

ANOTHER VOICE: WE MUST WORK TOGETHER FOR EQUITY AND EFFICIENCY IN TIMES OF CRISIS

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Over the past several years, our Buffalo community has endured many crises. As the city of good neighbors, we celebrate the many incredible individual and collective efforts to respond. We also honor the loss of life and harm caused by the inequities and system failures entrenched in our region, which disproportionately impact low-income communities of color.

The National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD) states that effective crisis response requires 4 C's – communication, coordination, collaboration and cooperation – and 4 R's – relationships, resources, roles and responsibilities. No single person, organization or institution has all the answers for every disaster-related challenge. An asset-based community development framework values everyone – from grassroots organizations to government – and organizes us to have collective impact.

In this spirit, in response to the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020, we formed a coalition called ANCHOR (Addressing Needs for Community Health, Opportunity and Resiliency), which has coordinated assistance to the community on issues ranging from Covid-19 testing and vaccination to housing evictions, water shut offs, nutrition services, mental health, education, childcare and more. It has also supported community action and safety during times of national and local crises, such as the protests after the killing of George Floyd in 2020 and the May 14 Tops massacre.

On December 26, in response to the Christmas weekend blizzard, we reactivated ANCHOR. People from front-line community, mutual aid and neighborhood organizations, online groups, healthcare providers, housing and food agencies, government, philanthropy and the media met virtually the next day to collectively assess needs and map assets, with an equity focus to prioritize those most vulnerable and who have been historically marginalized based on race and socioeconomics.

Community groups highlighted urgent needs related to food, shelter, medical care and transportation. The City of Buffalo director of citizen services and the deputy county executive immediately deployed resources to address these issues. We developed shared language for safety tips and numbers to call for various types of assistance, and stayed in constant communication to problem-solve emerging needs.

ANCHOR demonstrates the need to invest in relationships that bring different kinds of people and organizations together. Many heroic responses during the blizzard happened in isolation. More collective, organized efforts could have saved lives and ensured that everyone was equipped to weather the storm.

A coordinated network should be built with neighborhood pods across the city, led by trusted community members trained in disaster response and community organizing. Data gathered from the city, county and 211, along with academic and community expertise, should focus resources on our most vulnerable people and neighborhoods.

Social infrastructure is as important as physical infrastructure to keep us safe. Let us work together to build trust, share ideas and prepare to respond more effectively and equitably in our next time of need.

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Both write on behalf of ANCHOR. ANCHOR leadership includes CoNECT, PUSH Buffalo, Buffalo Urban League, Native American Community Services, Erie County Restorative Justice Coalition and 211 WNY.