

Emergency Management Strategies for Communicating Hazard Information

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In the past decade, increasing numbers of Americans have become exposed to natural and man-made hazards. This exposure stems both from changes in technology and in human settlement patterns. In some cases, citizens have been unknowingly exposed to health and safety risks for years; while in others, recent developments have produced new conditions that expose or threaten future exposure of populations to hazards. From the perspective of the local emergency manager, these circumstances introduce distinctive communication demands to educate the public about environmental risks both for impending dangers and longer term hazards. The objectives of any risk education program are twofold: (1) to make the public aware of the danger, and (2) to inform them about possible means of achieving protection. To accomplish these dual objectives, emergency managers must take into account both the public's perception of emergency management as well as the manager's own educational resources.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the process of communicating information to the public about environmental risks to increase the likelihood that citizens will adopt protective measures. To accomplish this objective, three issues in public education will be examined. First, an attempt is made to understand how emergency management agencies can become identified as credible sources of information within the community. Second, attention is given to establishing and maintaining viable communication channels through which local emergency management personnel can reach the public. The closing section of the paper discusses strategies for increasing citizen receptivity to officially designated prospective measures.

Agency Credibility

Establishing the credibility of an emergency management agency is an ongoing process. It takes place during times of acute threat and during normal times, outside the context of any impending disaster. The most basic

challenge in this process is to make citizens aware that community emergency planning is underway and that a specific office has responsibility for its conduct.

Agency recognition is certainly a prerequisite for credibility. Given the recency of modern emergency management, one task of any public educational effort must include an element of re-familiarization with the legitimacy of the organization. At a minimum, citizens need to understand the nature of community emergency management and the structure of the organization that carries it out.

During times of crisis, public awareness of emergency management may be enhanced by making emergency services personnel visible to the community. During the disaster response period, for example, emergency services workers could be distinguishable from police or fire fighters who also routinely respond to emergencies. Such devices as pocket plaques, arm bands, distinctive garb, and clearly marked vehicles help identify emergency services personnel. By observing emergency service staff in the process of responding to community threats, citizens can then begin to appreciate their contribution to the preservation of public safety.

In non-disaster situations, efforts must also be undertaken to make emergency services personnel visible. If emergency managers are to execute their agency's charge effectively, some degree of organizational credibility that exists in disaster situations must be preserved in the absence of an acute threat. Wolensky and Miller¹ found that citizens have come to expect emergency officials to perform "backstage" duties and remain largely invisible on a day-to-day basis.

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Preparation of this paper was supported in part by the National Science Foundation (Grant numbers CEE 82-12799 and CEE 81-20426). The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the authors and do not represent official policy of the National Science Foundation.