

The current crisis and impending disaster

David A. McEntire, PhD

There is a growing problem facing emergency management today, and the potential exists for it to get even worse unless the situation is fully recognized and actions are immediately taken to resolve it. This threat is not related to a brewing hurricane, an unanticipated failure of equipment at an industrial facility, or the menace of terrorism involving weapons of mass destruction. Instead of emanating from natural, technological, or human-caused hazards, the challenge to be discussed here relates to our rising vulnerability. In particular, there is concern that the quantity of local emergency managers in the United States is not keeping up with the burgeoning demands placed on them.

Emergency management has historically been understaffed. Smaller cities do not have anyone working in this area. If a moderately sized jurisdiction has a professional emergency manager, he or she may work part time or have other duties (eg, serving concomitantly as a fire chief or public works director). In other cases, a full-time emergency manager may exist, but this single employee is often overwhelmed due to the size and complexity of the community. Even most major cities do not have more than a handful of emergency managers and staff.

The ongoing personnel shortage has required that each emergency manager take on countless responsibilities. These professionals assess community hazards and plan for possible contingencies. This has included the development of disaster plans and close coordination with first responders (police, fire, and

emergency medical service). Over time, those in emergency management have concentrated more on mitigation activities to prevent disasters, reduce their probability, and minimize associated consequences (eg, Project Impact and FEMA's Pre-Disaster Mitigation Program). In addition, there has been an expectation that emergency managers will network with state and federal officials/agencies as well as others in the private and nonprofit sectors.

Although the workload in emergency management has traditionally been significant, it has become even more onerous over the last decade. For instance, after 9/11, emergency managers are encouraged to seek out, apply for, and manage multimillion dollar homeland security grants. When the failures of Hurricane Katrina unfolded, emergency managers were required to spend further time planning for special population and functional needs. Furthermore, emergency managers are now asked to complete Hazard Mitigation Action Plans so cities and counties may qualify for Post-Disaster Mitigation funding. More recently, the federal government has mandated that many emergency managers complete Threat and Hazard Identification and Risk Assessments, which go above and beyond traditional risk assessments.

Such additions to an emergency manager's job have not been typically accompanied with an increase in permanent staff and support personnel. However, the future may only aggravate the challenges in emergency management. It is likely that emergency

managers will be required to take on further duties relating to public health, chemical security, environmental protection, and recovery planning in the future.

The current situation is certainly unsustainable. Emergency managers will eventually burn out due to impossible work obligations and leave the field in droves, or they will have to selectively neglect some of their responsibilities. In either case, the negative outcomes will stifle success and cause others to question the value of the profession. However, the ongoing crisis becomes even more disconcerting when rising disasters and decreasing budgets are considered. Emergency managers are being asked to do the impossible with insufficient resources. They are undoubtedly caught between a rock and a hard spot.

It is unknown if and when this predicament will be resolved. Local government bankruptcies and rising state and national debt do not bode well for emergency management. However, at least three things are

abundantly clear. First, emergency managers must do a better job explaining their multiple and diverse responsibilities to elected officials and their constituents. Second, disaster professionals must vigorously defend and protect Emergency Management Performance Grants that predominantly fund their positions. Finally, the case must be made to hold the line on funding, if not increase spending on emergency management at a time when disasters are rising and emergency management is becoming more complex.

In short, advocacy may be the most important responsibility that emergency managers have currently to save their profession and ensure its success in the future. However, it is hoped that this additional responsibility will not be the straw that breaks the camel's back!

David A. McEntire, PhD, Emergency Administration and Planning,
Department of Public Administration, University of North Texas,
Denton, Texas.

Healing Ministry™

470 Boston Post Road, Weston, MA 02493 • 781-899-2702 • Fax: 781-899-4900
www.healingministryjournal.com

A proven and effective tool for emergency and disaster management professionals, *Healing Ministry* is a quarterly journal for those who work with individuals or groups suffering from trauma, sickness, death and dying. *Healing Ministry* offers a balanced mix of relevant articles, timely research, field studies, commentaries and human interest stories on the power of faith to guide and comfort those in need.

Healing Ministry embraces a global focus and aims to publish contributions which can be read by non-specialists, academic experts and practitioners alike. It encourages a wide conception of spiritual caregiving, the issues surrounding trauma, and the care of those who work in emergency fields.

Regular features include:

- ◆ **Original articles:** articles on every aspect of spiritual healing such as: being an effective disaster chaplain, ministering to the dying, and the power of prayer.
- ◆ **Spiritual healing techniques:** tested approaches to providing spiritual aid and comfort.
- ◆ **Profiles in spiritual healing:** in-depth profiles of special members of the profession and how they handle specific problems.
- ◆ **From the pulpit:** a commentary/sounding board on current topics.
- ◆ **Book reviews:** reviews of the latest books on spiritual and emotional healing.



We invite you to subscribe to *Healing Ministry* today by visiting our website www.healingministryjournal.com or scan the quick response barcode to subscribe immediately.