Having recently retired after 34 years in law enforcement, I am amazed at the narrow-sighted approach given to disaster planning by our federal, state, and municipal governments in light of the lessons learned at the Federal Building in Oklahoma City and the World Trade Center in Manhattan.

In an effort to profess preparedness and ease public concern, officials have put these plans together with the best of intentions. Still, these plans lack the details necessary to ensure successful outcomes when put into action.

All disaster planning must begin on the local level and then extend outward to include federal support because all disasters are, in fact, local occurrences.

In any type of disaster, the first 15 to 30 minutes are critical in determining the public safety response. During this period, available manpower is limited to on-duty personnel; therefore, each responder needs to thoroughly understand their role if the incident is to be kept from spiraling out of control. Moreover, each responder must be trained so that their response is second nature. Well-intentioned actions by mistrained or untrained personnel can turn the disaster into a career-ending event for those responsible for the actions of all the players.

Local governments need to focus on the most likely scenario of disaster that could occur in their community and then establish a plan of action around that type of incident. Take, for example, a community located on a major highway used each day by thousands of vehicles, including tanker tractor-trailers hauling potentially deadly chemicals. If released into the open atmosphere, these chemicals become lethal clouds. To complicate matters, nearby are a middle school, a high school, and a nursing home/elderly housing facility. On a weekday when school is in session, the three facilities have a combined population of 5,000 persons.

In this scenario, local government officials would first need to inventory which services they can realistically provide in the first 15 to 30 minutes versus what tasks must be performed during the entire incident period. The first major hurdle (except in major cities) will be garnering sufficient manpower to control the incident so that it does not begin to mushroom out of control. Contain and control are the first priorities that local government needs to address.

Local planning needs to include roles for all municipal employees, not just public safety personnel. In a disaster, all available manpower is needed. Government employees from all service areas should be assigned tasks based on their skills and abilities. In emergencies, public safety dispatchers need to be free to deal with such situations. Why not assign clerical personnel from the municipal government to answer nonemergency telephone calls or to deliver communications equipment and supplies between the storage facility and the Incident Command Center. At the time a disaster occurs, every municipal employee on duty should have a clearly defined role and responsibility. Mutual aid from neighboring communities,
state aid, and/or federal assistance will take time to arrive and when a disaster occurs, time is a luxury you don’t have.

Once incident contain and control has been established, victim services becomes the top priority. This aspect of a disaster is extremely complicated and involves multi-agency planning, from emergency dispatch to trauma room specialists. Local authorities need to address issues such as what type of protective clothing emergency personnel will need, where the transport vehicle needed to move victims to the hospital will come from, and what will be done with the bodies of the deceased.

In addition to local, state, and federal resources, local disaster planners need to tap into the vast supply of technical and equipment resources contained in the community’s private sector. Inviting private company representatives to participate during the planning stages can provide valuable feedback and may disclose an area overlooked by planners who may have developed tunnel vision. A partnership between the public and private sectors of a community can often be a successful one.

Disasters occur in the blink of an eye but the response necessary requires a carefully thought out plan of action framed securely by training, training, and more training. The first 15 to 30 minutes are critical—this is not the time to be looking up telephone numbers or deciding whom to call. A well-devised, much-practiced, and well-executed plan for the disaster with the highest probability of occurring will provide the community with a blueprint for success in such adverse situations.

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