The jigsaw puzzle of emergency planning

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In a recent session on the Oklahoma City bombing, the incident commander said that one of the key lessons learned from that particular disaster was that even when a good plan is in place, some event always occurs that you have not accounted for.

Putting together an emergency response plan is similar to doing a jigsaw puzzle—misplace any one piece and you cannot complete the puzzle. The major difference is that in emergency planning, overlooking one piece can create a larger disaster than the one you are trying to manage.

When formulating an emergency response plan, whether for natural or man-made disasters, you need to address seven areas: communications, situation maps, command posts, the chain of command, casualty services and information, media relations, and support services. Each of these elements must be addressed individually and incorporated into the overall plan. Each element is critical to the completion of the puzzle.

Next to having sufficient manpower, reliable communications may be the element most critical to your plan. To determine the reliability of your communications system, you should conduct a thorough assessment of your present communications abilities. If you are already having difficulties communicating with field units under normal circumstances, imagine how hard this will be once the system is strained by a disaster. Smaller communities are especially at risk due to their limited expertise and lack of adequate funding to improve their current communications system.

Many of the current Homeland Security grants have been awarded to individual states to study the interoperability of their communications systems. While I applaud these efforts, the problem is that they deal with making recommendations for the future, rather than addressing the issues being confronted today.

Agency interoperability is a concern that all planners must address, inasmuch as agencies responding to assist the host agency will undoubtedly use communications systems which may not be compatible. Therefore, another means of communicating will have to be provided to these agencies.

Before committing to and implementing a communications system, the shortcomings of that system should be ferreted out. This will help planners avoid pitfalls that can be costly in terms of money, as well as time spent in R&D. For instance, while cellular telephones have many advantages, they are still subject to reliability issues, such as “no-service areas” or lines becoming overloaded in emergency situations when callers flood the cell zones.

The key to the success of any communications system will be thoroughly testing it under stressful situations. The height of a disaster is no time to find out that the communications system you put so much faith in does not function.

Incident commanders use situation maps to position their existing manpower in the most advantageous areas. Situation maps need to depict all utilities, as well as locations where these utilities can be...
deactivated if necessary. These maps must be updated on a regular basis by the particular agency responsible; out-of-date maps can only cause problems. Here is an example. Traffic needs to be diverted from an incident scene. The incident commander settles upon a route for this traffic, only to learn that the bridge needed to cross the river has been closed for six months. Obviously, this type of situation is not acceptable.

The field command post does not refer to a structure or vehicle as much as it refers to a spirit of cooperation between competing agencies, now united by an event. The command post is the center of all operations, regardless of which department has the responsibility for overseeing the entire event. Whether placing the incident under the command of one individual or in a unified command structure, this decision must be made prior to the occurrence of any incident. During the preparation of this part of the emergency plan, attention needs to be paid to the assignment of tasks and responsibilities to positions within the governmental structure, rather than a specific individual. Doing this insures that the plan will be usable regardless of changes in governmental personnel.

Should the plan call for a mobile command post, departmental responsibility for requesting activation should be clearly defined. Consultations with the agency providing the mobile command center need to be part of the plan so that all the parties involved in the process are on the same page.

The chain of command is the piece of the puzzle that interlocks with the command post. It is vital that there be but one voice issuing orders during a crisis (although this one voice should have the benefit of counsel from each discipline involved in the operation). Having more than one voice can lead to conflicting orders, which can in turn create chaos and misdirection. The chain of command must be established during the planning phase, so that the egos of those involved can be expressed and then dealt with. All those involved in dealing with this disaster must be open to the spirit of cooperation, keeping in mind that the ultimate goal is resolving the situation in a manner that protects the citizens and their property.

Any major disaster will entail a certain number of casualties. Casualty services and information are the next pieces of the puzzle. Rescue and recovery operations have to be preplanned. Proper equipment, trained personnel, and sufficient resources are needed to support the operation. Personnel in charge of this phase of the operation need to remember that the relatives of victims will be anxious for any word of their loved ones. Still, they need to be vigilant in disseminating information concerning the situation or rescue efforts. Considerations that must be detailed in the plan include: medical treatment for the injured, transportation from the scene to medical facilities, and sufficient space for the operation of a morgue. Completing this portion of the plan will require the input of several agencies and institutions. It is essential that they participate in the process, as their participation will trigger the formulation of the plan for their respective agency.

Effective media relations in the new millennium will be based on a clear and concise policy that is adhered to by all personnel. To understand the impact the media has on our daily lives, just reflect on the broadcasts of the war in Iraq. Should a major event or incident occur, the white trucks with satellite dishes will be arriving at the scene shortly after you get there. The wish to be the first to broadcast live feeds from the scene can cause confrontations between newspeople and emergency workers if you do not have a plan in place. In addition, the broadcasting of false or misleading information gathered from unreliable sources can turn an already complicated situation into an out-of-control nightmare. Your policy needs to address media access, media control, and the dissemination of information in order to avoid problems when the situation descends into utter chaos.

As part of the policy, planners need to designate someone as the media representative. A good media representative will be personable in nature but will command respect. They will not only be able to control the nature and content of the information given out but will be able to enlist the aid of the media in alerting the public to potential dangers or areas of restricted access.

The final piece of the puzzle is support services. A major incident, whether it occurs in a large metropolitan
area or a rural farming community, will likely require a request for aid. The authority to make such a request, whether established by state law or governmental charter, should rest in one—and only one—position. However, the decision should be aided by the counsel of on-scene professionals. Examples of these support services are:

- state or federal aid;
- military enactment (i.e., the National Guard);
- declarations of martial law;
- security services for public facilities;
- vehicular traffic control; and
- specialized equipment or persons to operate same.

Once you have incorporated these elements into your plan, you have only begun the process. Any plan is only as good as the lessons you learn from it once it is put into practice. What may seem logical when sitting around a planning table may be a complete failure in the field. Only by actually activating the plan can you detect its shortcomings and make the necessary adjustments.

With more major incidents occurring, the danger of becoming complacent grows larger every day. Indeed, while the acts of terrorists may cause massive death and destruction, the greater harm may come from complacency, which lulls us into a false sense of security.

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