

**“  
... law enforcement agencies must alter  
their priorities, operations, and schedules  
to meet emergency demands.”**

safety emergencies, important to the concept of “the greatest good for the greatest number” of citizens. Officers and administrators alike require a clear understanding of the “big picture” of damage and priorities.

During damage assessment, patrol units check their assigned districts and report the extent of damage to the communications center. Some agencies assign each beat a list of pre-selected key sites that should be checked immediately after a disaster occurs, e.g., hospitals, schools, electrical substations, to name a few. If an Emergency Operations Center (EOC) is established, these reports should be routed there for collation with

reports from other departments and agencies.

#### **Informing the Public**

Keeping citizens informed is not just a convenience, but a necessity. Often, when citizens are unaware of a situation, they contact the police department to determine what has happened. To accommodate such calls, police departments can respond in one of two ways. First, agencies can designate a public information officer who works closely with the local news media to disseminate accurate information on the extent of the damage and the action citizens should take. Or, consideration might be given to a recorded information tape. This

diverts callers from emergency telephone lines to a source of recorded information that gives the status of the situation and what actions are appropriate.

#### **Dispatching Personnel and Equipment**

Following any disaster, personnel mobilization occurs as necessary. This involves either a general re-call of all off-duty personnel or only those in selected assignments. With a general re-call policy, all off-duty employees report for duty when they become aware of a potential disaster situation or one that has already occurred. Many departments institute this policy since it is easier to send excess staff home than to try to call them to report for duty. Another option is to have an organized system whereby adjacent local police departments or the State police force provide personnel and equipment to assist those in the stricken area. Above all, it is critical that a rapid coordinated response follows an emergency.

Equipment mobilization must also accompany an increase in on-duty personnel. This includes vehicles for added staff, re-distribution of communications equipment, and issuance of emergency supplies, such as batteries and flares. Sleeping accommodations and other special arrangements, such as meals and showers, may also be necessary with extended shift assignments.

#### **Light Rescue and Evacuation**

After the October 1989, California earthquake, many Bay Area police agencies started to carry specialized equipment in their

vehicles. Pry bars for lifting debris, wrenches for turning off natural gas meters, and better-equipped first aid kits are now standard items in patrol vehicles. Clearly, law enforcement personnel do not need to be trained in large-scale rescue efforts, but they should know how to perform light rescue operations and the capabilities of local fire agencies, search and rescue teams, and available military units.

Law enforcement personnel may also be responsible for coordinating evacuations. A review of actual cases indicates that when there have been difficulties handling evacuations, the problems can be traced to several deficiencies in emergency assistance plans. These include failing to adequately warn citizens of the dangers and the reason for evacuation, difficulties in communicating information in other languages, failing to recommend proper routing for evacuations, and failure to prepare a site to house and feed those evacuated. In some areas, evacuees may even need transportation, and prior arrangements should be made with the local school or transit systems, as necessary.

### **Security**

Alternatives exist so that security in the stricken area can be maintained with minimal personnel commitments. In areas suffering from weather or earthquake damage, erecting chain-link fencing around the perimeters of the damaged areas is an option. In some communities, contract private security companies monitor access to areas after the initial danger is over. Some jurisdictions enact special laws or ordinances as part of a

declaration of a local emergency, including curfew restrictions, travel and access prohibitions, or special business regulations.

### **Special Law Enforcement Operations**

Sometimes, local law enforcement officers have medical examiner/coroner responsibilities. Reviews conducted of past emergency situations indicate a need for such an operation to augment local capabilities in this specialized activity. Agreements with funeral homes, military units, or State health organizations are usually necessary.

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In many instances after the initial disaster, law enforcement personnel assist with official visitors, such as State legislators, ranking Federal Government officials, and perhaps even the President of the United States, who come to survey the stricken areas. Such visits require coordination with local law enforcement so that access, transportation, re-routing, and security arrangements can be integrated. These activities may require additional staffing. Therefore, mutual aid assistance agreements with other agencies might be necessary to provide adequate security or to handle the necessary arrangements for dignitary visits.

Another concern during the extended disaster period is the potential for fraud. Accounts of bogus contractors approaching disaster victims to inspect homes and businesses are not uncommon. In many cases, phony repairmen take advance payments for work never performed. Law enforcement can stop such fraud by disseminating warnings through local shelters and public service announcements, as well as by thoroughly investigating fraud cases brought to their attention.

As personnel begin to return to more routine operations, consideration should be given to a critical incident stress debriefing program. Either individual or group sessions with specially trained professionals can help law enforcement personnel cope with the death and destruction that they witnessed. Although some officers initially resist participating in such discussions, most eventually derive great benefit from the opportunity.

### **PLANNING**

Given an understanding of the issues related to disaster response, how does an agency adequately plan for such operations? First, it is important that the law enforcement disaster plan be consistent with, or complement, existing city, county, and State disaster planning documents in force. The best approach involves assessing various disaster scenarios that could lead to special law enforcement operations. Next, agencies should conduct a capability assessment to determine the facilities, personnel, equipment, and training available to handle the hazards identified.

Many agencies find that action checklists provide the best format to use for disaster plans. Such checklists allow personnel with little training to begin functioning effectively under emergency conditions, even if it is their "first look" at the plan.

Another accepted means of command and control during the emergency period is an incident

command system. This system, which was originally developed for fire services, includes such components as a consistent organization chart, common terminology, effective span of control, and efficient operations planning formats.

However, even before a disaster occurs, agencies should consider common upgrades to facilities and equipment, such as emergency

generator capabilities and stocking adequate reserves of radio and car batteries, road flares, portable stop signs, and flashlights and batteries. Consideration should also be given to keeping vehicle gas tanks filled, stocking spare tires, and making provisions for hand cranking gasoline in the event of a power failure.

## COST RECOVERY

When and if a disaster affects a law enforcement agency, documentation becomes critical. The State and Federal Government repay most of the costs incurred in response to an emergency if adequate documentation exists to support such a claim. Therefore, agencies should keep detailed records to include personnel shifts, assignments, and hours. Logs for vehicle use and repairs and copies of receipts for any emergency purchases or equipment procurement will also be necessary. Logs prepared since the beginning of an emergency situation prove their value in the end.

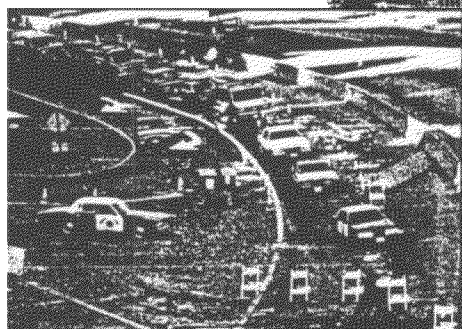
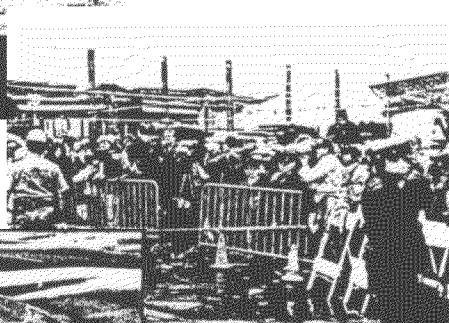
## CONCLUSION

When a disaster occurs, law enforcement operations do, in fact, change. Effective law enforcement administrators begin well ahead of the emergency to prepare their agencies to face demands. Assessment and planning are the best defenses against problems related to disaster response. It is in the public's best interest to make these preparations a constant priority. They should be accepted as part of the overall public safety challenge that each administrator must face.

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Photos courtesy of the San Bernardino Sheriff's Office