

EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

How Do We Mend Our Emergency Safety Net?

Prepared by Dr. Craig S. Paterson
April 3, 2006

Introduction

Our emergency 'safety net' is itself in crisis. The response failures after Hurricane Katrina in late August 2005 have increased national anxiety, and have sparked a new urgency for emergency preparedness. According to Congressional studies, the leadership failures 'at all levels' made the response to Katrina a 'national disgrace.' Catastrophic disaster procedures that had been in place at the federal and state level for more than a decade were not implemented. Reports of staff incompetence and waste of response resources on the part of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) continue to surface. Even the American Red Cross is admitting to internal mishandling of donations. A suspicion of racially-motivated neglect of many displaced families has further damaged the credibility of the emergency 'safety net' we all hope will be efficient and fair when we need it. People are talking about emergency preparedness today, but they are uncertain how to mend a seemingly broken 'safety net.'

When public emergencies strike, there is no more time to prepare. There's no more time to purchase or position emergency supplies. There's no more time to take a class in first aid, or in search and rescue methods, or in the basics of mass care. There's no more time to establish relationships among agencies. There's no more time to establish trust with potential donors. When public emergencies strike, there's no more time to do anything more in preparedness. What you are prepared to do, you get to do. What you are not prepared to do, you don't get to do, no matter how desperate the need might be.

"Disasters disrupt hundreds of thousands of lives every year. Each disaster has lasting effects—people are seriously injured, some are killed, and property damage runs into the billions of dollars. If a disaster occurs in your community, local government and disaster-related organizations try to help you. But you need to be ready as well. Local responders may not be able to reach you immediately, or they may need to focus their efforts elsewhere.

"Being prepared and understanding what to do can reduce fear, anxiety and losses that accompany disasters. Communities, families and individuals should know what to do in a fire and where to seek shelter in a tornado. They should be ready to evacuate their homes, take refuge in public shelters and know how to care for their basic medical needs.

"People can also reduce the impact of disasters (flood proofing, elevating a home—or moving a home out of harms way, securing items that could shake loose in an earthquake) and sometimes avoid the danger altogether."

Extract from "Are You Ready?" on www.fema.gov

Two types of actions are evident in emergency response—ad hoc and planned. Ad hoc actions are conceived and implemented as the emergency evolves, allowing no time for dialogue, analysis or reflection. Planned actions, on the other hand, are conceived prior to an emergency event through inclusive dialogue, detailed analysis and careful reflection. These planned actions are practiced and fine-tuned before the emergency for immediate implementation whenever a predetermined action criterion is met. Planned and

practiced actions can save many lives, because the necessary resources are readily available, the essential skills are present where they are needed, and the foreseeable barriers to effective and equitable response are eliminated or at least reduced.

Emergency preparedness is primarily intended to increase reliance on planned actions and decrease dependence on ad hoc actions. While this may sound simple, it is a challenging process. Every disaster or emergency event has enough uniqueness that some ad hoc actions will always be necessary and helpful. To depend on ad hoc actions alone, however, means that we are unwilling or unable to learn the transferable, common aspects of emergency response.

In addition to response planning, mitigation has become one of the cornerstones of emergency management. Its goal is to lessen the impact that disasters and public emergencies have on people's lives and property. Aspects of mitigation include effective floodplain management, engineering of buildings and infrastructures to withstand earthquakes, and the implementation of building codes designed to protect property from natural hazards. The National Flood Insurance Program, for instance, encourages the building of safe structures within floodplains and in some cases the removal of those that are the most vulnerable to repeated flooding. After the Mid-West floods in 1993, whole towns were literally moved from high-risk locations to safer sites. Mitigation is an essential element in reducing the impact of foreseeable emergencies on communities and their residents throughout the nation. In the last four years, mitigation has added the study of terrorist risk factors to the existing list of risks due to natural disasters. Response planning and hazard mitigation are applied simultaneously by many communities and agencies as they prepare their emergency 'safety nets' for threats they hope they will never have to face.

People are talking about our emergency 'safety nets'—local, state and federal—but they are worried that these essential services might not be effectively or fairly delivered when they are needed the most. Governmental agencies are concerned that they are stretched too thin with too few professional staff and too few resources. Non-profit agencies are talking about donor and volunteer fatigue in dealing with existing response projects and about their capacity to respond to any new emergencies. In light of these pressures, how do we mend our emergency 'safety net' so we can all be confident that our next public emergency will not be another national disgrace?

Approach 1: "Show Me the Money!"

Funding Decentralized Preparedness to Meet Immediate Needs

More money is desperately needed for emergency preparedness! All citizens are being told by FEMA and other disaster agencies that they need to be self-sustaining after an emergency for at least three days and perhaps more than a week. This level of decentralized preparedness will require massive amounts of money to purchase supplies and to provide training in basic emergency response skills for thousands of people across the country. The call for more public and private funding for emergency preparedness, however, will require a dramatic shift in perspective—increased funding for response planning and hazard mitigation must be seen as an investment rather than just another expense.

Massive natural disasters and public emergencies seriously affect the whole country, so it needs to be everyone's business to sustain a high level of national preparedness to meet these wide-spread and pervasive needs. Less severe emergencies require less national support for immediate response, and will receive their primary source of assistance from state and regional agencies. For this reason, additional funding for emergency planning, mitigation and response services at all levels is essential. Cities and counties in many regions will, of course, find this level of preparedness to be prohibitively expensive. Partnerships in response planning and mitigation need to be developed to spread the costs so all citizens can have the training and supplies they need.

Since many emergencies can happen without warning, preparedness cannot be limited to homes or designated shelters. People may be at work in urban centers, far from home. Children may be at school with no way to get home, and with no one home to care for them anyway. Families may be shopping at the local mall, or they may be stranded along disabled freeways. While local stores may have enough basic supplies for the survival of the people who may be cut off from other resources, the lessons of Hurricane Katrina should convince us that we don't want to our citizens to have to steal what they need to survive. Decentralized storage of emergency supplies will be expensive, but it is necessary.

What Can Be Done?

- Legislate more public funding at all levels for comprehensive emergency response planning and practice, including support of essential non-profit agencies when their funds are insufficient
- Create a non-profit National Endowment for Emergency Preparedness (and similar state and regional funds) to seek donations from private, philanthropic and corporate donors, and to coordinate the distribution of funds for hazard-specific preparedness education and mitigation projects
- Mandate the storage and maintenance of basic emergency supplies for the occupants of all workplace or public buildings, making the cost of these supplies and of the staffing to maintain them tax-deductible
- Provide public funding for "Community Emergency Response Team" (CERT) training in all counties in every state to increase the capacity of citizens to respond to their own needs until outside assistance can be mobilized
- Make family disaster kit supplies available 'at cost' to encourage all families to participate in their own preparedness, using public funds to subsidize the distribution of supplies and to provide a reasonable profit to producers and manufacturers

People Who Agree with this Approach Say....

- Increased funding will make it possible for all emergency agencies to develop and deliver a wide variety of preparedness options, so citizens can choose how they want to be involved
- Public funding, even for non-governmental agencies, will sustain a basic level of 'safety net' preparedness when private and business donations fall short
- A non-competitive fundraising and awareness effort will provide low-profile but important agencies with the funds they need to be fully involved in preparedness upgrades
- Many donors want their resources to go into direct services only, so the development of long-term relationships with donors through regional or national endowment funds will provide a more stable funding foundation for preparedness and emergency infrastructure support

People Who Disagree with this Approach Say....

- If we provide unlimited public money to all emergency agencies, there won't be enough incentive to coordinate efforts or to provide accountability
- The public chooses with its donations—if the public doesn't support various non-profits with adequate donations, it's because the public has a different set of priorities
- Enough money is already available—more preparedness will be possible when emergency agencies become more efficient with existing funds

A Possible Tradeoff Is....

- If more successful private and corporate fundraising can be done, I'd be willing to have more public money dedicated to the coordination of emergency 'safety net' efforts.

Approach 2: “It Takes a Village”

Coordinating Complex Relationships among Agencies

All emergency response agencies need to be integrated into a fully coordinated and highly focused ‘safety net’ community. Comprehensive emergency preparedness has many layers—starting with individuals, families, neighborhoods and cities; reaching through county and state agencies; and extending to the highest levels of the federal government. In addition, it includes agencies and organizations from all segments of society—governmental, non-profit, religious, corporate, educational, philanthropic, medical, etc. This network of agencies can assess needs quickly and accurately, and can mobilize emergency supplies and trained personnel to meet those needs using the most direct and timely means.

A coordinated ‘safety net’ community of agencies can maximize the efforts of all partners in delivering emergency preparedness education before an emergency occurs and in delivering response services quickly and efficiently after an emergency. While agencies with a national role can effectively standardize some preparedness information and methods, locally-based agencies can customize their information and methods to the specific needs of their citizens. All ‘safety net’ agencies need to clearly and accurately identify their capacity to assist citizens in the event of an emergency, so partnerships can be established and so ‘holes’ in the net can be recognized and mended.

Communication is essential for a coordinated and timely ‘safety net’ response. Pre-determined procedures and agreements among agencies can significantly reduce confusion in emergency response and actually save lives in efficiently coordinating the distribution of precious resources and rescue staff through the use of a synchronized communications system. These patterns of coordination and the use of an inclusive communications system will require both planning and practice. Coordination doesn’t just happen—it takes the commitment of all partners to the on-going development of cooperative efforts and clear communication. In addition, these systems must be practiced at all levels on a regular basis to maximize efficiency, flexibility and speed in emergency response.

What Can Be Done?

- Create and strengthen the development of coordination and networking at all levels within a comprehensive emergency response community
- Create a standardized intake procedure and forms for use by all ‘safety net’ agencies—integrate the efforts of all agencies into a coordinated response system with ‘multiple points of entry’
- Create and mandate the use of state-of-the-art, secure communication networks, like the Coordinated Assistance Network (CAN) case file web-based software that is being used now in support of a multi-state case management effort for survivors of Hurricane Katrina
- Integrate local and regional partners into the nationally coordinated community of agencies by creating a cadre of liaison officers to reduce communication barriers and to increase the effectiveness of the ‘safety net’ applications
- Revise the procedures for response to catastrophic disasters and emergencies with appropriate ‘redundancy’ so efficiency is not jeopardized by the loss of one or more major component

People Who Agree with this Approach Say...

- Government agencies, non-profits, religious organizations, and medical professionals all have different and unique roles in a coordinated community of ‘safety net’ efforts—when all participants accept the others as partners, program effectiveness and financial efficiency are both increased
- Donors have increased confidence in emergency response when all agencies are effectively integrated into a comprehensive ‘safety net’ community—total revenue for response will increase
- Corporate donors and foundations don’t want to fund agency ‘turf wars’—mutually beneficial and effective partnerships will create an increasingly non-competitive community of agencies

- Long-term ‘safety net’ planning will gain more support and participation when the emergency ‘safety net’ community becomes more visibly coordinated and when state-of-the-art, secure communication networks make potential partners more confident that efficiency will increase

People Who Disagree with this Approach Say....

- Coordination requires staff training, equipment and time—additional funding will be required to make this approach work, but it’ll be spent on infrastructure & not direct aid
- Limited funding will continue to create a competitive spirit among agencies as they vie for funding and advocate for their special clients—coordination will continue to suffer
- Creating a ‘super-agency’ will introduce more complexity and confusion into our emergency response system

A Possible Tradeoff Is....

- If a coordinated ‘safety net’ community can reduce duplication and increase the range of services to clients, I’d be willing to donate more money to the non-profits that cooperate and to pay slightly higher taxes

Approach 3: “Wake Up and Smell the Coffee” Renewing Public Trust in Cost-Effective and Equitable Response

The public’s trust in our emergency ‘safety net’ has eroded to a dangerous level and must be renewed through program accountability and financial transparency. Emergency response agencies at all levels need to restore the public trust by embracing good business practices and by publishing accurate and timely reports with sound evaluation methods. While governmental agencies are all under the oversight of elected officials, political divisions make non-partisan and impartial evaluation of emergency responses almost impossible. While non-profit agencies are totally dependent on donor generosity for their financial support, many non-profits practice casual financial accountability and offer only informal, anecdotal evaluation of their response projects. Restoring trust is a critical part of emergency preparedness, repairing the integrity of the ‘safety net’ agencies and encouraging donors and volunteers to be ready to support emergency efforts in the future.

The public trust must be renewed also concerning the fair and timely response of emergency agencies for all people, regardless of income or race. Hurricane Katrina brought increased suspicion that emergency responders will be prepared to quickly help communities where families with higher-incomes and mostly European-ancestry live, but will be slow to help communities where families have lower-incomes, are people-of-color, or both. The media also have some trust to rebuild after their inaccurate reporting that New Orleans had fallen into anarchy with wide-spread looting, rape and murder. Emergency agencies must be pro-active in addressing these suspicions of racial and economic bias by publishing their clear and evenhanded procedures before an emergency happens, by following their procedures closely in the midst of an emergency, and by accurately evaluating their response after the emergency.

Emergency recovery policies need to be redesigned to better reflect our diverse culture. Many current FEMA policies were created to serve a basically European-ancestry, middle-class family which owns their home and has an ability to follow a bureaucratic process. Ethnic communities, refugees, mentally disabled persons, physically disabled persons, homeless persons and families, unemployed and underemployed persons, non-English speaking people, persons with learning disabilities, undocumented persons, and others are generally underserved or neglected in the response systems we’ve inherited. The diversity of our culture must be fully integrated into all levels of our emergency ‘safety net’ for public trust to be restored to a healthy status.

What Can Be Done?

- Create a clear and high standard in strategic planning and evaluation for all agencies to maximize research and development in financial and program accountability
- Publish emergency response methods to invite increased public feedback and to provide the public with an accurate view of what they can expect when an emergency occurs
- Create working connections with the national and local media, so essential information can be distributed to the public quickly, and so media reporting can identify emerging needs for immediate attention by responding agencies
- Redesign response practices and recovery policies to do a better job in serving the most vulnerable citizens rather than just the most self-sufficient by planning for child care, elder care, transportation, sign language and non-English language translators, and cultural interpreters
- Standardize evaluation and reporting methods at all levels for emergency response agencies through the coordinated efforts of government agencies, non-profits, corporate donors, foundations, university researchers, think-tanks and professional polling institutes

People Who Agree with this Approach Say....

- Increased financial accountability will help to renew the public trust in our emergency 'safety net' so people will be more likely to participate in local preparedness projects and to financially support future response efforts
- Compassionate and caring emergency agencies can be fully accountable too—it's not necessary to choose one or the other
- There is an abundance of non-profit agencies, so those non-profits that distinguish themselves in providing sound and transparent accountability will receive more donations in the future
- Corporate funding of emergency services will increase when corporate donors are sure that their money is being well-spent AND that their business will receive positive public relations in return

People Who Disagree with this Approach Say....

- Faced with strict reporting requirements, some non-profit organizations will decide that they aren't ready to do the work AND provide the complex paper trail—services will be reduced
- Continued political posturing makes it unlikely that legislators will set aside their partisan agendas for a fair and comprehensive evaluation of governmental 'safety net' efforts
- Accountability and efficiency are important long-term goals, but they won't produce the short-term emergency preparedness that is essential to save lives

A Possible Tradeoff Is....

- If there was more accountability among emergency agencies, I'd be willing to participate in local preparedness efforts as a trained volunteer