

Faculty Member Participates on China Earthquake Research Team

Tricia Wachtendorf, assistant professor of sociology and associate director of the Disaster Research Center (DRC), recently returned from a two week reconnaissance trip to Sichuan Province, China. Part of a multi-disciplinary team from across the country and supported by the Earthquake Engineering Research Institute and the National Science Foundation, Dr. Wachtendorf's work focused on the societal and community impacts of the May 12th earthquake the devastated the region.

"These reconnaissance efforts are important to collect information that may not otherwise be available by the time formal research projects are funded, identify knowledge gaps where additional research is most needed, and establish or strengthen ties with local researchers and agencies conducting work in the impacted areas."



Hosted by the China Earthquake Administration in the early part of August 2008, the team spent significant time traversing the province and spending time in heavily impacted areas. According to Wachtendorf, the country had made significant strides in a very short period of time. She visited one shelter camp for 12,000 people that was constructed in just 10 days and opened just over two week after the quake. At the same time, much work remained to be done.

"Aftershocks are a daily experience, landslides continue to block access to areas, some towns are completely destroyed. The people we spoke with were unsure what the next few months would bring, particularly as government stipend support was coming to an end. At the same time, however, it was common to see people taking the initiative to clean up their own communities one brick at a time, slowly reopening their businesses, and demonstrating a great deal of resilience."



Wachtendorf learned that each impacted area has been paired up with another province or major city in China to help fund the reconstruction. It was an innovative approach designed to facilitate the response and recovery efforts. One of the many issues Wachtendorf hopes to explore further is the role of volunteers and non-governmental organizations in the disaster response and relief efforts, a role more prominent, she learned, than in previous disasters.

"There are differences and similarities between countries. There are many common social and behavioral features of disasters, but some are country or region specific," she says. "Learning from earthquakes is vital if we are to better understand these events and take steps to make our communities safer."

Dr. Wachtendorf and other DRC researchers participated in a similar reconnaissance effort one month after the Indian Ocean tsunami. This work not only led to publications on the event, but also collaborative efforts between the University of Delaware and scholars in India. This summer, two graduate students from India's Jamsetji Tata Centre for Disaster Management joined DRC's summer research program. Wachtendorf is hopeful that similar fruitful collaborations will develop with colleagues in China around earthquake impacts and recovery.

