Terror alerts boosted Rhode Island’s emergency response performance

Robert Keeley

Anyone who has ever questioned the value of advanced emergency planning, especially in these perilous times, should take a hard look at the folks in the sleepy New England mill town of West Warwick, located some 20 miles southwest of the state capital in Providence.

Prior to the night of February 20, Rhode Island was one of only three states in the country to have set up and completed a statewide training program instructing local level emergency management personnel on how to deal with terrorism and attacks from weapons of mass destruction. That training proved invaluable that night when fire swept through a downtown nightclub, eventually claiming 100 lives and injuring 186 people.

“We had been meeting and training for the past year at the state level on how to respond to terrorism and attacks by weapons of mass destruction,” said Thomas Scnerchia, director of West Warwick’s emergency management team. “We have been preparing for something like this, I just never thought it would be of this magnitude. The terror alerts and training helped us to provide better, closer and more responsive reaction to a major emergency situation that played out here that night.”

Scnerchia’s sentiments were echoed by Town Manager Wolfgang Bauer, himself a veteran of emergency response and planning dating back to his military service as chief of an operations center and as a town manager in Nebraska who had to deal with killer tornadoes. “The principles of management, be they for a terrorist attack or something like this tragic fire, proved to be exactly the same,” said Bauer. “One thing you learn is that nothing ever goes exactly as planned. You must be flexible and have backup contingencies. Most importantly, you must develop a list of contacts who can provide the resources when and where you need them. That base of support is what makes it all happen correctly.”

It was because of that high level of preparedness that the response mechanism worked so smoothly that fateful night. Literally within minutes after the first alarm, hundreds of emergency response personnel were at the scene or on their way. Help poured in from 36 neighboring communities (including some from bordering states Massachusetts and Connecticut), state and federal agencies, the Red Cross and Salvation Army, local business and civic leaders and countless civilian volunteers.

Bauer was out of town when he got the first call. He jumped into his car and headed down Route 95, through Providence and Cranston, for West Warwick. “It was an eerie feeling,” he said, “as I saw all the ambulances heading in both directions, sirens blaring. I couldn't imagine the horror of it all.

“By the time I arrived at the scene, the fire was fully involved and triage was being performed right there at the scene. The fire department was fully
Town manager's biggest challenge: The press

When tragedy strikes and local, state and federal emergency response teams are pressed into action, perhaps the last thing emergency managers think about is how to deal with the media.

Wolfgang Bauer knows firsthand that the experience can be traumatic. As Town Manager of West Warwick, Rhode Island, he feels strongly that some training in how to respond to the press in times of crisis should be made part of all emergency management training programs. “The demands the media make in terms of time and energy and resources can be staggering,” he said, discussing his experiences in dealing with the media following the tragic nightclub fire in February that claimed 100 lives and injured 183 other persons.

“I don’t mean it as a criticism of the press, but it is a fact,” he said. “The frenzy that surrounds the media made it difficult for us to do the job that needed to be done. We had media from around the globe descend upon West Warwick. It can be overwhelming and obtrusive when people are trying to respond to the problems at hand.”

In the hours following the fire, Bauer said, media types were all over the scene, trying to pull firefighters, police and other emergency responders aside for interviews. They overran private property and pestered the families of the fire victims who had also started to gather at the scene.

“Most of the emergency coordination seemed to come together quite easily. We had a system in place and it worked as planned. My biggest challenge became the press whose appetite for news was insatiable,” said Bauer. “They were pulling and pushing and had a barrage of questions that no one really had any answers for. I have had experience in dealing with the press when I was a town manager in Nebraska when a tornado struck our town. But I wasn’t prepared for this.”

Ironically, Bauer found himself in the middle of the media power struggle even though he felt that the media really didn’t want to talk with him. “Everyone wanted to speak with our fire chief, but he was too busy to deal with them. They used me to get to the people they really wanted to interview, such as the fire chief, fire marshal, building inspector and town clerk. The in-fighting between the major networks over which one would get the first live interviews was really something to see. I finally told them they had to settle that amongst themselves.”

To control the media frenzy, the area around the fire scene was sealed off and Bauer promised to make the fire chief and other essential town personnel available offsite at a 7 a.m. press conference the next morning. Acting on the advice of the Governor’s office and FEMA officials, he set up the families of the victims at one central location out of town. This kept the families together so that information could be disseminated to them more efficiently and reduced their exposure to the media horde.

Months after the fire, Bauer’s concern about the press hasn’t eased. “As a professional administrator, I’m trained to worry about lots of side issues when tragedies such as this arise - things like liability issues, inspections and paperwork,” he said. “The media scrutiny can be intense. Even if you are next to perfect in everything leading up to a tragedy such as this, a simple thing like paperwork will not be up to the expectations of the media. They can make you look bad even when we know everyone did their job the way they were trained to.”

The liability issues that will arise from the ashes of the nightclub fire are another major problem Bauer must deal with. He just hopes that continued media scrutiny does not fog the issue.
remained open so that emergency vehicles would have unrestricted access to and from the fire scene.”

As soon as he arrived on the scene, Bauer asked himself, “Where do we go from here? There were no obvious scene issues to deal with. The police and fire departments were functioning exactly as they are trained to function. The triage was ongoing, the ambulances, Red Cross, Salvation Army and other volunteers, both public and private, were all chipping in and helping wherever they could. No one was actually pulling all the strings, but because of our state of preparedness, it all meshed—somehow it all worked.

“All in all, we transported 186 people to hospitals that night—at least 40 of them in critical condition. The biggest miracle was that only three of those people succumbed to their injuries. (Editor’s note—Two more of these victims would eventually die.) That attests to the effectiveness of all the coordination and rapid response mechanisms that were pressed into service that night.”

Bauer’s problems were just beginning, however. He had to figure out what he was going to do with all the bodies and how they would identify all the victims, many of whom were burned beyond recognition. He also had to deal with the problem of what to do with the families of the victims who began arriving on scene as the local news began airing word of the tragedy. And there was the media—a problem, he said, that quickly developed into a major headache (see associated story). The fire scene was cordoned off and made off-limits to members of the press. In addition, regular morning press briefings were scheduled off-site. These actions didn’t solve all the problems with the media, but they did manage to quiet things down quite a bit.

By the time the fire was extinguished, Bauer’s to-do list was growing by the minute. There was still the question of what to do with all the bodies and how to proceed with identifications. “I’m not sure if I fully understood all the ramifications of what had taken place and what still needed to be done,” Bauer said. “I’m not sure I fully understand it even today. I remember first thinking we needed to set up a temporary morgue at the fire station or in one of our larger public auditoriums or gyms.

“But that thought was only fleeting. I decided I didn’t want the morgue located in West Warwick. We had enough tragedy to deal with at the site without complicating things even more as grieving families and the media started arriving in town. I thought we would be better off if the morgue was established somewhere else, so I met with several representatives of the Governor who had come to the scene and made arrangements to use facilities at the State Department of Public Health in Providence.”

The Governor was also instrumental in securing the services of the state medical examiner and federal Demort Teams to assist in forensic investigations to help identify the victims. Meanwhile, Scnerchia learned from some of his colleagues in state government that it would be important to get the families away from the scene and into comfortable surroundings. Every effort, he said, was made to keep them up to date. It was a lesson the State Emergency Management Team had learned during its investigation of the Air Egypt crash off the Rhode Island coast in November 1999.

It’s been four months since that tragic winter night, but Bauer and the residents of West Warwick are still reeling from the shock and aftermath of the fire. The town is being overwhelmed with hundreds—perhaps thousands—of potential lawsuits by victims and their families and it is choking on the fire’s costs, which Bauer said surpassed $300,000 in the first five weeks. That figure included $86,000 in police overtime and the loss of a fire truck during the height of the blaze, but doesn’t include any human factors such as ongoing stress management counseling and any early retirements that may result from those stress factors.

“This tragedy is far from over,” said Bauer. “We are still paying and I don’t see any relief in sight. Rhode Island has applied for federal disaster relief, but I’m told we don’t meet the minimum guidelines needed to qualify for relief. From the number of people killed and injured, we certainly qualify, but not in the overall picture. It’s sad to say, but according to the federal standards, this was just another small, localized event.”