

## RESISTANCE TO MASS CARE AND SHELTER FOR CHILDREN IN CATASTROPHES

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When a child dies in your arms, looking up into your eyes, wondering in pain why you cannot help...you do not forget. There is much effort made in modern emergency management to protect infrastructure, government, and the processes of business. But the largest focus of funding and efforts is misplaced by underestimating the needs of large numbers of children who are vulnerable immediately after massive catastrophic events. I have not forgotten that child that died in my arms on the way to get cancer treatments. I have not forgotten the poor service and treatment of women and children in tent cities and poorly equipped shelters used after disasters--and I don't mean in developing countries, I mean right here in the Golden State: California. Ask people who trudged through the mud and filth in Watsonville after the Loma Prieta Earthquake. Ask the caretakers of the medically fragile how they fared in the evacuation of Sutter and Yuba County in the floods of '97 in Northern California.

Long before the Loma Prieta Earthquake and the El Niño floods, I was keenly aware of the incomplete preparedness for massive numbers of displaced residents in the United States. The American Red Cross (as well as many civil authorities) still maintains that pre-designated shelters and tent cities can serve the immediate needs of an evacuated populace. This is of course for those citizens who cannot afford other housing or cannot reach outlying communities that have available hotel/motel accommodations. The problem with these schemes is that the shelters are designated on the assumption that a disaster will not be a regional catastrophe, and that most of the shelters will be viable. The other unfounded assumption is that tents will arrive in a timely manner, with clear weather prevailing, and without disease outbreaks flooding the camps.

There are no easy answers for mass care and shelter for even moderate-sized disasters. It is hard, demanding work that requires the patience of Job. However, the plans currently in place completely underestimate those conditions that might require the mass relocation of an entire urban population after the loss of a U.S. metropolitan area. Few emergency planners consider such conditions, especially the impact on the most vulnerable populations--children. That is why many planners were happy to see Civil Defense pushed to the back burner under the Clinton Administration. We all...all of us...knew that we could never make nuclear war plans work, especially mass care and shelter. It was a farce! I personally sat in meetings where public officials in rural communities threatened those from urban centers, should they ever try to evacuate their inner-city residents to the countryside homes of their citizens. Even during the California floods of 1997, one county initially refused to shelter flood victims from another neighboring county. Simply put, we are not yet finished with the work of managing mass care and shelter for disasters---not to mention gigantic cataclysms.

With this challenge in mind, what is needed for children (and their families) when there is a total loss of a city? For ten years I've worked on the details for such a plan: a prototype to prove it could be done, and should be supported. I designed a concept called LANDARK, the first mass

relocation center for children in the world. It is structured based on a detailed business plan, allowing a non-profit to build a site that would hold up to 30,000 children for up to six months after the loss of a U.S. city. It is also founded on the concept of low-tech sustainable architecture, corporate and government sponsorship, and multi-purpose use to ensure the site would not sit vacant, waiting for a time of need. I have also walked the very land where it should be built, outside Denver, Colorado. All of this was carefully designed, researched and developed over years of trial and error, unending research and with a growing experience in emergency management.

What would a site like LANDARK cost to develop? The bottom line is that it would take \$3M to buy the land and \$10M to build the infrastructure. It would then operate on an annual budget of about \$500k (most of which could be recouped from the ancillary site use fees). This seems so elegant and cost efficient in the face of the hundreds of millions of taxpayers dollars spent on camps for Haitian refugees at Guantanamo who were not even residents of the United States. Even funding equal to just ten percent of a failed Mars satellite mission would be sufficient.

What amazed me was the reluctance and resistance from the public sector when I proposed this project. The National American Red Cross (in a personal memo) stated they had no such plan in place for such activities and were not interested. Officials I contacted at both the national FEMA headquarters and Regional headquarters ignored me, or laughed, except for a few working in the mass care and shelter arena. Most State officials further rebuked the idea. When I appeared on a national television program, I had my state job in California threatened if I didn't "shut my mouth about the state of mass care and shelter." It is important to note that no appearance I ever made mentioned my work with state government. Just the fact that I would even state the obvious was unacceptable to the political parties then in power.

I soon left state government and tried to promote the building of a similar shelter for the general population of Sacramento County. Twice, in the last ten years, the Sacramento levees were severely threatened during high waters in the Sacramento and American Rivers. Unfortunately, area officials now believe that levee upgrades protect the residents from future floods. I share the belief of many emergency professionals that this is folly, and that the elected officials are moving developments into areas that may someday be deathtraps.

I first proposed almost a mile-square area to build a mass care and shelter site for up to 30,000 evacuees, to be constructed over a 12-year period. I eventually begged for a mere 10 acres for just a pilot project to show that it was feasible and necessary. When I pressed this issue to the Sacramento County officials I found two very strong interests. First, their desire to develop land on existing privatized military airfields so that only the highest dollar value would be returned (not the highest use value). Second, to ignore and ridicule any ideas about risks (man-made and natural) to a large population that would need mass shelter immediately, for possibly a month or more in duration. It is clear that developers, good or bad, own the fate of future Sacramentans.

I had left the security of my state job, with no income in sight, sure that my contacts with the authorities in California and Sacramento would move people to reason. The ensuing failure was not a pleasant surprise. Shortly after the refusal to even continue discussions about the project, the Sacramento County Supervisors decided to put millions of dollars into a minor-league

baseball stadium in an adjoining county. That was when I finally got the message. I had expected too much from government employees and elected officials, possibly because I had been both in California. But the problem is not just at the local government level.

The President has established a commission on mass migration. In contacting them, however, I found that their focus was on other countries, not the United States. They told me specifically that they could not imagine a mass migration in the United States, regardless of my pointing out the Gold Rush of 1849, the movement of the Cherokee Nation, and the mass relocation of the farmers from the Dust Bowl in the 1930's. That is the crux of the matter. Officials here do not believe there can be a loss of an entire major metropolitan area or the need for massive care and shelter sites. Their memories and historical education seem somehow dimmed. Actually, parents sent thousands of children away from San Francisco after the 1906 earthquake, on trains arranged by a non-profit organization, but that fact is rarely mentioned.

If Hurricane Andrew had moved one degree of latitude, Miami would have been swept off the map. If the Loma Prieta Earthquake had been on a normal Friday night, instead of one when San Francisco and Oakland residents were glued to their television set to watch the World Series, thousands would have perished under collapsed highways. We've just been incredibly blessed not to have the worst happen. We have not had the loss of an entire major city since General Sherman burned Atlanta. Even the 1906 earthquake did not totally destroy San Francisco. No, United States officials have been isolated from history and the inevitability of Mother Nature's delight in change. Living Americans have also never had to send their children away in huge numbers due to quake, hurricane, nuclear disaster, chemical/biological terrorism, or war. Americans watch the nightly news of other countries and know it just will not happen here.

The next steps needed to establish mass relocation facilities for children and their families will be difficult. It may take tough measures and the exposure of blind officials. I'm up for it, and so are a lot of other emergency managers who have seen this issue swept under the rug with political rhetoric. Playing by the rules of the entrenched authorities will not get LANDARK built. It will take public pressure and exposure. There was a wonderful line at the end of a documentary about the Johnstown Flood in Pennsylvania, "Never expect responsible authorities to act responsibly."

I do not ever want to have a child die in my arms again, wondering why I could not do more. The children who are safe at LANDARK and other shelters needed across North America will not care what the price was to keep them safe. No emergency management professional should be afraid to pay that price. Not a single one of us.