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Earthquake: Act II Emergency Planning Revisited

When actual disaster strikes how many of you in the fire service immediately run into your office and grab a copy of your disaster plan and open it to the appropriate page that matches the disaster in progress? Chances are very few. In most cases, we respond to an emergency that is in progress with a combination of training, experience, and mutual trust in our coworkers that results in a particular type of an operation. The plan, although it is important for bureaucratic reasons, is not often even referred to until the emergency is well under way. Of course, I am not referring to Incident Command Systems that we are using to gain control of our resources. I am talking about that Disaster Plan for the city...the thick one, with the dust on it.

Several months ago I wrote an article for "Fire Chief" about the planning aspects of dealing with major emergency operations by comparing the onset of emergencies to a type of rhythm in the community. The implication was simple. When an emergency strikes with a great deal of speed, there is very little time to talk about planning. If it has not been done before then, then it's not going to occur during the emergency. Another implication of the article was that the longer the emergency extends the more likely that the use of resources is going to require an extensive plan for replacement and relief. Little did we know when we produced that article that the state of California would have an opportunity to experience a type of incident that was a manifestation of that model. Of course, we are referring to the "world series" earthquake that occurred in San Francisco on October 17, 1989.

I was not among those who responded to the scene of that emergency. I strongly suspect that there will be many individuals who were involved at the scene who will be able to tell the stories of the actual incidents with a much more specificity and first hand accounting. However, as I sit watching my television set and responding to the telephone calls that emerged from the need to respond to that emergency, I collected some observations and perhaps some considerations that we need to incorporate back into the emergency planning cycle. These recommendations are also derived from numerous conversations I held with fire and local government officials in the peripheral areas during the debriefing period.

Observation Number One: While planning should be a comprehensive process, plans for operations should be kept as simple as possible.

Observation Number Two: Murphy's Law applies to communications during disaster operations. No matter how complex the communications and command and control system, it will be in a state of confusion for the initial episode of the emergency.



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Observation Number Three: The “Media” is not part of the damage assessment team for local government and their news broadcasts should not be used as a reflection of the severity of any calamity.

Observation Number Four: Well intentioned but spontaneous mutual aid is often more of a problem than dealing with the emergency.

Observation Number Five: While plans are important, individuals make a difference.

With respect to observation number one, almost all fire departments, police departments, and most municipalities have been encouraged over the last couple of years to develop rather comprehensive disaster plans. In many cases, the documents that have been produced by the planning process are voluminous and verge on being almost unreadable. Granted, those of us in the public safety services can probably recite segments out of disaster plans like chapters and verses out of the bible, but the vast majority of non-safety personnel regard these disaster plans as being almost unreadable.

In the initial episodes of a mass calamity, especially one that has large geographical impact, the public safety services are essentially removed from the scene. Granted, many of them will be hard at work dealing with isolated and specific incidents, but there is no way that the average community will be able to mobilize a sufficient number of public safety services to exercise all the elements of its plan. Instead, we fall back upon the use of the incident command system to deal with a specific site emergency and the community must fall back upon a disaster management system administered by a very large number of individuals who lack emergency services training.

Several years ago the IEMS Committee, working under the direction of the Federal Emergency Management Agency and in cooperation with the International Association of Fire Chiefs, produced a very simplified document entitled, “The Executive Officer’s Emergency Operations Guide.” This was essentially a very simplified checklist for those who lacked comprehensive training in emergency management. It gave them a series of do’s and don’ts. These types of simplified action plans are absolutely essential to reducing the type of dysfunctional behavior that occurs during a widespread emergency.

There are those who might say that if a person does not know exactly what to do then they shouldn’t take on any responsibility. That’s simply not facing up to reality. In the case of a lot of widespread emergencies, they are no longer the purview of strictly police, fire, and emergency medical services personnel. They involve the private sector and many elements of government functions that are nonemergency.



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The utility companies, the public works crews, construction crews, and so forth, are not trained to operate under an incident command system and are not going to follow extensive protocols that have been established for controlling uniform personnel. What is absolutely essential to the overall management is to have some type of a simplified incident management system that can be rapidly placed into the hands of non-uniform personnel so that their behaviors tend to be more synchronized with public safety.

A review of many tapes from the San Francisco earthquake revealed that a large percentage of the actions being taken at the scene of site emergencies were being taken by civilians. This type of spontaneous rescue operation is typical and, for all intents and purposes, probably impossible to control. The down side of this type of spontaneity is that it often results in individuals being in danger themselves or in failure of the system to actually develop an adequate prioritization of existing emergency services. In other words, civilians might be working on one very critical problem while emergency services personnel are working on a relatively minor one and they are not being coordinated.

The concept that was developed by the IEMS Committee was to develop a checklist type of card that was actually carried in an individual's wallet. It is unlikely that most disaster plans would fit into the glove box of a car much less the wallet of a person. Yet this approach has merit, especially if these kinds of emergency response directions can be placed in the hands of a sufficient number of people in the community that when spontaneous rescue operations do occur, there is someone who has an obligation to attempt to integrate that operation with an overall citywide effort.

The second dimension of this idea is that many communities are beginning to recognize that when a major emergency impact occurs, public safety services are the first resource to be overburdened. These cities have, therefore, begun to develop a "neighborhood hardening" program. Sunnyvale California has one such plan. If one has been around the business long enough, they may recall the old civil defense "medical self help program" that was in existence in the 1960's. The basis for that program was to recognize that most individuals, at the time of a mass emergency such as war, do not have the ability to use conventional services unless they fend for themselves.

Recognizing that these same phenomena can occur in many communities, some cities have opted to pass along information to neighborhood watch programs in cooperation with law enforcement to raise the level of neighborhood cohesiveness. Once again, merely by reviewing videotapes of events that occurred in San Francisco, it was clear that the sense of neighborhood was one of the stabilizing influences in the way in which the response was managed in specific areas.

Observation number two is nothing but an extension of the idea that if something is going to go wrong it always will. I am constantly amazed at the number of people who have emergency plans based upon the



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use of conventional communication systems. The interesting aspect is that many of them fail to prepare for a contingency in the event that there is a communications failure of those conventional systems. Public safety has spent literally billions of dollars in this country preparing radio and telephone networks. Almost all of them are vulnerable to one degree or another to geographically area wide impacts. Radio antennas have been dismantled, telephone systems have been knocked out, and, in general, the reliance upon a communications system is not backed up by a secondary system that is not as vulnerable. There are those who will not agree with this because they believe that public safety systems are built with a sufficient amount of redundancy and engineering standards that they will not be endangered. Yet, in looking at disaster after disaster, the greatest single problem in damage assessment has been getting adequate information out of these areas due to the fact that the commercial communication systems were disabled.

Many communities have incorporated the amateur radio operators as part of their system as a means of providing a strategy for this area. Others have chosen to treat the word "amateur" as a reality and treat the radio operators as "amateurs" and keep them out of the system. They are usually very competent people that are anything but amateurship at communications. A distinct advantage of using parallel communication systems for information transference has to do with the laws of averages. It is highly improbable that two totally separate communication links will be disabled at exactly the same time. The amateur radio people tend to rely upon self generated power and facilities that are not as redundant as public safety but, in many cases, are more reliable.

Our third observation about the media is going to sound somewhat cynical. Yet, the media is responsible for a certain amount of this cynicism. Generally speaking, the mass media, specifically the television and major newspapers, do not feel that they have a responsibility for accuracy in their reporting if an emergency is unfolding. Instead, the focus is on the feel of the moment, the newsworthiness of it, and, in some cases, the mysticism of what is going on in hopes that people will "tune in at 11" to catch film footage of something they missed at 6 o'clock. This is not meant as a criticism for doing the media doing its job. That's what they do.

What is important to realize is that in those areas that are not impacted by the disaster and who are temporarily out of communication with their conventional sources of accurate information should not use the media as an indication of the need to mobilize resources. There were numerous individuals who came on the news and made forecasts or statements about the severity of the earthquake in the Northern California area that were dealing with the same degree of speculation that those of us who had no communications were utilizing. The media does have the ability, if it were to integrate itself with the Emergency Operation Centers, to do a great service for local government by beaming from the EOC's interviews with parties directly responsible for managing emergencies. Yet, many of the EOC's bar the use of the media crews for fear they are going to be made to look poorly in the eyes of their citizens or they are not adequately prepared to give out information.



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The result is a sort of media stalemate that tends to raise the anxiety level of those on the threshold areas. There were many cases in this particular event where the news media's speculation resulted in the spontaneous activation of resources that were mobilized but were uncalled for.

Which leads me to observation number four. Whenever disaster strikes, those who are involved in managing it have a difficult time developing an adequate assessment of their problem and prioritizing their existing resources. Generally speaking, there are some means of activating mutual aid and external resources that is inherent in either the regional or in the state delivery system. Over the last couple of decades, there has been the tendency for organizations to create capabilities to respond to these emergencies and then have a strong desire to be utilized even when they are not required. The key factor here is that we have a strong need at the state, national and even international level to develop a means of coordinating and mobilizing external resources without causing extensive logistical problems and impact on the entity that is suffering the disaster.

My last observation is something we all take for granted but it has a special meaning at the time an actual disaster strikes. That is the value of the individual. If there is any time in which a community needs leadership, it is when the circumstances require leadership at all levels. In discussing the response in many situations it was clear that leadership is not a position to be occupied by an individual. It is a process that is implemented by individual(s). The higher the level of training and preparation on the part of the individual officers, the more concentrated and focused the response was. There are several stories that have emerged from the incident, especially those associated with the collapse of the freeway in Oakland that clearly indicate that some very difficult decisions had to be made and were made. What is equally important is the realization during the time of emergency that the delegation level in an organization has to go down to the lowest possible levels to increase the survivability of the community.

The greater the support system for individuals, the more likely that they will be able to continue functioning in that role. What I'm referring to here is the simple planning process that is required to make sure that there is an adequate relief so that people will not have to work 48 and 72 hours. It is difficult to maintain a high level of command presence in a state of physical exhaustion. It is equally important that the planning process include means of providing for the emotional and psychological security of those in a leadership role.

For example, many communities have now seen fit to do training programs for the families of some of their key officials so that the family will know what is going on as well as the individual with the responsibility.



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Of course, there are thousands of other lessons that could come out of this scenario. After listening to several individuals discuss their personal experiences, I am convinced that the disaster of 1989 is not that much different than all the others that are found on the pages of history books. I have had the opportunity to read firsthand accountings from individuals who were at the site of the San Francisco earthquake in 1906. That earthquake was much more devastating than this one, yet some of the stories had a similar flare. I'm not sure that we can continue to have disasters to continue teaching us lessons.

The disasters don't really teach lessons. What they do is give the examination. The difference between an A- and a C+ can quite possibly be measured in lives, dollars, property and reputations.