

Critical Incident Preparedness: What You Need to Know to Be Ready

by Douglas Robertson

When it comes to your response to a critical incident or some type of emergency situation within your organization or at your facility, nothing rings more true than that old Boy Scouts' motto, "Be Prepared." Preparedness is the *key* in emergency management. A facility's or organization's response, mitigation and recovery efforts are all going to be affected and ultimately judged by how well it is prepared.

In today's world, many of the critical incidents potentially faced are going to involve responders from different disciplines, agencies and jurisdictions. Each agency may have different responsibilities, but each will all share the same goals. The goal, as the author of an organization's plan, is to provide an effective and efficient response. In order to achieve that goal, a plan needs to provide a consistent standardized approach that will allow responders from different organizations, agencies and locales to work together. This, in turn, will allow them to respond to and recover from critical incidents, regardless of cause, size or complexity.

The preparedness phase in emergency management is an equation of multiple factors: **Planning + Communication and Information + Cooperation + Training = Preparedness.** This article will examine all of the factors within this equation and give insight into how to better prepare your organization.

Elements in Planning

So what constitutes planning and what are the key elements to an effective plan? The first step is to develop a sound *management* plan beforehand. The emphasis here is on management, not tactics or operations. The incident itself dictates the tactics to be used to respond and what objectives to achieve.

Two of the most important elements that must be included are flexibility and adaptability. Too rigid plans that cannot be applied to all hazards will ultimately cause confusion, delays and, ultimately, failure. In its *Final Report to Investigate the Preparedness for and Response to Hurricane Katrina*, the US House of Representatives Select Bipartisan Committee cited: "... a failure of agility. Response plans at all levels of government lacked flexibility and adaptability. Inflexible

procedures often delayed the response. Officials at all levels seemed to be waiting for the disaster that fit their plans, rather than planning and building scalable capacities to meet whatever Mother Nature threw at them."

Your plan should be an all-hazards plan – to include natural and manmade disasters, biochemical or hazardous materials incidents and acts of terrorism – that can be executed regardless of the size or complexity of the incident. It should be designed so that your organization can utilize it throughout day-to-day operations as well as when disaster strikes. It should reach across all organizational, jurisdictional and disciplinary lines and be designed to improve coordination between public and private entities.

Information Emphasis

The next factor is communications and information. There cannot be enough emphasis placed on communications and the timely flow of accurate and consistent information. Every plan needs to include a communication and information component. In many of the recent events of major national or regional significance, the inability for responders to communicate with one another caused significant command, operational and safety issues that delayed and compromised the effectiveness of the response.

Compounding these issues was the dissemination of inaccurate, unsubstantiated and, in some cases, false information released by public officials and the media to the public and to responders alike.

Illustrating this point was the massive breakdown in public safety radio systems, which severely hampered police, fire and emergency medical personnel from communicating via a common radio system. This limited command and control, situational awareness, and the ability to address unsubstantiated media reporting – crucial factors in the failure in response to these events. *The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks in the United States 9/11 Report* calls for the "improved connectivity for public safety communications."

To further illustrate the importance of information, the *Final Report to Investigate Hurricane Katrina* found that, "the lack of a government public communications strategy and media hype of violence exacerbated public concerns, led to civil unrest and further delayed relief. Many of the problems we have identified can be categorized as 'information gaps' – or at least problems with information-related implications, or failures to act decisively because information was sketchy at best. Better information would have been an optimal weapon against Katrina. Information sent to the right people at the right place at the right time."

The flow of information is absolutely essential, not only for information released to the media and the public-at-large, but also information disseminated across jurisdictional, municipal and intergovernmental lines of authority and decision making. Accurate

continued on page 16



The Oneonta WWTP inundated by the June floodwaters

Photo by Olsago County Emergency Services



Photo by Kevin Delaney, NYSDEC Region 7

A 10,000 gallon fuel oil tank is trapped next to a Binghamton bridge during the June flood.

situational awareness is critical for commanders and leaders in making the right decisions based on accurate and timely intelligence.

Any response plan must include a comprehensive communications and information component. Pre plan how your staff and emergency responders will be notified or contacted regarding the incident and how they will communicate; and be sure to

include a contingency plan should the primary communications infrastructure become disabled as a result of the incident. Your communications plan should identify the types of devices, methods or systems to use.

If your plan calls for the use of land mobile radios, you should also include a frequency, channel or talk group plan segregating the various functions that will be ongoing during your response to the incident. By assigning

different methods of communicating to the various functions (i.e., operations, command, logistics, etc.) it will greatly reduce confusion among responders and managers.

Make sure your plan includes an information officer and identify the person in this position at the onset of any event. This one person should act as the sole central point of contact for all media representatives and a clearinghouse for the dissemination of public information. It is critical to remember that the release of any and all information needs to be cleared with the incident commander who is ultimately responsible for the management of the event and any information or public statements made should be coordinated with other interrelated incidents ongoing at the time.

Equally important is to insure that there is a coordinated process in place to share information throughout the organization. Information should move within agencies, across departments and between jurisdictions of government in a seamless, secure and efficient manner. Keeping responders informed will minimize freelancing and provide greater accountability of resources and situational awareness, thereby enhancing your organization's response and recovery efforts.

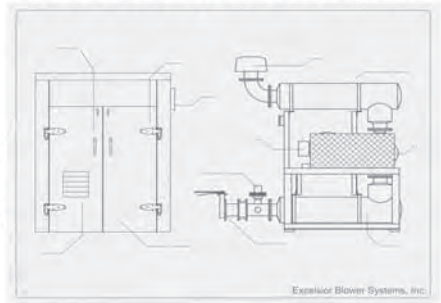
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Cooperation

The next element is cooperation. Establish a sound relationship with your local emergency service providers, such as the police and fire departments or the emergency medical providers. The time to establish these relationships is *not* when a critical incident has occurred, but beforehand, so that when an incident occurs, an established liaison exists with those personnel and agencies that are going to respond to your event. Having that rapport or relationship provides a greater level of comfort when it comes to another person's knowledge, skills and abilities in dealing with an event at your facility. It greatly enhances the communications functions of incident management.

Along with relationships is the knowledge of what resources and assets you have within the organization at your immediate disposal and knowing how and where you can readily obtain those you do not have. Today with limited resources, the highly complex and inter-related incidents we may face require a greater use of mutual aid and Emergency Management Assistance Compacts or EMACs. Mutual aid and EMACs are pre-established formal agreements that can be activated to provide immediate assistance and resources in the face of a disaster or critical incident. Jurisdictions at all levels are encouraged to enter into agreements with other jurisdictions, the private sector and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Emergency Training

Finally, there is training. All members of your organization need to receive some level of emergency management training, whether it is simple awareness level training for line-level personnel, or more advanced

degrees of training for first-line supervisors to top-level managers and administrators. Your employees will play a role in your response and recovery efforts. It is critical that they each have some understanding of the terminology, systems and protocols to use.

Once your staff has the appropriate level of training, your organization should practice or hold drills on the emergency plan, minimally on a semi-annual basis. These drills should be specific to one or two objectives and reflect real world conditions as much as possible. They should also include those entities that will inevitably be players in the response to an actual event. Training together helps to foster the cooperation component and provides all the participants with a better understanding of their counterpart's role in the response effort.

Drills and exercises should also incorporate several knowledgeable and skilled facilitators and evaluators that can provide essential assistance and feedback. Post-action reviews or debriefings also are needed to provide feedback to the participants and to evaluate preparedness and response levels. Implement the lessons learned from these drills.

In July 2004 an exercise known as "Hurricane Pam" simulated a fictional, strong category three to category four hurricane named Pam that hit the New Orleans area. The purpose of the exercise was to help officials develop a joint response plan for a catastrophic hurricane in Louisiana.

Certain assumptions were built into the exercise. Some of those assumptions were that 300,000 would not evacuate; 97 percent of all communications systems would be down; boats and helicopters would be needed for thousands of rescues because many residents would be stranded by floodwaters; and, the catastrophic flood would leave swaths of southeast Louisiana uninhabitable for more than a year.

Many of the lessons from the Pam exercise were designed to improve the region's preparedness plans. However, the House Committee's report determined that: "The Hurricane Pam exercise reflected recognition by all levels of government of the dangers of a category 4 or 5 hurricane

striking New Orleans, yet implementation of lessons learned from Hurricane Pam was incomplete." Therefore, it is imperative to take immediate action to correct any deficiencies or shortcomings discovered in the training and exercise process.

Once you have your preparedness plan drafted and implemented, it must be disseminated to everyone within your organization. To reiterate, everyone in your organization is a potential resource and a pivotal participant in your response and recovery efforts. If everyone is not familiar with the plan or the plan is not implemented according to your policy, procedures and training, you run the risk of failing in your objectives.

Incident Command System

In New York State and in the rest of the nation, the accepted emergency management system is the nationally recognized Incident Command System or ICS. This system meets all the necessary criteria to be a highly flexible standard onsite, all-hazard incident management system. Some of the features of ICS include: common terminology; organizational resources; a manageable span of control; standardized organizational facilities; standardized use of position titles; a reliance on an Incident Action Plan (IAP); integrated communications; and resource accountability.

The ICS should be the foundation on which your emergency preparedness plan is built. By doing so, you will insure your organization will have a consistent standardized approach that will allow responders from different organizations, agencies and locales to work together effectively and efficiently. Training in ICS is available from a variety of resources, including your local emergency management or domestic preparedness office, the New York State Office of Emergency Management (SEMO) and the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Emergency Management Institute.

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Photo courtesy of OCC Public Safety Training Center

A public safety training class recently held at Onondaga Community College.