

ACT Houston: Landscape Scan Briefing & Initiative Orientation

Orientation Summary

On January 16, 2025, the Gulf Research Program (GRP) of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine held a convening event to introduce its Adaptive Capacities for Transformation (ACT) Initiative. The first half of this event brought together a variety of participants from local nonprofits and the second half of the event added participants from local foundations, academic institutions, and government agencies. It served as a discussion forum for the findings of a recent landscape scan that mapped ongoing health and resilience efforts in Harris County Precincts One and Two (including areas of Houston), TX, and as an orientation to its follow-on work: the ACT Initiative.

The GRP's goal was to have participants gain a deeper understanding of three major questions:

- (1) What do the landscape scan findings mean to participants and their work?
- (2) What do the landscape scan findings mean to the GRP and its work?
- (3) What could the landscape scan findings mean for everyone (participants and GRP) going forward in a collaboration via The ACT Initiative?

Participants came with a shared interest in learning more about ACT, connecting with others, tackling similar issues, and identifying new opportunities for working together. GRP staff opened the session by emphasizing these goals, expressing their hope that the ACT Initiative would evolve into a collaborative framework capable of advancing resilience and public health outcomes.

A key component of the event was the presentation of a landscape scan by consultant Dr. Juan Antonio Sorto. His work identified 21 and 16 organizations with ongoing or planned efforts that address climate, health, and equity in Harris County Precinct One and Two, respectively, painting a detailed picture of both the strengths and challenges shaping the community's health and resilience landscape. Dr. Sorto identified that many organizations share strengths such as long-standing operations, regular in-person meetings, and a strong commitment to community health equity. However, major challenges include limited resources, competition over funding, and poor collaboration among community, academic, and governmental groups. He highlighted that the region is rich in opportunities for further funder investment.

These findings led to a discussion among attendees on the accuracy and meaningfulness of the findings identified through the landscape scan. Participants shared their own experiences and perspectives, reflecting on the complex power dynamics that exist among individuals, groups, organizations, and institutions. They also noted challenges in facilitating effective

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knowledge sharing among local nonprofits and community groups. Additional concerns included limitations in project implementation due to divided responsibilities between city (Houston) and county (Harris County) services, as well as the growing competition for funding among local organizations.

To provide a scientific foundation for this work, the GRP introduced group concept mapping as the primary methodology through which ACT will gather input and organize collective priorities. Ms. Cheryl Noble from Concept Systems, Inc., provided an orientation to this methodology and piloted a focus prompt: “What does your community need to deal with the effects of multiple disasters?”

Feedback from participants included the following comments on prompt phrasing:

- Clarifying disaster phases: Use plain language like “before, during, and after” to describe phases of the disaster cycle and organize responses accordingly.
- Enhancing relevance: Include specific disaster examples (e.g., industrial pollution) and describe negative impacts (psychological, physical, logistical) to make the prompt more relatable.
- Emphasize equity and impact: Acknowledge that disasters have disproportionate effects on certain groups and are systemic, intergenerational, and compounding.
- Refining terminology: Replace vague terms like “deal with” with more specific language such as “surviving, overcoming, or bouncing back.”
- Clarifying definitions and scope: Define what is meant by “community” (e.g., cultural, geographic) and distinguish between short-term and long-term needs.
- Improving data collection and structure: Collect demographic data from respondents and provide a structured tool (e.g., matrix) for organizing thoughts across disaster phases and levels (individual, community, etc.).

In preparation for the next phase of the ACT Initiative, the event concluded with a stakeholder mapping exercise. The purpose of this exercise was to gather participants’ perspectives on which stakeholder groups should be considered for future consultation. Using a matrix, participants assessed each stakeholder group’s potential interest in engaging with health-, resilience-, and/or disaster-related issues and their influence within the community (both on a high versus low scale). This exercise helped identify stakeholders whose positioning may inform or affect future engagement efforts under the ACT Initiative.