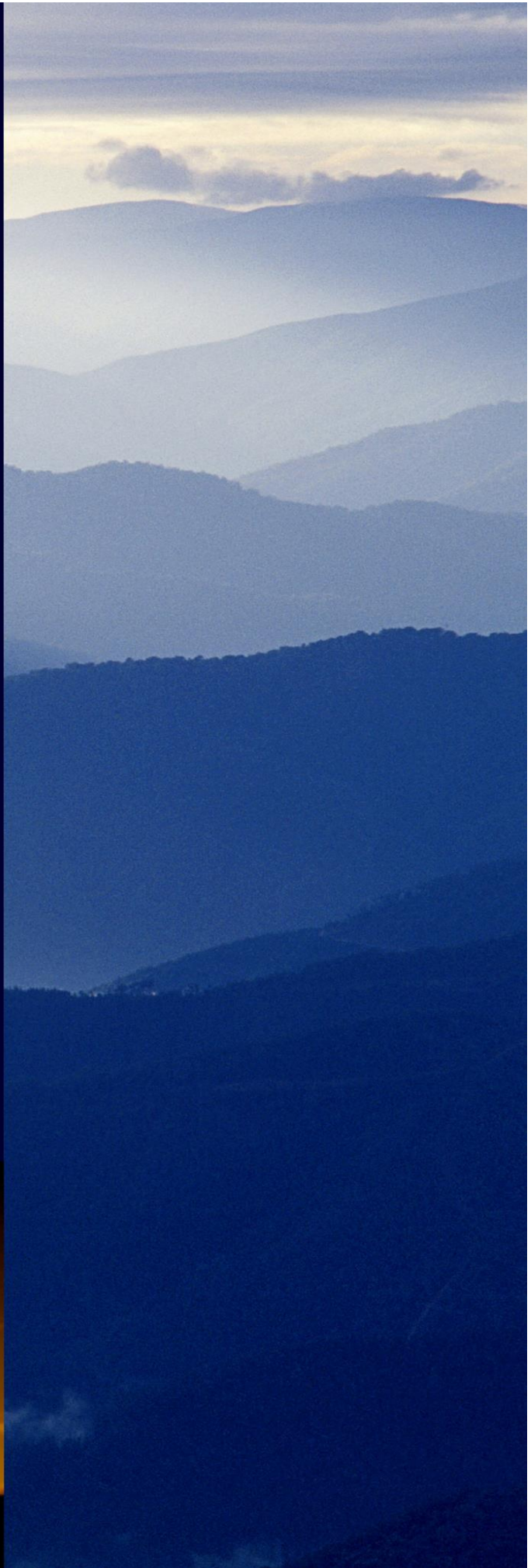


LARIMER CONNECTS STRATEGIC VISION

Creating resilience through
social connections.

**Larimer County Office of
Emergency Management
August 2016-December 2017**



STRATEGIC VISION FOR LARIMER CONNECTS



BACKGROUND:

Historically, emergency management has functioned in such a way that it was primarily a top-down approach when helping communities prepare and recover. However, in recent years, national studies have proven that this approach leaves an immense gap in the resilience and sustainability of a community as it has instilled a dependency on emergency services or persons of authority for community members to take action. We find that we live in a world where now even if a homeowner sees smoke, they will not evacuate a wildfire unless someone of authority tells them to. Additionally, in post-disaster recovery, this approach has created an expectation that the government will come in and give communities money and resources to rebuild their homes, businesses, roads, etc, and therefore discourages pro-active measures such as mitigation against hazards. Furthermore, the top-down approach is primarily based upon the built environment and physical infrastructure. This does not take into account the crucial social infrastructure of a community. When community members are connected to each other socially, they are better able to work together in adverse situations and frequently have better awareness not only as to what resources are available, but how to allocate them more efficiently as a united force. Larimer Connects seeks to strengthen this aspect of resilience by helping develop social connections and awareness for accessing resources.

PROBLEM STATEMENT:

After completion of the Unmet Needs and Fragility Study following the 2012 High Park Fire and 2013 Floods, Larimer County found that communities still had barriers or gaps in 3 key areas: Planning, Communications, and Private Property. It was found that communities were fairly disconnected socially, prolonging recovery since they were not able to efficiently allocate resources, or were unaware of how to reach out to programs and organizations around the County. Additionally, it was felt that the County did not do a sufficient job of educating or communicating procedures or means in which to access resources and the Larimer Connects program was sought to fulfill these needs and strengthen the social network of Larimer County.

MISSION:

Build community connections – within communities and between communities – through coursework, networking, education, and outreach throughout all of Larimer County leading to a culture of community resilience at the most local level.

GOALS

1. To build Larimer County Communities from the ground up by strengthening connections and partnerships

How this will be achieved:

The program is implemented using a two-pronged approach: rural and urban. The needs of both of these community types vary significantly.

In the rural approach, the central focus is to build self-sustainability as they are less connected to larger municipalities and are dependent on minimized resources, including fire departments comprised mostly of volunteers.

In the urban approach, the central focus is to build social connectivity and capacity. Several factors including technology, rapid population growth and expansion, cultural differences/language barriers, and more have an adverse effect on the level to which community members know one another. Because of this diversity, it is important to reach out to these communities to ensure they are adequately connected to the rest of the county and can access resources as needed.

In addition to the two-pronged physical community approach, Larimer Connects is also implementing efforts virtually. In our modern society, more and more social connectivity and communication is occurring online via the internet. Social media is now a cultural norm for how we remain informed about what is happening in and around us and how we communicate and interact. It is a vital tool in mobilizing community action. While not a physical concept, the internet is undoubtedly a “community,” and Larimer Connects will be tapping into this sphere to further enhance social connectivity throughout Larimer County.

2. To create custom programs for each community to enhance knowledge, skills, and abilities

How this will be achieved:

Social dynamics, culture, and the needs of each community in Larimer County have significant differences. Therefore, it is essential to create custom programs instead of a one-size-fits-all approach. To ensure that each program meets these needs, Larimer Connects will reach out to formal and informal community leaders in each area to determine what the community needs most. The community leaders are a part of the entire process from start to finish to ensure the program solutions and achievements align with what is best for the community from the community’s perspective.

3. Bringing greater awareness to community about hazards

How this will be achieved:

A message emphasizing resilience and mobilization into action is often most successful when coming from within a community. As stated in the last goal, a key tenet of this program is to engage with formal and informal leaders in each community. This may be the emergency services providers in the area or it could be the resident who has lived in the community their entire life who remains a trusted agent for all who live there. In order to achieve the goal of bringing greater awareness to communities about hazards, Larimer Connects will establish partnerships with local, trusted, emergency services personnel and community members that have a presence or a leadership role in their respective communities. These groups or individuals then champion the message we are attempting to convey during Larimer Connects facilitated workshops and classes conducted within the community emphasizing hazards pertinent to the community itself. Essentially, the individuals or groups that Larimer Connects have established partnerships with are the “proxy” or “face” of the effort we are attempting to implement at the community level, further building trust with community members as they see their own local representation and guidance versus strictly higher level government representation.

Hazard awareness is also communicated through outreach campaigns, including social media campaigns utilizing hazard-awareness information and tools from local partners, as well as higher level, recognized entities including the American Red Cross, United Way, and FEMA. Additionally, hazard-education materials are distributed in-person during community events and other outreach opportunities in which we hold a presence or a booth.

Finally, we have found that focusing on disruptions instead of hazards will often bring new people to the conversation. Everyone faces a disruption at some point in their lives, whether it is a power outage, a financial loss or a loss of transportation.

4. Change the culture of Larimer County to ensure future generations are more equipped to react to disruptions/disasters and to respond/recover

How this will be achieved:

Returning to the two-pronged approach of urban and rural, there are a variety of activities that will achieve this goal.

Rural communities in Larimer County tend to be disconnected from resources and services that are plentiful in urban communities. A culture of individualism is high in these regions, which further makes building social connections and building social capacity difficult. Additionally, these communities are highly dependent on volunteer emergency services, and in an incident, overwhelm them seeking information and direction. Larimer Connects has identified the following communities as rural pilot communities based on such factors as the community’s level of motivation to become resilient, vulnerability to disaster in their region, difficulty accessing resources, and level of social connectivity: Crystal Lakes, Red Feather Lakes, Glacier View Meadows, Pinewood Springs, and Glen Haven.

To alleviate these rural issues, Larimer Connects is implementing the following activities:

- Creation of connection points, or “hubs”: These are a location established in the community (ideally a location where community members already go to connect socially such as town halls, libraries, or community centers) where local community leaders will provide a flow of information to be disseminated to their fellow community members both in disaster situations and day-to-day. Larimer Connects works with Colorado Amateur Radio Emergency Services (ARES) to provide radio communication infrastructure and plans to ensure that the personnel in the hub have communication to provide adequate and up-to-date information to effectively give their fellow community members and neighbors guidance and direction in an incident.
 - These hubs are not meant to be response-organizations. They are strictly informational, and during a response, they are in place to help alleviate the overwhelming call load or amount of people flocking to fire stations or departments seeking information (which hinders the response missions of the volunteer emergency services agencies)
 - These hubs are especially useful in the planning and recovery stages of disaster. Outside of an emergency situation, Larimer Connects is connecting communities with organizations that can provide resources for their needs, such as trainings and educational seminars. This can be disaster-related, or social-capacity-building-related (i.e. Preparedness classes for disaster or master gardening classes to build social groups organized around an activity). In the recovery stage of a disaster, this will be an important point to go to for community members to have updated information, and a place that holds important information for the county to know what needs still exist in the area as the Larimer Connects Program Manager will be in frequent contact with the community leaders operating the hub.
 - Lastly, the hubs can be used for the purpose of building social capital. The better communities know and are familiar with their neighbors and fellow members of their community, the better the likelihood that they can quickly and efficiently band together in an adverse situation or come together to solve a problem. The hubs can also be used as a sponsor, or a location to hold social events, to help bring the community together frequently.
- To build self-sustainability in communities, Larimer Connects is connecting to different groups around the county including local emergency services agencies and NGOs/Non-profits such as the Red Cross and United Way to assist in providing education in self-resilience, mitigation, preparedness, etc and connecting community members and volunteer emergency services departments with additional resources to better build their capacity.
- Lastly, Larimer Connects is facilitating collaboration between community leaders, Larimer County OEM, and local emergency services agencies to develop succinct plans and guides to better prepare the rural communities for an incident. These guides establish how the hubs will disseminate information, how hubs from each community will work across community lines, and how best the hubs can serve, versus hinder or get in the way of, emergency services operations.
 - Plans that have the greatest needs include: Evacuation planning, Communications planning, and Inter-Community Connections planning

Urban communities in Larimer County have greater access to resources, however are less connected socially than rural communities. This decreases their resilience in the sense that community members

do not band together or turn to their neighbors for assistance initially, and turn primarily to public service for assistance. In order to make urban communities more resilient, there is a large need for increased social capacity and community engagement. The urban pilot community selected was Berthoud as it was the urban community that came back as “least connected” from the Unmet Needs and Community Fragility Study.

To alleviate these urban issues, Larimer Connects is implementing the following activities:

- Identification of social groups, volunteer organizations, faith-based organizations, and community service groups that can be targeted as community leaders who can then be utilized to work through for more integral connections into the community.
- Larimer Connects has established relationships with local, trusted, emergency services personnel to help in facilitating a community engagement workshop
 - This workshop is comprised of three sessions:
 - Session 1: The first session will be the “How to Prepare for Anything” workshop created by Aaron Titus from the Larimer County VOAD. This workshop educates participants on disruptions that effect everyone at some point and how to prepare for them. Through awareness of smaller scale disruptions, participants learn how making smaller plans can help them be better ready for larger scale incidents. The benefit of this seminar is that it teaches participants how to be better prepared and resilience, without using the strategy of evoking fear associated with disaster.
 - Session 2: The second session is more of an educational session for both the facilitators and participants. This session demonstrates hazards and strengths of a community from both the perspectives of the citizens themselves as well as the emergency responders. During this session, the end goal is to develop a vision for the community’s future.
 - Session 3: This session is utilized to develop an action plan for the community members to come together to solve a problem that will help increase their resilience. The end goal is for the participants to walk away with an actionable item and a plan in which to pursue it.
 - The Program Manager as well as local emergency services personnel will work for the months leading up to the first session to target groups to give a “pitch” of the workshop to and to encourage their attendance. Groups that are of particular interest include faith-based communities (including groups congregated around large churches, mosques, and temples as they are more culturally aware) and at-risk communities including non-English speaking, those with disabilities, and aging populations.

The benefit of working virtually will also come into play in ensuring a change in preparedness culture for Larimer County residents and future generations as this gives us a means in which to connect to younger populations. As demonstrated by a 2017 study done by Pew Research Center, it was found that “seven-in-ten Americans use social media to connect with one another, engage with news content, share information, and entertain themselves.” Furthermore, this study demonstrated that popular social media pages, such as Facebook, of the users studied, 88% were young adults between the ages of 18-29¹. By utilizing social media platforms, as well as creating a virtual hub specifically for county residents

to interact and to disseminate hazard awareness education, we can more likely reach out to the younger generation that will hopefully perpetuate this type of cultural change forward into future generations.

GRANT DELIVERABLES:

Larimer County was awarded a Community Block Development Grant – Disaster Relief (CBDG-DR) grant from the Colorado Department of Local Affairs with the intention of creating the Larimer Connects Program. The overall goal of providing the funding to Larimer County was to utilize the funds to create a program that is multi-faceted, multi-organizational, and attempts to reduce community and countywide fragility and vulnerability, and increase overall resilience by building social capital and community connectedness.

Larimer County was provided with the following deliverables in receiving the grant funding:

- 1. Creation of a consistent and inclusive community outreach and engagement program to work with the educational and outreach efforts of county government, emergency responders, non-profit organizations, and the community in order to enhance social capital, adaptive capacity, and connectedness during disasters**

How this will be achieved:

Community outreach, especially that which is being extended by a recognized government entity, is most effective when we meet communities on their turf. As a result, Larimer Connects will make it a priority to engage in outreach activities that coincide with local social events or getting on the agenda of social group and organization meetings already in place in communities. Other outreach activities include:

- Working collaboratively with the Resilience Networkⁱⁱ to make sure we are seeking solutions to community needs that are across all 6 community sectors and we are working across-sectors versus in silos
- Creation of Larimer Connects social media pages on both Facebook & Twitter to promote activities, ask for community feedback, and to engage with other social groups and organizations (including NGOs, non-profits)
- Working with elected officials and emergency services in Berthoud/Loveland to facilitate 3-session community engagement workshop centered around the importance of building social capital with the final session ending in creating a plan for community action to improve resilience through social cohesion

2. Strengthening of non-governmental/non-profit resources, and coordination and collaboration by coordinating the ongoing development of strong independent Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster

How this will be achieved:

The largest gap for Non-governmental and non-profit groups is the ability to effectively inform their respective community about what they do and that especially in rural communities, they are not aware of what resources they can provide. Through the partnership with Larimer Connects, non-governmental and non-profit groups have an additional platform in which to promote their services and resources. Larimer Connects also helps facilitate meetings or establish connecting lines between community needs and non-governmental or non-profit groups that can meet these needs.

3. Coordinating the transition of the Larimer Long-Term Recovery Group from recovery activities to VOAD resilience

How this was achieved:

This deliverable was completed before the on-boarding Larimer Connects Program Manager and the onset of the Larimer Connects Program itself. Larimer County Office of Emergency Management (OEM) worked closely with the Volunteer Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD) Coordinator to ensure a smooth transition from Long-Term Recovery Group (LTRG) functions post-disaster to a robust VOAD structure. This included the development on an LTRG Annex to the Larimer County Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan (CEMP), clearly outlining how the VOAD would function as an LTRG in future disasters based off of lessons learned from 2012 and 2013. Additionally, the VOAD formalized their structure for long-term success and began meeting regularly to address challenges in response and recovery. The VOAD has held a series of exercises, and participated in County exercises to further refine these practice and procedures. Finally, all LTRG tasks were transferred to appropriate partner agencies to continue through the end of recovery, including tasks given to Larimer County OEM for continued recovery success.

4. Creation of countywide resource alliance network and website to help communities connect to resources in order to assist in recovery efforts and maximize access to resources in the future

How this will be achieved:

The aforementioned creation of hub network allows for a location for physical hubs, but is also a social network and team made up of representatives from each community in the network. This promotes connectivity between communities, while preserving the identity of individual communities, but also ensures that if one community is compromised, there is still a physical location in which to access resources and information for surrounding communities.

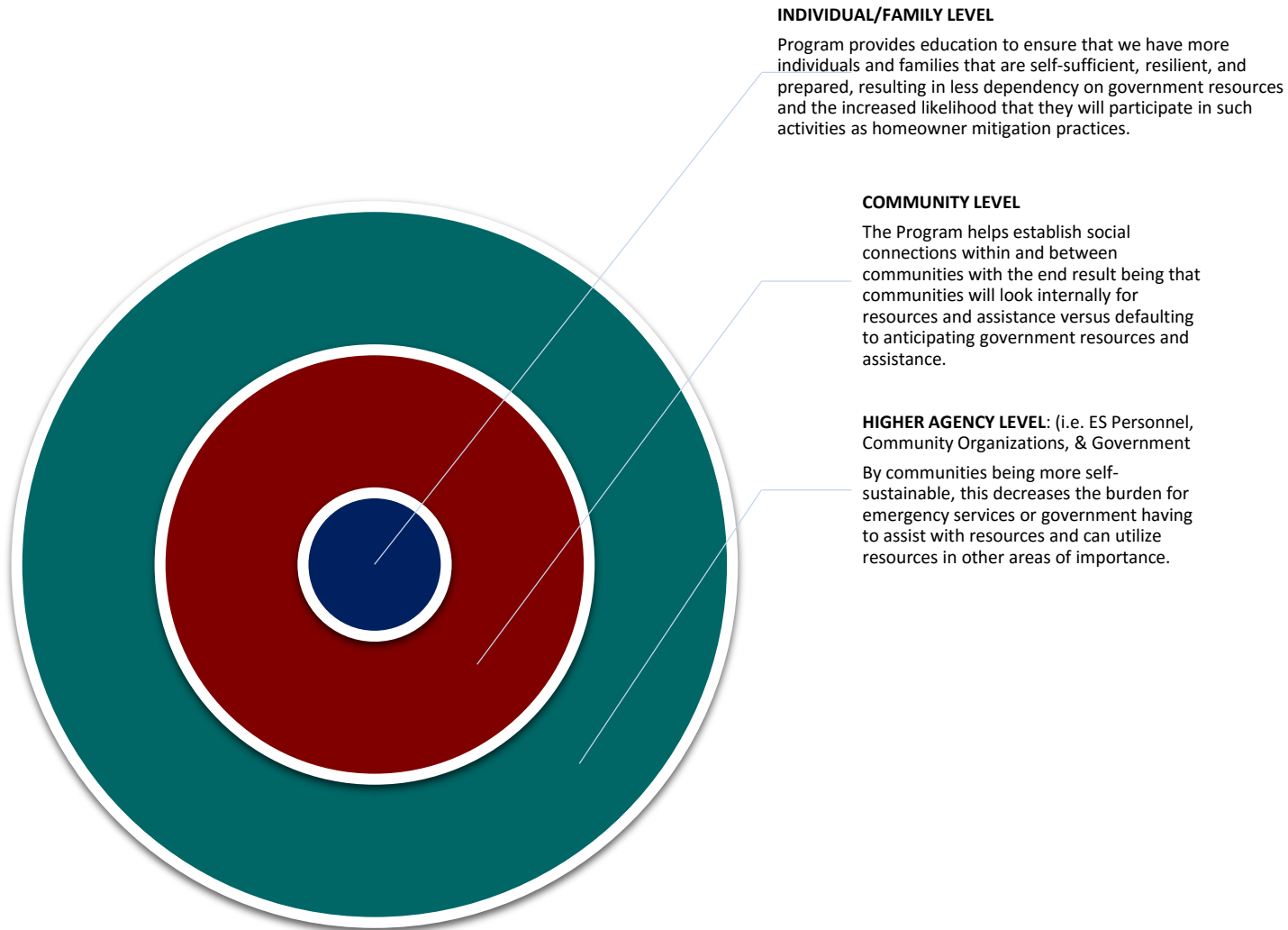
In order to meet the deliverable of an online resource alliance network website, there will be a creation of an Online Community Engagement Tool that will serve as an interactive virtual hub for information sharing and accessing resources.

The Online Community Engagement Tool will have the following capabilities:

- A non-social media platform for social groups and individuals to connect online and promote awareness of activities, ways to be involved in the community, share information, a platform to provide outreach for social groups and entities, and to educate about resources available throughout county
- Users can receive information tailored to interest of user
- Incentivizes organizations to participate as more engagement gives that group higher ranking
 - Will also have opportunity to have their org showcased, which gives county opportunity to know what is going on with organizations around the county

BENEFITS OF THIS PROGRAM:

The benefits of this program can be visualized utilizing a bullseye model. The benefits of this program work outward from the individual level, but how each group is benefitted also mutually benefits the next level.



The initial investment of this program creates long-term revenue. Historically, government programs and emergency management have been done in such a way that the public has developed a sort of “learned dependency” on government resources, especially in an adverse situation. This program seeks to minimize that dependency as much as possible by empowering communities to take charge of their own self-sustainability and resilience. This program helps solve the following problems:

1.) High dependency on emergency services and resources:

During an adverse situation or incident, the public is heavily reliant on emergency services. The public looks to these agencies for direction and often times we run into situations such as those who will not evacuate unless being told to, even if they feel they are in direct danger. A phenomenon that occurs especially in rural communities is that culturally-speaking, emergency services, particularly volunteer fire departments are seen as community leadership. In a situation such as a wildfire, the public will overwhelm fire department phone lines or flock to

the fire department seeking information and direction. By creating hubs, communities can provide this information to one another on their own, decreasing the burden on emergency officials – who then can do the incident-related missions they are meant to do as responders.

2.) *Efficient allocation of resources:*

Through the creation of self-reliant communities, this creates a very cost-effective advantage for Larimer County. By creating social networks that are equipped with the education and resources to work together, Larimer County will experience long-term return on revenue as Larimer County will not have to continuously provide resources to at-risk communities. These communities, through Larimer Connects, are developing skills and allocating resources to be able to sustain themselves long-term and to better work internally to solve problems and seek solutions to needs.

In addition to creating significant economic and community improvements, this program provides benefits to the County entity as well. This program helps alleviate such issues as:

1.) *Lack of connection and communication between County communities and the County.*

Larimer County communities complained largely of not being aware of what resources were available to them, and particularly, how to access them. Through Larimer Connects, and the social network established as a part of the program, community leaders have a trusted agent whom to provide information they receive from their community members. This gives the County the ability to more consistently be aware of issues that arise in the communities in Larimer County (especially those more disconnected in rural areas) and be better able to serve them. In addition, by the County being more frequently informed of community issues, it allows the County to provide and plan for more long-term service and more efficiently allocate resources, not to mention have the ability to anticipate problems or needs as they arise and act more quickly upon them.

2.) *Lack of government trust and the perception of the lack of follow-through in County initiatives/assistance.*

This program is, by definition, by the community and for the community. This program allows Larimer County communities to have fairly free reign to address issues in their area, and to be able to more effectively communicate needs to improve their community to the County. By allowing this freedom to communities, and by illustrating how the county truly cares about and takes consideration of the local-led initiatives, this improves governmental relations between Larimer County populations and Larimer County.

3.) *The continual desire to always be innovative and improving customer experience/service as a County.*

A key aspect of this program is the ability to have a flexible manager who can travel to communities and meet with them continually face-to-face. This shows that the County is willing to meet constituents on their terms as often as possible and have a human being interact with them versus relying on technology to interact with community members. Additionally, the

County can provide better outreach in informing constituents about services and resources the County can offer more quickly and efficiently.

4.) *Excessive use of resources during and after a disaster.*

Larimer Connects seeks to continually provide education on hazard awareness, mitigation strategies, and tools to ensure better self-reliance. In addition, by building social capacity and social networks, the goal is that communities will transition from immediately seeking governmental assistance in times of disaster and instead will start to look internally for resources and assistance. This will allow the County to better allocate resources where they are more needed, as communities will be more self-reliant versus dependent.

5. *Connection point between communities and county services*

Larimer Connects seeks to be a connection point between vital county services and the communities that are served. This is important in all aspects of county business, not just in emergency or disaster situations. In many cases, community members do not understand the differences between county services, public utilities, special districts, private sector partners and non-profits. By having a point of connection at either the community-led hub or through direct interaction with the Larimer Connects Project Manager, community members will become more educated and aware of services available and where to find them.

CONCLUSION:

Larimer Connects is an opportunity to improve communities. Through collective, collaborative, and locally-led action, together we can build social capacity to ensure more resilient futures for Larimer County communities. Through improved social networks and by providing community members with the tools they need to be more self-reliant, prepared, and capable, we believe that Larimer County populations will be able to recover more quickly, band together more effectively, and come out stronger than before after our next emergency or disaster. These efforts have the added benefit of building strong communities for day-to-day living to assist community members with problem solving, community-led solutions, and community connections that are vital to a healthy and thriving Larimer County.

ⁱ Pew Research Center. (January 2017). *Demographics of Social Media Users and Adoption in the United States* (Fact Sheet). Retrieved from <http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheet/social-media/>

ⁱⁱ A collaborative network entity comprised of representatives from each State-recognized community sector including: Economic Development, Community, Infrastructure, Health and Social, Housing, and Natural Resources