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Weather Effects on Local Social Programs: A Look at Hospice

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A simplified goal...

- Assess whether local social programs use weather information for short-term (i.e., 12- to 48-hour) planning; from what sources they obtain this information; and how they use this information for decision making
- Get a sense of whether my exploration into this area has potential, based on a pilot interview with two colleagues

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My guinea pigs

- Finally...two weeks ago, interviewed two colleagues from Heartland Hospice
 - Susan, hospice volunteer coordinator
 - Sally, bereavement coordinator
- “14” questions -- assess work situation, current use of weather, potential for future use of weather info
- Intended it to be an hour...ultimately lasted nearly an hour and 45 minutes!

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Some interesting responses

- Flexibility of work-related tasks and meetings
 - Can cancel/postpone about half the time
 - Hospice facility covers large area (from whole Denver metro region to Boulder to Berthoud), so last-minute cancellations are harder
 - Interdisciplinary team meeting every other Thursday with whole hospice team (docs, nurses, chaplain, social workers, Susan, Sally)

Asked for my input on developing a weather “policy” specifically for these meetings!

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...and more responses

- How job is affected by weather
 - Road conditions, fog
 - Sally: extremely cold temps problematic when planning an outing for elderly bereaved client
 - On scale of 1 to 10 (1=never, 10=always) rank weather as 1 to 2 in terms of its effect on their daily work

Most important ... all times of day!

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...even more responses

- Where they get weather info
 - Forecasts from TV (Sally) and NPR (Susan) and observations by looking out the window or asking others...never check NWS website
 - Susan: uses www.cotrip.org for road conditions
- Confidence in forecasts
 - Sally: 50% confidence...but it's more about varying topography than forecasters
 - Susan: “don't really believe them at all”...but her solution is to be prepared with extra clothes, food, shovels, candles, etc. in her car at all times!

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5 1/2 lessons learned

1. Patience is a virtue
2. It's easy for the interviewee to digress and/or tell stories when he/she is a friend (or maybe this is just part of the process?)
3. It's hard to remain the interviewer and not slip into the co-converser when interviewing friends
4. It's hard to write interview questions
5. To follow your interview guideline or not...that is the question!
 - 5(a). Whether to ask questions in order?
 - 5(b). Whether to ask some questions at all?

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What next?

- CAN'T generalize these results to others in the hospice team, to other hospices, or to other social programs!
- CAN use this experience to refine what questions to ask in the future or possibly to develop a survey

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What else?

- Even though Susan and Sally didn't consider weather a strongly affecting factor in their typical work life, there are some opportunities...
 - Help them define a weather policy
 - Help them know what they don't know (e.g., how to access and interpret radar information)
 - Other, possibly more weather-sensitive, users: Meals on Wheels, special transit services, Boulder country aging services division

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Assessing the situation

1. How far in advance do you plan the majority of your daily work tasks? (e.g., week or more, approximately 3-6 days, 1-2 days, the same day)
2. How flexible are the majority of these tasks? Can they be postponed/cancelled if necessary?
3. Do you think your job is affected by weather? Are there certain conditions that constitute “problematic” weather to you, and if so, what are they?
4. Does Heartland have a formal policy indicating what to do in the event of problematic weather? Are there certain “thresholds” that affect when the policy goes into place (e.g., if there are 6 inches of snow, if the temp is below freezing) or it based on the discretion of the administrator?
5. You have several obligations/factors affecting your daily work. On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is never and 10 is always, where do you rank weather as a factor?

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Current use of weather info

7. Do you use weather information to make personal decisions? If so, what do you use it primarily for?
8. Do you use weather information to make decisions relating to work (e.g., whether to meet volunteers, whether to meet with bereavement clients) ... a “personal weather policy” of sorts? If so, how do you use such information? When do you make such decisions? Can you give any examples of what you do or how you change your plans?
9. What is your primary source for getting your weather information?
10. How often do you check the weather forecast?
11. How confident are you in the accuracy of the weather forecasts you receive? Does this affect whether/how you use the forecasts to make work-related decisions?

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Potential for future use

12. Would you use weather forecasts more for your work planning if you knew where to seek such information?
13. If so, what kinds of information do you most want to know? Type of weather, timing of weather, amount of weather?
14. How far in advance do you ideally need reliable, accurate weather forecasts?
15. Can you think of a weather event that really affected your work? Was there any weather information you would have liked to have received that might have changed what you did that day or how you did it?