REVISITING THE PURPOSE OF DISASTER PLANNING

To the editor:

The impact of Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent response give us ample reason to reflect upon our policies and efforts to improve the important profession of emergency management. Without a doubt, we need to give increased attention to disasters and refrain from making the mistakes of the past.

One of the glaring weaknesses that must be overcome concerns our planning activities. During the Cold War, civil defense personnel hid in underground bunkers and wrote elaborate plans about how they would evacuate communities in case of nuclear war. These plans often failed to include the input of other participants and were often based on faulty assumptions. Other departments and organizations were not incorporated into the planning process, and the strategies listed frequently were based on wishful thinking and unrealistic expectations. Furthermore, civil defense plans did not always result in the development of abilities to ensure successful implementation. For instance, crisis relocation plans may not have accurately projected how to move millions of people and how to address the long-term needs of evacuees.

Such problems are still evident to this day as illustrated by the case of New Orleans. If there was ever a community (referring to both leaders and citizens alike) that understood risk, it was the Big Easy. Numerous assessments revealed an extremely vulnerable situation, and the Hurricane Pam exercise one year before Katrina suggested that a number of challenges would be presented to response authorities at the local, state, and federal levels. It is amazing to see how accurate these hypothetical projections were on August 29, 2005.

New Orleans did have an emergency operations plan (EOP). However, and without being overly critical, hindsight might suggest that the planning process was flawed. How is it possible that city officials acknowledged that thousands of people had no transportation and would need assistance with evacuation but did not utilize school busses (as outlined in the plan) to help accomplish this task? Katrina was undoubtedly an unusual event, but the failure of the response may be due in large part to the “paper plan syndrome.” Simply put, it appears that a plan was written to comply with preparedness mandates, but little was done to facilitate its implementation.

Today’s emergency managers are recognizing that planning is insufficient in and of itself. Instead of just writing a plan, professionals in this field are spending more time and energy on “capacity building.” Capacity building involves concerted preparedness efforts to ensure successful response and recovery operations. In the case of New Orleans, this would imply that meteorologists, emergency managers, and the media are able to work together to make quick decisions and successfully warn the populous of an impending hazard. A focus on capacity would indicate that bus drivers could be contacted, busses are fueled in advance, and stranded citizens could be picked up and delivered to less hazardous areas. Strengthening capacity would enable a quick assessment of damages and ensure that alternative methods to communicate with state and federal officials would be present in case they need to be employed. Furthermore, the capability approach would suggest that adequate personnel and supplies would be available at the Superdome, that receiving communities are able to shelter evacuees for extended periods of time, and that recovery can proceed as quickly and effectively as possible.

The emphasis on capabilities is not limited, however, to post-disaster situations. Capabilities need to be developed for mitigation as well. For instance, additional coastal and flood plain managers are needed to monitor development and recommend ways to limit potential damage and destruction. More building code inspectors are required to enforce regulations, and improved presentation skills are required on the part of emergency
managers to convince politicians that disasters must be taken seriously.

The solution to the disaster problem will necessitate more than the strengthening of capabilities though. Specifically, the focus on planning must also have the goal of “liability reduction.” Liability reduction implies the elimination or minimization of factors that lead to disasters. The environment must be protected so that wetlands can act as a buffer between warm gulf waters and inhabitants in the inland area. People and property must be located in safer areas and older buildings must be retrofitted to withstand the destructive forces of nature. Constraining cultural attitudes must be challenged, poverty must be addressed, and personal responsibility must be encouraged.

A focus on capacity building and liability reduction is very different than the traditional disaster planning model that has dominated the field of emergency management for too long. The dual approach outlined here is obviously more aggressive than the paper plan syndrome which assumes that a completed plan is all that is required for preparedness. Hurricane Katrina and countless other disasters reveal the fallacy of inaccurate planning methods and assumptions. Giving priority to capabilities and liabilities will not prevent all disasters nor guarantee there will be no loss of life or property. However, changing our thinking about planning is needed if we are to advance the profession of emergency management and limit the disruption caused by disasters.

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REFERENCES

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Does your emergency response system help your bottom line?
What can your emergency response system do for you when you are not in crisis?

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