

Ten Emergency Management Paradigm Changes to Improve National Disaster Response

“Governments tend not to solve problems, only to rearrange them.”

Former President, Ronald Reagan

The contents of this paper are strictly the views and opinions of Rick Tobin, the President and CEO of TAO Emergency Management Consulting and do not reflect the opinions of any other organization, either public or private.

INTRODUCTION

The Hurricane Katrina impact responses provided a stark exposure of the weaknesses in the United States emergency management programs. These recent problems with provisions for public safety overshadowed weaknesses that had occurred just a month earlier in California, when a state with fame for its earthquake preparedness could not consistently address a statewide tsunami warning at the local government level. I've prepared this brief opinion paper to address what I believe are ten of the key factors that must be improved to systematically reduce the likelihood of future poor performance in disasters by local, state and federal agencies.

LIMITATIONS OF THIS PAPER

The results from the upcoming investigations and hearings will lead to gigantic reports with thousands of suggestions and directions for improvements. My opinion is that there are many areas for improvement, but these are often very specific to a jurisdiction, agency, region, etc. What is provided here is a very focused approach to what I consider “root cause” issues. My suggestions are provided to direct attention for change to key emergency management paradigms having influence on all and any other recommendations that may arise. These root cause recommendations for change were limited to ten issues organized within the broader topics of preparedness, response, recovery, mitigation, funding and certification.

PREPAREDNESS

Realign Where Emergency Management Is Located Within Organizations

There are times when structural reorganization is necessary in order for the greater mission of a group to be achieved. The formation of Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was justified in the context of the labyrinth of disconnected federal agencies that were trying to work within the Federal Response Plan (FRP) during terrorism events prior to 9/11. However, some of the rearrangements under Secretary Ridge were missteps. Even the briefest understanding of the gulf between crisis and consequence management should have been enough to justify keeping the Federal Emergency

Management Agency (FEMA) as an independent agency, albeit with close working relations with DHS. I totally agree with the concept that is being floated now that FEMA should be moved to a cabinet level post. But this problem at the federal level has a direct reflection in what has been happening at the state and local government level for years. Unfortunately, it has also been happening in the private sector.

The issue is based on a simple fact: emergency management is not a single-discipline proposition. Emergency management agencies at the state level have been moved farther and farther away from direct reporting capability to the Governors. These state level emergency professionals have been buried in State Police, State Fire, National Guard, and other programs to their ultimate detriment. By the time the spin from a particular discipline is used on reports and recommendations from emergency managers, few Governors really get the actual picture of threats, shortfalls and inconsistencies in preparedness. Individual disciplines view all information as pertinent to their turf for the purpose of building their prestige and budgets. Conversely, emergency management is a process of integration, and bridge building. Single-discipline approaches often build walls, and at worse act as if they are building bridges, but there are no connecting points on either side. Just like the move of FEMA, the State agencies responsible for emergency management programs must be moved as a direct report to the Governor of the state, without interference from self-serving bureaucracies.

This recommendation applies as well to counties, parishes, boroughs and cities. Many independent emergency management offices that once reported directly to community leaders have disappeared. Too many emergency management duties have been tossed on the desk of a law enforcement officer, fireman, public works official or even to a risk manager. Often these selections do not have the background or interest to perform these duties. There are absolutely top-notch emergency managers who are law, fire, and public works personnel, but they are the exception rather than the norm.

Sometimes this choice to reduce the status of an independent emergency management office was done for the worst possible reason—to bring budget dollars into a department so the funds could be manipulated for other purposes. That is an ugly side of this profession and of government reorganization. This disintegration of professional emergency management must stop now. Every time unprepared and uninterested personnel are assigned to these critical programs, instead of those with interest, experience and training in the profession, it diminishes the outcomes of disaster response. I believe that many of the disconnected responses seen in Katrina were due to these programmatic lapses in the good organizational development at all levels of government.

Sadly, business and industry have also begun the same trend by moving emergency management under such single-discipline programs as security, information technology, safety and risk management. Many CEOs have a completely incorrect view of how ready their organizations are for disasters because of their own internal filtering systems.

Strengthen Regionalization Coordination and Complete the Emergency Management Assistance Compact

The National Incident Management System (NIMS) and the National Response Plan (NRP) support stronger regional coordination for resource sharing during disasters. Most seasoned emergency managers support this and have for decades. California has an extensive history of regional coordination due to the development and use of the Incident Command System (ICS), the California Master Mutual Aid Agreement, and the statewide establishment of mutual aid administrative regions. This has not been the case in all other states. Unfortunately, the regional concept does not readily adapt to interstate boundary relationships that are many times stronger than some jurisdictions have within their own state. This challenge is compounded further by the fact that a few states (including California) have not signed the Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC). The time for state resistance is over. The EMAC needs to be a national system now...not next year. Pressures must be brought to bear on policy makers at the state levels to complete this important resource agreement pact so that regionalization is enhanced, especially across state borders. This can ensure speedier and more effective support during disasters and catastrophes.

I also believe that a truly national EMAC system will help drive a national standard for information management systems and the software that supports these systems. Every jurisdiction in the United States should be able to share disaster response or recovery information directly and immediately with any other jurisdiction, at all levels of government. The two major EOC information management software platforms (WebEOC™ and E Team™) do not have a clean, direct interface with each other. Until this is completed and widely available, there is an artificial veil that further complicates regional coordination efforts. There is no excuse for this veil to continue.

RESPONSE

Expand and Improve the Use of Initial Scene Evaluation Teams

One of the response tools FEMA is supposed to initiate its Emergency Response Teams (ERT) to establish early coordination with state emergency operation center (EOC) operations. In support of the ERT are Field Assessment Teams (FaST). These have been in place since the early 1990's. The FaSTs are the initial federal evaluation teams that are inserted into the damage area to provide recommendations for the types and kinds of federal resources most needed immediately and in the near future. Something does not appear to have worked properly with the FaST process in the Katrina response. FEMA headquarters should have known a great deal about losses on the ground and human needs early on, especially at the Superdome in New Orleans. I have no specific evidence or information on how FaST support was used in this event, but there must be improvements in initial information gathering including use of FaST response, with or without a request from State governments.

On the same note, every state government should have its own FaST process. Their team(s) should typically consist of a National Guard helicopter unit with support from emergency management, communications, hazard-based technical experts, and logistical specialists who understand the hazard involved and the processes to address the immediate threats to human life and safety. These teams need to be on the ground at the very earliest time it is safe to do so after the event strikes. Each type of event will create limitations for the teams, but with proper training and staffing, the teams should be able to surmount these limitations and still protect their own safety. Without this immediate scouting information, critical supplies and personnel support will lag behind the power curve of need simply due to ignorance in the EOC(s). If a standard were developed for forming and equipping these state teams, then these state teams would be a tremendous mutual aid resource to share through the EMAC.

Strengthen the Current Use of Amateur Radio to Build the Backbone of Interoperability

There were some substantial communications problems during Katrina's response efforts, especially during the first three days. I have no first hand knowledge of the root causes of this particular problem, but this issue has appeared in every actual event and every exercise I've been in for over 30 years of emergency management and response operations throughout the United States. Why is this problem not fixed? There is no excuse for the loss of communications in any national emergency. There are enough cell sites, internet Voice Over IP (VOIP) systems, radio types and frequencies, and satellite phone services that there should be enough redundancy to ensure work arounds are immediately available. I'm still amazed at how many jurisdictions either ignore or refuse to use GETS cards from the federal government to cut through busy phone systems. If there is one thing the tragedies of 9/11 revealed is that interoperability is the heart of successful life-saving response. There is no excuse for such interruptions to continue to occur in large events as we are well into the 21st Century.

I also believe that the thorough and complete involvement of amateur radio operators at every level of operations, whether in the field or in the EOC, has not fully developed into a mature system. There is no excuse for this. The seamless blending of RACES operations in the government sector with ARES volunteers serving the private sector is long overdue. Some communities and emergency management programs have made great strides in this area. However, there are gaps in the quality of the use of amateur radio between jurisdictions and levels of government. This must be fixed. Amateur radio and their vast array of communications tools have been virtually ignored by some parts of the country, by a few critical parts of government, and by much of the private sector. Leadership and funding to correct this situation must come from the federal levels of government.

RECOVERY

Develop 12 Regional Large-Scale Permanent Population Relocation Centers

Since 1989, I have campaigned virtually alone to government at all levels, non-profit agencies, and to the private sector to build mass relocation centers for evacuees after the loss of metropolitan areas due to disasters. The efforts have been completely ignored or at worst laughed at in these last 16 years. No one in a position to make a difference wanted to even accept the idea that a modern U.S. city could be destroyed. I have always stressed the great vulnerability of the coastal cities in the U.S., and proposed early on the absolute need for development of a pilot relocation center to manage the needs for at least 30,000 evacuees. Once this multi-use facility was proven useful and viable, a total of twelve would be built around the United States.

I also proposed in the early 1990's that the military base closures offered unique opportunities for citing these shelters. It was clear after a very bad experience in Sacramento County, California that local leaders will be more interested in developing housing on closed bases in order to increase the tax base than for creating evacuation sheltering, no matter what the military agreements said about using the abandoned sites for the best purposes for the interest of the public. Developers and elected officials hungry for reelection at any cost will block the use of military bases for these sheltering purposes. It will take a federal mandate to ensure these relocation facilities are built at closed military bases. I also made it quite clear that these relocation facilities must be run under a strong business model, and not by non-profit organization, including the American Red Cross. Experience from the past ad-hoc and limited sheltering operations are valuable, but no sheltering organization in this country has the direct experience of successfully running such large, complex and continuous shelter operations.

New Orleans is by far not the last U.S. city that will be devastated in the next ten years. There is still a window of opportunity, but that window will likely close quickly as more earthquake, terrorist and climate impacts devastate coastal communities.

Revise the Public Assistance Process For Immediate Funding of Evacuees

The recent use of debit cards helped speed funding to those directly impacted by losses from Katrina, yet there are still great holes in the Public Assistance process. Why anyone would tell the evacuees to continuously call overwhelmed 800 numbers or wait in lines for hours with thousands of others is beyond imagination. Yes, there will be fraud. However, that needs to be put in perspective. If all of the fraud was caught and prosecuted due to federal defense contracting in the last 30 years we might be able to restore a good portion of the federal deficit. So, why are the federal relief personnel required to be so implacable when providing funds directly to individual taxpayers and citizens who are most at risk after the loss of everything they owned? There is a terrible inequity here. And the bureaucrats who continue to say things like, "You can get your funding if you have it sent to your bank account," have no context for what it is to be

truly poor, or what it is like to be thrown out from an area where local banks may not be working or accessible for weeks or months.

Someone in FEMA needs to be called on the carpet for this continued lack of understanding and reason. The Stafford Act will undoubtedly be pushed in front of the microphone over and over again at the hearings that will be coming, as a shield to excuse bureaucratic mindlessness. So what does this mean? It means that if the Stafford Act is preventing reason and decency from being used during public assistance acts, then the Stafford Act must be revised to reflect the reality of the new millennium. After hearing some of the public statements of Senator Trent Lott during the Katrina response, I believe the U.S. Senate would be most anxious to reevaluate the current terms and conditions set in Stafford Act. It is law that is long overdue for a major overhaul.

MITIGATION

Direct Mitigation Plans to Be Implemented As Written

The Disaster Mitigation Act of 2000 (DMA 2000) put a demand on every single government jurisdiction to complete a thorough and detailed plan that described the natural hazards in their communities, and the methodologies and plan for addressing them. Although the deadlines were extended, most communities have now completed that task. So, why aren't these documents now the bulldozers for pushing forward some of the needed changes to protect the public and property? The answer is that mitigation has become a stepchild in the NIMS and NRP. The NIMS Integration Center has stated that this is not true, but anyone actually working in mitigation programs is painfully aware of the funding crises and diminishing federal support for meaningful, yet costly, life-saving programs. The fact is that first responders are part of well-organized interest groups that have influence on elections nation wide. Those who promote and complete mitigation projects are not part of such groups. In addition, it's political candy to stand next to fire fighters, law enforcement officers and EMS personnel after disasters and show one's support for their bravery. This is terrible, costly and ego driven politics. The fact is that if mitigation was really the driver at the helm, fewer of these first responders would have to take the risks they do in disasters. If serious, extensive mitigation efforts had been completed on the New Orleans levee system, as was called for in study after study, there would have been no need for the heroic helicopter rescues, the firefighters toiling without water, or the police officers overwhelmed with looters as they stood knee deep in water. Someone has to be brave enough to stand up and say, "Stop this insanity!" Why are we continuing to make the same mistakes and refusing to take the right steps? Must we continue to senselessly build more graveyards for our first responders?

One of my mentors said it best decades ago:

“For every threat you have choices to make early on, but if bad choices are made initially, for whatever reason, the later choices become fewer and fewer as the threat gets closer.” The same person also said, “The best choice is to remove or prevent a hazard from even existing. At the next step one tries to reduce the risks from a hazard that can’t be removed, which can be provided by distance, avoidance, and control measures. If these can’t be fully implemented, then one must prepare to reduce loss of life through appropriate response and treatment programs. By that point, however, ***YOU MUST ANTICIPATE LOSSES.***”

That simple lesson from Art Tate of Austin, Texas, has proved to be one of the truest standards I’ve ever encountered. It is particularly valuable for protecting people, as well as infrastructure. In the consideration for reinstating mitigation to its rightful place, Critical Infrastructure Protection (CIP) must also be kick started throughout the country. This will also be an expensive part of the mitigation process, but the loss of the hospitals and critical pumping stations in New Orleans is just one more salient cry for serious mitigation efforts for infrastructure fortification.

FUNDING

Substantially Revise the Federal Grant Funding Process to State and Local Government

The state and local government emergency management funding processes provided through the federal government are heinous, despicable and culpable for the erosion of more quality program efforts than almost anything else I’ve encountered. The levels of paperwork, review, and training just to receive funds are becoming an albatross on the necks of state and local programs. This must come to an end. If the budgets for all of this paper pushing were focused into accomplishing real emergency management the Country would be in much better shape. In addition, the use of the grants administration is politicized (including Homeland Security, Department of Health and Human Services, FEMA, and the U.S. Fire Administration). I don’t know if this can be mitigated. However, I do know I’ve seen my colleagues, as I have quipped, “Buried in grants tomb,” for the last five years. The mindless bureaucracy built around the grant funding process must be trimmed substantially, including the use of computer application and evaluation programs that are bulky, unfriendly and time consuming.

Another error in funding is making grants tied to budget cycles. That just doesn’t make sense. Most extensive and comprehensive changes in emergency management programs occur over several years, not just one. In addition, federal agencies are guilty of mandating programs to be started at the state and local level with some minimal federal funding to initiate them. Then, after the spotlight dies down, these same federal agencies pull their funding and program support, leaving the state and local governments to fend for themselves. This makes no sense and smacks of what has been termed, “whim

management.” If a program was important enough to be started, it should continue with full and consistent support. The dropping of Project Impact and the shuffling around of the Metropolitan Medical Response System are typical of these programmatic inconsistencies. “Emergency management processes change glacially,” said one very wise emergency professional I have known for years in California. He is right, and the constant reshuffling of national priorities does not serve well the needs of state and local programs to directly protect and serve the public. The grant process must also be based on reasonable expectations, with reasonable performance horizons, and be implemented through a simple, timely administrative system.

EDUCATION and CERTIFICATION

Bring Emergency Professionals and Organizations Up to A National Standard

The new NIMS and NRP will not create an even playing field across the face of this land. What can move us towards that is the carefully planned and designed reeducation and certification of the cadre of emergency management professionals now coming into this field. Those of us with 20 or more years of experience are leaving or are close to leaving. Much of the valuable institutional memory is going out the door with little or inadequate turnover to the next generation. There is also a barrier between the planners in the public and private sector, which is slowly being overcome, but which is tied to bringing the new emergency managers up to a similar standard...and that barrier is certification.

For the last ten years the public sector certification programs have grown under the International Association of Emergency Managers (IAEM). At the same time the private sector professionals have opted for the now Canadian-based Disaster Recovery Institute (DRI) to provide certification. Somewhere in the near future these efforts must merge as the line between the world of government and the world of business blur, especially during disaster operations. Since 1995 I have suggested the development of an internationally recognized individual certification process that would pull the two sides together. The final level of achievement would be the MEM, or Masters of Emergency Management. This could be achieved only through accredited university programs using curricula developed in coordination with IAEM and DRI. Emergency managers would then have a clear career path and salary value based on their accomplishments along a recognized series of formal academic steps. There are many details to make such a system work, but just as fire, law and EMS personnel have recognized levels of skills and accomplishment, so would emergency managers.

At the same time, the still infant efforts of the Emergency Management Assessment Program (EMAP) would become THE accreditation agency for all and any programs for emergency management and response related disciplines in the United States. That would mean one-stop shopping for program certifications in emergency management, fire, law enforcement, EMS, hazardous materials response, safety, information technology security, etc. This may seem an impractical visionary idea, but the simple fact is that there are too many certification organizations now that are disconnected from

each other, which often creates conflict in the information and acceptable practices between them. This can be resolved by EMAP becoming the assessment arm for credentialing federal, state and local programs. I also propose that the American Society for Testing and Materials, International (ASTM) should become the standard writers for this process. This would also reduce the politics involved in developing the standards, and our neighbors in Canada and Mexico would recognize the standards.

FINAL NOTE

These paradigms are those selected by Rick Tobin as being critical for making major, meaningful changes to a wide range of activities in emergency management. No single element in these ten will make enough of a difference to truly heal the breaks in program quality now being experienced in communities through the United States. Whatever areas of improvement are selected, they must meld together and be implemented in a cooperative process that is measurable and sensible within the constraints of personnel and budgets. That balancing act will take the effort of many fine minds and the public will. I truly believe we have the ability to bring both to bear on these systematic flaws.
