Just what is it emergency managers do, anyway?

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INTRODUCTION

It occurred to me this past week—when one of our recently hired firefighters asked me the question, “What do you do when there are no hurricanes?”—that some people don’t really know what emergency managers do when we don’t have a hurricane. I didn’t have to think twice to answer his questions as I rattled off as much as I could without overwhelming him or boring him to death by the multitude of tasks that the division performs “when not monitoring storms.”

It wasn’t easy to try to sum up the various duties and jobs we perform on a daily, weekly, or yearly basis. However, during my short conversation with this curious young man, it occurred to me that maybe others—yes, even in our own department here in Seminole County—may not know what it is emergency managers do, other than respond to acts of Mother Nature. So I thought I would take a few minutes from my work to explain just what it is that we do.

Sure, we all gear up and get excited over the prospect of Mother Nature sending the “Big Bertha” at us. We do this year-round by creating and practicing in the form of exercises. Checklists are abundant in the division, so we won’t forget and leave out any important procedure or make that call for the resources needed prior to and following storm events. These checklists are constantly updated as we learn by each and every event that affects this county. We do this to ensure that our responses and resources are always the very best and that we serve the citizens to the very best of our ability. The fact that we have a state-of-the-art Emergency Operations Center (EOC) assists us in our response to any significant event in the county. Our EOC is equipped with video conferencing equipment, teleconferencing, lighted wall and table maps, an EM2000 messaging system, and seating for 80 personnel. In case many of you don’t know, we are proud of the fact that we are the alternate EOC for the State of Florida Division of Emergency Management.

TENDING TO SPECIAL NEEDS CITIZENS

Tending to citizens with special needs, who number approximately 500 in this county, also is a continuous assignment. Registries are updated weekly, and new and improved ways to retrieve information about these citizens are always on our minds. Providing them with the best possible care when they need it during any emergency is a number-one priority for the division. We work hand in hand with the health department and school board to this end.

MITIGATION ISSUES

Mitigation issues include ensuring that the planning process is ongoing and the projects listed are either in progress or completed, such as buyouts of properties that have had recurring flooding or drainage problems and retrofitting our shelters. It is important to encourage the development of disaster resistant communities in order to reduce the effect of disasters on lives and property.

COORDINATION OF RESOURCES

Emergency managers coordinate the efforts of all community resources, including first responders (police, fire, and EMS personnel), public works, volunteer agencies (e.g., American Red Cross, Salvation Army), public health, private industry, the mayor’s office, and more. Efforts are not duplicated, but rather big management practices are in place to cope with a disaster.

MONITORING HEALTHCARE FACILITIES

Monitoring healthcare facilities’ emergency plans...
is another time-consuming chore. Some of the smaller facilities often feel they do not need to plan for emergencies. We, in the division, however, know better—and all facilities are required to have a plan, regardless of size. We make sure that anyone who takes in citizens to care for will at least have a workable emergency plan to protect the people who have put their trust in the facility during such emergencies. Without our review and approval of their emergency plans, they do not become licensed. All critical facilities throughout the county are kept in a database, as required by the State Division of Emergency Management, and updated on a yearly basis. Since the events of September 11, 2001, ensuring that these data are current has been a priority of the division.

TEACHING CITIZENS THROUGH CERT

Teaching citizens how to take care of themselves and their neighbors during emergency situations through the Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) program is another time-consuming initiative for which the division is responsible. Providing informational brochures on preparedness to citizens is ongoing through requests for such information or by presentations to Seminole homeowners associations and civic groups. The President’s Citizen Corps is planning to expand this area of activity.

COORDINATING WITH PRIVATE INDUSTRY COUNTERPARTS

The emergency manager ensures that manufacturing facilities, plants, and other business operations are familiar with emergency procedures in the event of an incident. There must be regular communication with these contacts to ensure that they are aware of hazardous materials, potential disaster resources (such as heavy equipment), and available response personnel.

SOMETHING NEW: TERRORIST EVENTS

Something new to most of us are the terrorist events that took place in this country. Emergency management has been busy sharing information with all the departments in the county as well as the various agencies that assist during times of emergencies. We have, to date, conducted three briefings on protective measures being taken to address future terrorist concerns. We have set up rumor control lines to deal with citizens concerned about anthrax and mail handling. We have distributed procedures on mail handling to all county employees and assisted in conducting mail-handling classes. A Terrorism Annex has been developed as part of our Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan (CEMP), along with levels of activation pertaining to terrorist events. Emergency management offices are pivotal in the application of resources such as the $3.5 billion First Responder fund in the Federal FY 2003 budget. Emergency managers must ensure interoperability of equipment, facilitate communications and training, and coordinate mutual aid (both inter- and intrastate) to ensure the best investment of federal funds.

WHAT ELSE DO WE DO?

When our county emergency managers have time in between the tasks addressed above, we usually attend as many classes, conferences, meetings, and instructional seminars as we possibly can so we can continue to be the most responsive and knowledgeable emergency management division this county has ever had.

Now, if anyone asks you what emergency managers do . . . you know what to tell them!

ACKNOWLEDGMENT


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