

The stereotype of a disaster prepper is that of a man alone in the woods, hoarding cans of baked beans and bullets to fend off neighbors after the apocalypse. Few may know, however, that the best chances a community has for survival come from working together and looking after each other.

This information is particularly compelling with the knowledge that severe weather patterns are more likely as rising global temperatures ravage our normal ecology and shift local weather patterns. Hot, dry summers increase the risk of wildfires, and unpredictable, wet winters can lead to floods, landslides and severe winter storms.

There are a number of considerable environmental hazards to prepare for in Lane County, not to mention the coming Cascadia subduction zone earthquake that involves many similar preparations.

Matt McRae, the climate policy strategist for Our Children's Trust and a disaster mitigation expert says, "We're bound to have a major fire in the short term."

The south hills of Eugene, McRae says, are full of dry brush that will make for perfect fuel during wildfire season. "Dozens of houses will go up in flames and hopefully we won't lose any lives, but that's what'll shake us out of it."

Other weather disasters include flooding which could shut down our sewage system, severe winter storms like the ice storm that left thousands without power for days, and the potential for summer heat waves that harm human health and safety without the scary pictures of destroyed infrastructure. All of these will be more common and more likely as global temperatures rise.

With so many in need after a disaster, citizens must rely on themselves, not firefighters and emergency workers who have too many others to attend to.

Disasters are frightening, but planning ahead can help you avoid facing them alone. A 2002 study by Eric Klinenberg, professor of sociology at New York University, showed that communities with strong social ties were more likely to survive environmental disasters than those with weak ties. Klinenberg's book, *Heat Wave*, is a study comparing two similar neighborhoods during the 1995 Chicago heat wave that killed hundreds. Affluence was a strong indicator of survival, but neighbors simply checking on each other made the biggest difference in survival rates.

McRae agrees with this assessment. "It's really that simple, the people in the connected neighborhood got help because their neighbors asked after them."

Patty Hine and Deb McGee of 350 Eugene can attest to the power of community. During the ice storm this past winter, their neighbors in Peaceful Valley near Spencer's Butte shared resources like power generators and made sure to check on elderly, vulnerable neighbors.

"There's a community of people out here who have a loose but powerful connection to each other," Hine says. "We put aside all of our political difference and pull together and it's really wonderful that way."

"I think it's really important that people reconnect to public institutions," Hine adds. "Churches have historically been the kinds of places where people make these kinds of connections, but so are granges, Rotary clubs and other institutions."

It can also be as simple as sitting on your front porch on a sunny day and saying hello to those who walk by with their dogs. McRae says that "some of the rest of it is just choosing to do social activities with people who are in close proximity with you, like closing down the street and having a neighborhood block party."

If you're a bit shy or need some structure, Eugene has a few programs that can help you meet your neighbors and prepare for disasters at the same time. Patence Winningham is the emergency program coordinator for the city, and she suggests Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) training for those with a particular passion for preparation and helping others.

The free, 30-hour training is held twice a year over the course of a few weeks and prepares participants for everything from fires to search and rescue to disaster psychology. "We've trained over 1,500 community members since the program started in 2003," Winningham says. That's significant compared to the 174 firefighters serving Eugene's population of 160,541 who would be bombarded with requests during a climate disaster.

If you don't have 30 spare hours for the fall CERT training, the Map Your Neighborhood program is a free opportunity for communities to work together and think about disaster planning. "It really heightens awareness and builds resilience in those little pocket areas," Winningham says.

Participants work through a program with 10-15 other households and create a plan in case of emergency. They also map out important resources and skills amongst their neighbors, and figure out who has vulnerabilities that need addressing.

McRae says, "You map the assets and go knock on doors to find out where does the doctor in our neighborhood live, who has the chainsaws, who has an extra pickup?"

It also protects the vulnerable. After doing the program, McRae says "you know there's an elderly couple here and a family with a newborn over here, so now you're attuned to that."

Tim Ingalsbee, executive director of Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics and Ecology, participated in the program in his neighborhood a few years ago.

After a disaster, Ingalsbee says, "communities and neighborhoods will have to fend for themselves for some time. Emergency services are going to be overwhelmed and they won't be able to come. They'll do triage and might go right past a flaming house to go to a higher priority."

To prepare, Ingalsbee, whose child is involved in Our Children's Trust's landmark climate lawsuit, created a plan with his family for the moments right after an emergency starts. Once he knows his family is secure, he will go to an agreed upon meeting spot to get organized with his neighbors. From there he can create rescue teams to save missing neighbors.

He also has stockpiled a week's worth of food and water for each of his family members, and encourages his neighbors to do the same.

"That whole doomsday prepper approach comes right out of our hyper-individualistic culture," he says. "The only way we'll make it through disasters is through a collective, collaborative approach as a community."

"What if we prepare for these disasters and they never happen, is it a waste of time?" Ingalsbee asks. "Absolutely not! It's part of having a better lifestyle and a happier community." His own forays into mapping his neighborhood led to communal potlucks and a community garden — strengthened ties that increase quality of life and can save lives during an emergency.

The biggest thing is to get started. Emergency program coordinator Patence Winningham says starting your plan at two minutes after a disaster is a great start — know where your shoes and flashlights are. Then push that plan out to two hours, then two days, then two weeks.

"Know your evacuation routes," Winningham says, and assess which disasters are most likely to harm you and your community. Everyone needs to prepare for the Cascadia earthquake event, she says, but those in the south hills should plan for forest fires and those near the river or Amazon creek can prepare for flooding.

Most of all, she says, talk to your neighbor. "It's really Joe across the street who can help you if your house is on fire."

City programs that help create resilient citizens are helpful, but resilient infrastructure that won't break even during an earthquake, fire or flood is just as important.

McRae says a huge aspect of disaster preparation is pressuring your local government to protect you and prevent severe damage. "Youth have a moral authority that I don't have," McRae says. "They can go to their leaders and say 'I need you to protect my future.'" ■



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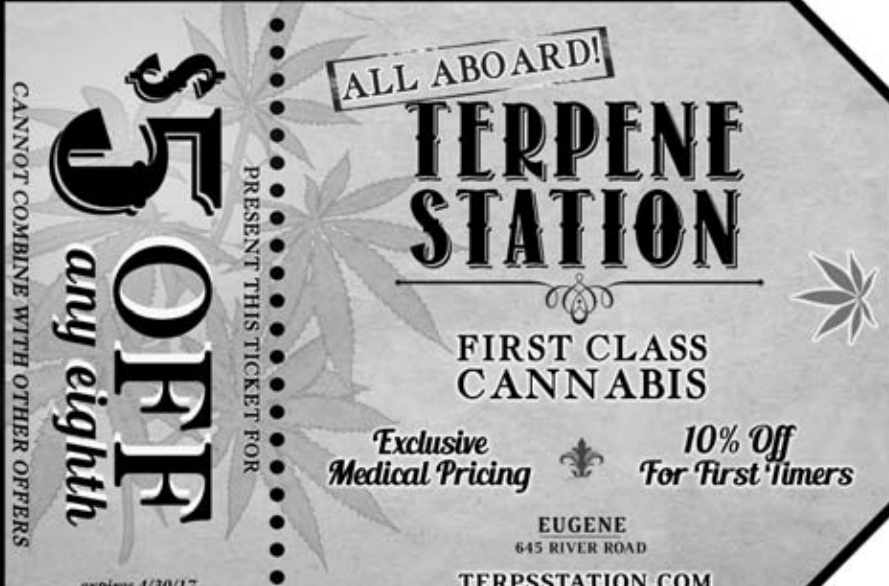


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