Emergency preparedness is all local

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Local emergency response is always first-line of defense

As we ponder the lessons from the recent hurricane disasters in the Gulf, we have a duty to our citizens and all future disaster victims to become better prepared. Preparedness and emergency management is like what a former US Speaker of the House once said about politics—“it’s all local.” Emergency preparedness is a community-wide effort. We are all responsible—the federal, state, and local governments; all civic and disaster volunteer organizations; the business community, families, and individuals.

State and local governments are responsible for disaster preparedness or emergency management by statute of the communities they serve. Local governments are the first-line of defense and must be ready to safeguard the safety and security of their citizens. All levels of government must ensure that their plans are viable, realistic, flexible, adaptable, and executable. Good, sound planning is not enough, however, as we saw with the federal government’s recent response to Katrina. FEMA and the Department of Homeland Security completed the National Response Plan earlier this year, after a couple of years of coordination with different federal agencies. By all accounts, it is one of the best plans FEMA has ever prepared. Yet, we saw their efforts fail, not because of their planning, but because they failed to follow their own plan. And when they did finally manage to use the established plan, they were ill equipped to carry it out.

The lesson here for local government is that obtaining and maintaining the capability of executing approved plans must follow good planning. People implement plans, a simple concept that oftentimes is ignored or not taken seriously. People need resources to carry out the requirements of any emergency plan. Outside of our first responder community, do we have a viable and comprehensive emergency response team that will lead our community through a disaster, and have all the team members been properly trained for their roles?

State and local government must constantly assess its capabilities to fulfill its emergency responsibilities, especially in the fastest-growing communities in the country. We should ask ourselves: do we have the resources to respond to disasters? What are our shortfalls? Where can we get the resources we know we will need and do not currently have? Are our elected and community leaders knowledgeable about our plan? Do we have viable inter-agency and inter-governmental coordination, and have we practiced our plan under actual emergencies or exercises? Have we taken advantage of state-of-the-art technologies that can improve the way we communicate and respond during an emergency? Has our emergency management infrastructure, systems, facilities, and organization kept up with our population growth?
Has our planning been comprehensive enough to account for every possible resource we may need? Emergency management is no different from any other program in that the true measure of a community’s commitment to preparedness can be directly linked to the level it is funded. Our state and federal partners are there to supplement and not to supplant our local response. Emergency preparedness and response is, indeed, all local.

Just like a government plans for emergencies, so should our business community, civic and volunteer organizations, families, and individuals. We all should know the hazards that are present in our communities and be prepared to take action to protect our families and ourselves. The private sector has an obligation to its investors, employees, and local communities. Businesses should complete continuity plans not just for business survival purposes but also for employee safety. History has shown that an overwhelming majority of businesses that fail to plan for disasters either never recover or recover to only go under shortly afterwards. Civic and volunteer organizations can be extremely important contributors to both the preparedness of a community and in the assistance to our first responders after disasters occur. A clear example of this is all the Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT) that have been organized throughout the country and are now part of some city response plan. Here again, emergency preparedness, just like politics, is all local.

These are just a few easy lessons that we can now draw from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. But emergency management should never simply be about what has happened before; this business is about being able to respond quickly to anything that may endanger the safety and security of our citizens today, tomorrow, or five years from now. It’s about being prepared to manage any major emergency, imagined or not. The public deserves nothing less than that.

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