

BY ROD GOULD, ICMA-CM

TUNE UP YOUR EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

Steps to take now

Responding to an emergency in the community is the one local government service a manager hopes never to provide. Yet, chances are the service will be needed, perhaps multiple times, during a manager's career.

Earthquakes, floods, mass shootings, toxic spills, tornados, wildfires, and even terrorist incidents are not out of the question. The time spent preparing and practicing will pay off many times over when an emergency does occur. It is local government's greatest opportunity to shine or fail.

Here are steps to follow to become ready for such an event:

Update the local government's emergency operations plan and checklists.

Too often, these items are out-of-date and of little use. The checklists are important for your disaster service workers, who may need simple reminders in order to get started when a disaster hits.

Equip and practice setting up an emergency operations center (EOC).

An EOC is the nerve center that manages local response. It need not be a stand-alone building, but it does need to be a space large enough for this function and also able to be set up with the needed furniture and equipment in a reasonably short period of time.

The technology and communications equipment need not be Space Age; however, they should be dependable and well understood. Have the school district's emergency center and local hospital representatives located close by or in the EOC.

Understand the National Incident Management System (NIMS). The NIMS approach really works. Train by using it so it becomes second nature. For information on NIMS, visit www.fema.gov/national-incident-management-system.

Orient disaster service workers and plan to meet their needs during an emergency. Many city and county employees don't know or forget that they are required to report and serve during an emergency in their communities.

It's a good idea to review this obligation regularly. Be sure to offer means for employees to communicate with their families and provide food, sleeping accommodations, and medical help to support them in performing their duties.

Know how regional resource decisions will be made. If the emergency is not localized, a community will be competing with others for emergency staffing, equipment, materials, and supplies. This should not be learned on the fly.

Obtain the needed equipment and supplies in advance. This may include emergency generators, cots, food, and water for disaster service workers; emergency packs for evacuees; and open contracts with local businesses for the rest. The communication system being used should be tied into the regional system as seamlessly as possible.

Feed a local government's website and local news stations with accurate

information on the local emergency and the response. Try to get elected officials on the air with regular updates.

Use geographic information systems to map the disaster and update the media. Don't underestimate the public's ability to access the Internet and your community's website to get up-to-the-minute information.

Be ready to make triage decisions.

Demands for emergency resources can quickly outstrip availability. Staff should be ready to make hard decisions to maximize the preservation of life and property. Elected officials should back staff in making these tough calls.

Use shifts for disaster service

workers. Don't use all of your personnel at once. Staff members will need to be relieved of their duties after the first 24 hours, so plan to use service workers in shifts. Hold briefings often in the EOC.

This allows everyone to hear information at the same time and to understand the decisions being made. Brief elected officials and those in the evacuation centers.

Don't scrimp on recordkeeping.

Having good records of the emergency and the decisions made throughout it are essential for after-action reporting and federal and state reimbursement. Have the forms and paperwork ready before the emergency. Get ready for recovery.

Assemble your development assistance and social service teams

because as soon as the emergency is over, residents will want answers on how to rebuild their homes and lives.

A manager's leadership and involvement is essential if a community is to be properly prepared. This is the height of public management service. **PM**



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