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Local angles: Delaware, Maryland, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Virginia, West Virginia and Washington, D.C.

FEMA grant will help disadvantaged communities prepare for disasters

CHAPEL HILL -- With the 2005 hurricane season quickly in full effect, MDC Inc. and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill have received a \$1.5 million grant from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to help disadvantaged communities in six states and the District of Columbia prepare for disasters.

The Emergency Preparedness Demonstration Program will be conducted through a partnership between MDC, an independent nonprofit research organization based in Chapel Hill, and the Center for Urban and Regional Studies in UNC's College of Arts and Sciences. MDC will be the lead partner for the two-year program, which will alert residents to the hazards of natural, technological and manmade disasters and communicate what they can do to be better prepared.

The program will be carried out in Delaware, Maryland, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Virginia, West Virginia and Washington, D.C., all of which received major presidential disaster declarations as a result of damages inflicted by Hurricane Isabel in 2003.

The program will conduct extensive research on disaster awareness, develop culturally sensitive information and education materials, provide technical assistance and document the successes after community-based "demonstration projects" in selected areas.

MDC focuses on expanding opportunity, reducing poverty and building inclusive civic cultures in the South and other regions. Its core strategies include developing responsive public policies, demonstrating effective programs, building institutional and community capacity for progress and informing the public dialogue.

The Center for Urban and Regional Studies conducts and supports research on urban and regional affairs - research that helps build healthy, sustainable communities nationwide and worldwide.

"We'll be looking at why the message about emergency preparedness is not getting through to these disadvantaged communities," said lead UNC researcher Dr. Philip R. Berke, a faculty fellow at the center and professor of city and regional planning.

"We want to use communities' knowledge and leadership to build their capacity to take self-directed, disaster-reduction initiatives. The action plans developed by the communities will focus on reducing the harm of future disasters."

Berke, whose research and teaching interests are in land use and environmental planning, said FEMA chose communities affected by Hurricane Isabel because the storm created a vast area of destruction and a lot of disadvantaged communities were affected by the hurricane.

Researchers will examine the following questions both before and after the demonstration projects in various communities:

- Has the community's capacity to undertake coordinated action to develop and implement emergency preparedness plans improved?
- Has the knowledge and understanding of what to do in preparation for a disaster been raised?
- What are the actual activities and plans that have been developed, such as individual household and community emergency plans, evacuation routes, etc.?

"FEMA wanted to engage the community in this process, which is a strength of MDC," said Dr. John Cooper, who received his doctorate in city and regional planning from UNC in 2004. Cooper, who worked for the state Division of Emergency Management for two years, will be the project manager and lead researcher at MDC.

"We'll be looking at how better equipped communities are after the demonstration projects to not only take on emergency preparedness and response, but other issues as well. Have we created new leaders? Is there an organization

in place that has taken on the role of community awareness?"

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