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400 Silver Cedar Court . Suite 300 . Chapel Hill, NC, 27514 . Phone: (919) 968-4531 . www.mdcinc.org

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For More Information:
Mirinda Kossoff
Communications Director
(919) 968-4531
mkossoff@mdcinc.org

MDC Disaster Expert Says Inclusive Disaster Planning Should Begin Now

Missing in New Orleans: a community disaster plan that included the disadvantaged

Chapel Hill, NC – Appropriate disaster planning includes the voices and needs of the disadvantaged says MDC’s expert in emergency management and land use planning, John Cooper, Ph.D. Cooper, who has conducted extensive research on disaster planning, says he found only 19 instances in a nationwide sample of 62 flood mitigation plans in which disaster planning accounted for the needs of disadvantaged groups.

“We need a paradigm shift in the way we think about disaster planning,” Cooper says. “We need to plan in a way that is culturally appropriate and effective, which includes understanding the logic of the disadvantaged.” That logic, Cooper says, often carries a distrust of authorities, a false sense of security and a lack of understanding of true risks. “The disadvantaged don’t have the luxury of planning for the future; their priority is to get by from day to day,” Cooper says.

Local planners who have the commitment and capacity to include the disadvantaged and find effective ways to reach out to them will be more successful, Cooper says. And the planning should start now while the nation’s attention is focused on helping the survivors of Katrina. Low-cost measures, such as a special needs registry, can be taken immediately. A special needs registry would include the names of people, by neighborhood, who require special assistance during an emergency (the elderly, people with disabilities, single mothers). “Know your folks and be able to account for them,” Cooper says.

“What we’re talking about is equity,” Cooper says. “If we are to live up to our national ideals, then we have to meet people where they are and provide them with the resources necessary for them not just to survive, but to thrive.”

Note: Dr. Cooper is currently the project director for the FEMA Emergency Preparedness Demonstration Program. A joint initiative of MDC and the Center for Urban and Regional Studies at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, the demonstration program is supported by a \$1.5 million grant (made in July) from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to help disadvantaged communities in six states and the District of Columbia prepare for disasters. 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. Previously, Dr. Cooper spent two years with the North Carolina Division of Emergency Management and worked on the response team for hurricanes Fran and Floyd.

About MDC: **MDC** is a private, nonpartisan nonprofit headquartered in Chapel Hill, NC. Founded in 1967 to identify and help remove barriers to progress for the South, MDC has been publishing research and developing policies and programs focused on expanding opportunity, reducing poverty and building inclusive civic cultures in the American South for the past 37 years. Its core strategies include:

- creating responsive public policies
- demonstrating effective programs
- building institutional and community capacity for progress
- informing the public dialogue.

