



Planning and operating emergency reception facilities

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Organizing an evacuation, and then responding to the needs of evacuees, requires the same degree of planning as any other aspect of emergency preparedness.

The following guidelines were developed through the input and expertise of emergency planners with practical and technical experience in reception centre and shelter operations. These guidelines could be used by communities to prepare for the reception of evacuees.

Initial planning

Two types of locations should be anticipated: a reception centre and a shelter. Reception centres are locations where evacuees are received, documented, and personal needs are identified. Shelters are emergency accommodations, usually in a school gymnasium, arena, community centre, etc. These two sites can be combined in one building, or be set up some distance apart, depending upon suitability, geography, space availability, etc.

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Sites

The identification of possible sites should be done in the pre-incident planning process. With the exception of very small communities, the centre(s) should be pre-identified in each area or sector of the community, taking into account the total potential number of



evacuees envisioned and the geographical nature of the community (eg. identifying a centre on higher ground if the community is in a river valley).

A site profile should be drawn up for each anticipated location, including items such as the name, location, street address, and telephone number(s) of the buildings; the contact or responsible persons; the availability of sleeping and kitchen facilities; washrooms; accessibility for disabled persons; and, a large parking area.

The determination of an appropriate site should be based on several criteria. The site must be accessible by roads, available 24 hours a day, year round, and there must be sufficient internal space and support amenities such as washrooms, kitchens, etc.

Means of alerting the community to the location of the identified centre must also be considered. Local radio and television stations provide good access as long as transmission towers are intact. In a community with a significant or diverse ethnic or cultural mix, consideration should be given to the inclusion of radio/television stations which serve particular groups.

Staffing

Depending on the size and location of the community housing the reception centre or shelter, staffing may comprise local social service agency personnel, volunteers from community agencies such as the Canadian Red Cross Society and Salvation Army, other willing volunteers or a mix. Ideally, all staff will have some training or experience in reception centres or shelters, or



alternatively, some experience in one particular aspect to which they can be assigned.

Emergency reception centre and shelter staff should receive an on-site orientation prior to commencing their assignments. As well, they should receive some guidance on issues such as: who should be involved in counselling evacuees (and who shouldn't); keeping all evacuee personal information confidential from outsiders; how to remain sensitive to the losses of the victim; and, conducting a health screen of each staff to ensure that emergency reception activities and factors such as stress will not aggravate pre-existing medical problems.

Evacuees

Emergency planners should anticipate a wide range of evacuees. Groups with different requirements may be present in the community: families; single adults; couples; minors without parents; people with physical and mental disabilities; and persons with special medical or dietary needs. (Hospitals and correctional institutions will usually have their own evacuation facility plans in place and, hence, will not be integrated with the general population.)

A unique reception centre

During an evacuation in Mississauga, Ontario in November 1979 (as a result of a train derailment with the release of toxic gases), a shopping mall was used as a shelter. While not a usual, or even recommended choice, the experience in this case is notable. The mall was an ad hoc, rather than planned location. As Sunday shopping was legally prohibited at the time, all stores were closed. Volunteers prevailed upon the security staff on-site to open the main mall entrance, although the individual stores remained locked.

The mall was appropriate in this case due to:

Evacuees generally require two types of personal services: counselling and/or personal supports. Counselling may be needed to deal with post-traumatic stress due to deaths or injuries, loss of possessions and uncertainty of the future. Rescue staff may also require counselling for their own critical incident stress, particularly in situations of mass injury or deaths or when the rescuers' training is not able to save lives.

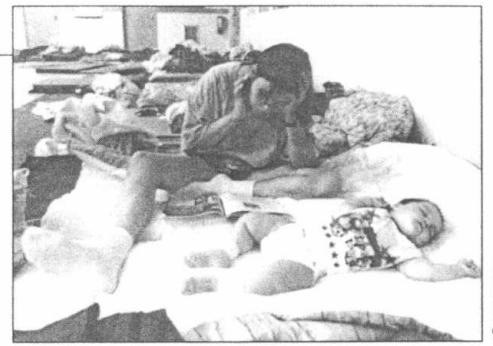
Personal supports can include personal hygiene items such as diapers, facial tissues, sanitary pads, bar soap and towels. As well, evacuees may need prescription medicines, clothing or finances. The tracing and reuniting of families is another function of reception centre and shelter staff.

Reception centres and shelters need to be secure to ensure the safety of the evacuees and their possessions. This can be done through the use of police or security officers. Another important issue relating to security is withholding personal evacuee information from outsiders.

Set-up of reception centres and shelters

The reception centre should comprise

- the large parking area, which encircled the mall, provided ample access for buses and private cars,
- the number and distribution of pay telephones and public washrooms satisfied the needs of evacuees,
- volunteers contacted and prevailed upon the owners of the drug store and supermarket located in the mall to open, making available supplies of personal necessities and food,
- the mall office provided an administrative area,
- the auditorium (present in this mall) allowed for the assembly and briefing of staff away from evacuees,



Canapress

several principal elements, including: a registration area; separate areas for specific services, such as clothing, lodging, etc.; the provision of basic amenities such as washrooms; provision of coffee and juice; crayons, paper and snacks for children; and, an administration and staff rest area.

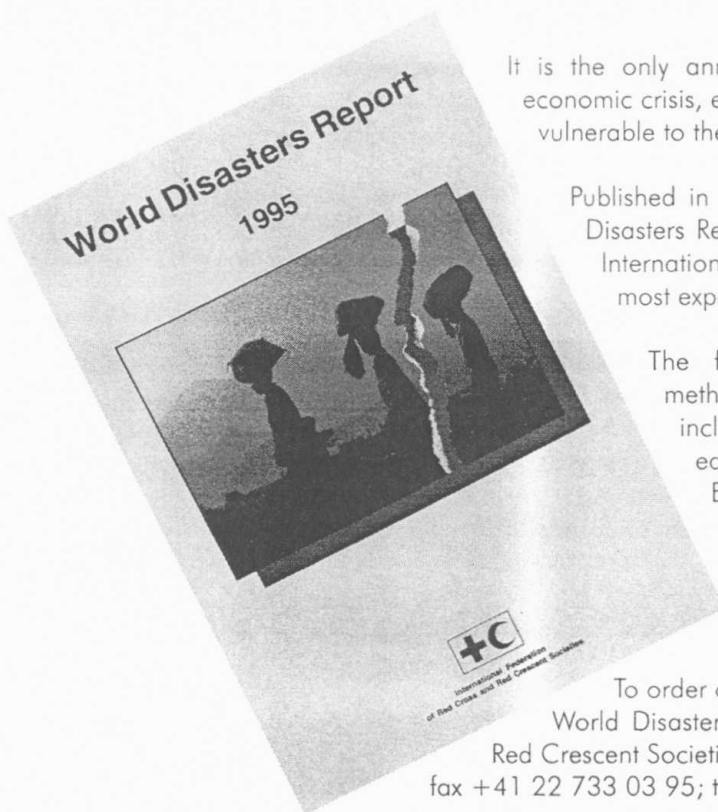
Shelters will require much more organization and planning than a reception centre as the former must provide for all living and eating arrangements for the evacuees.

- A sleeping area must be at a sufficient distance from the sign-in area so that noise will be reduced and light can be dimmed to a level consistent with safety. Local availability and advance research will determine the ease or difficulty in obtaining beds and bedding.
- The eating area should be separate from the sleeping area for sanitary reasons. Feeding the evacuees requires detailed planning. Restricted diets,

- the wide range of stores, although closed, provided a diversion for evacuees as they "window-shopped",
- other areas provided space for an infirmary, quiet room for seniors, and a pet area,
- the mall's public address system permitted simultaneous communication with all evacuees regardless of their location within the mall,
- the regular on-site mall security provided a visible deterrent to inappropriate acts.

The concern of what to do when Monday business hours came never had to be dealt with, as the evacuation area was expanded later in the day to include the mall, and all evacuees were relocated.

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food allergies, swallowing difficulties, infant food and formulas, and religious and cultural restrictions must be taken into account.

Off-site food supply can be provided through agreements with fast food restaurants, event caterers, hospitals and nursing homes, Meals-on-Wheels programs, church groups, or universities with cafeterias.

- A First Aid area should be available, including a few cots for those who feel ill.

Other areas which may be needed include: a private counselling area; a quiet room for family or personal religious devotion; a children's play space; an adult recreation area; a mother/infant area; and a section for pets, if they have been allowed into the shelter. (Pets should only be allowed into

the shelter as a last resort due to concerns of sanitation, fleas and allergies of some evacuees. An arrangement may be planned with the local Humane Society to pick up pets and transport them to local animal shelters or boarding kennels.)

As well, accurate information must be frequently provided to the evacuees to reduce the levels of tension and uncertainty. This can be done through periodic announcements of current status over a public address system if it is available, or through information updates on a notice board.

When the evacuation warnings are no longer in effect, it is most efficient to let the evacuees leave without having to sign out, as most will be anxious to return home. However, time should be taken with the departure of unaccompanied children, making sure the

people who pick them up are relatives or legal guardians.

Cleaning, waste removal and disinfection can then be completed, returning the building to the owners in similar shape as it was found.

With proper incident planning, any community can successfully deal with a disaster that leads to an evacuation. ▲

This article is condensed from a draft report prepared for Emergency Preparedness Canada by James A. Hanna. The full report is currently being edited for future publication by Emergency Preparedness Canada.

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