 when LuAn Johnson, who developed the program, joined the EMD as public education program manager.

Johnson’s involvement in neighborhood preparedness dates back to 1986 when the emergency management department in Sunnyvale, California, directed her to create a program that would reconnect local residents with their neighborhoods. The result was the earliest version of what later evolved into MYN. Johnson has further developed and refined this program in the years since, first in Sunnyvale, where she incorporated lessons learned from the Loma Prieta earthquake of 1989, and later in Seattle, where she worked for the local Office of Emergency Management. In Seattle, the program’s power to enhance neighborhood readiness was demonstrated following the 2001 Nisqually earthquake, when the “9 Steps” were successfully carried out in 92 percent of the 460 neighborhoods then participating in the program.

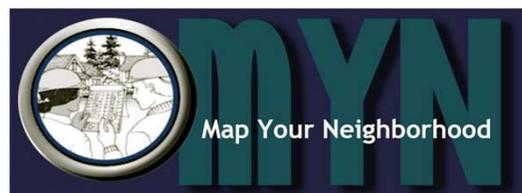
Over the past 2 years, the EMD has promoted MYN at the state’s annual emergency management conferences and has worked with local agencies to implement the program in 54 cities and counties across Washington. MYN has

also been promoted through the Department of Homeland Security’s Citizen Corps program, and Johnson has spoken about the program at national conferences. Following Washington’s lead, 14 other states are now in various stages of implementing the MYN program.

MYN is by design easy to start up and maintain, and these attributes have been key to its success in Washington. This year, the program is becoming even easier to implement as the EMD rolls out a new DVD-based program guide. Johnson has typically conducted train-the-trainer sessions for local agencies wishing to introduce MYN, and persons trained there have, in turn, trained the local residents who volunteer to host MYN neighborhood meetings. Hosts have used the *MYN Discussion Guide*, printed by the EMD with support from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, to moderate these meetings. In the new DVD, Johnson moderates the meeting, which eliminates the need to find and train hosts who are willing and able to shepherd neighbors through a 90-minute session.

After a group of neighbors has held an initial MYN meeting, the program calls for them to reconvene annually to update their neighborhood map and contact list. Annual sessions help maintain the sense of community that is an essential foundation of neighborhood preparedness. They also provide opportunities to review and build upon the “9 Steps.” This year, using concepts that Johnson developed and tested in Seattle, the EMD will begin distributing guidance on additional topics that can be incorporated into succeeding neighborhood meetings, such as response exercises, establishing first aid stations, and working with professional responders.

The EMD provides comprehensive information about MYN on its Web site at <http://emd.wa.gov/myn/index.shtml>.



For more information, visit [www.nehrp.gov](http://www.nehrp.gov) or send an email to [info@nehrp.gov](mailto:info@nehrp.gov).