

THE LESSONS OF HURRICANE HUGO

Expecting the Unexpected

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As Hurricane Hugo made its destructive trek across the Caribbean in September 1989 law enforcement officials throughout the southeastern United States began to focus their attention on the possibility of activating hurricane contingency plans. When projections made it apparent that South Carolina would likely be Hugo's destination, state officials were quick to implement emergency measures.

On the evening of September 21, Hugo's epicenter smashed ashore precisely into Charleston. And as the storm continued on in a northwesterly direction, much of South Carolina was destined to feel the full fury of Category IV hurricane... a storm that is now considered this country's most costly natural disaster.

As a result of effective contingency planning and a proactive posture taken by public safety officials prior to Hugo's onslaught,

however, fewer than 60 fatalities were left in the wake of the storm. And as officials shifted into a reactive mode the successful implementation of predetermined reactionary plans contributed significantly to the success of the post-Hugo recovery phase.

In the early stages of response and recovery it was clear that professional skills, untiring dedication and innovative techniques were sufficient to meet public safety needs. Most of the problems encountered had.

been anticipated, and effective contingency plans simplified resolution. However, it was not until some semblance of routine had been restored that the truly unexpected problems began to manifest themselves. While these problems initially seemed insignificant, they soon became disruptive to the point of impeding response and recovery efforts.

Most of us have been conditioned throughout our professional careers to react instantaneously in crisis situations, confident that incidental problems will be resolved as they arise. Such problems have become increasingly complex over the years, however, and their impact upon our organizations can be both profound and lasting.

While effective planning is important, it cannot anticipate every possible problem or guarantee preparation for every contingency. It therefore becomes prudent to share and learn from the experiences of others. For this reason, I would like to share the following sampling of typical problems and concerns that might plague the unexpected public safety organization in times of natural disaster.

Employee Compensation

The disposition of "nonessential" administrative employees and support personnel can prove to be a complex issue. For example, do you bring these employees in to their normal work stations or perhaps use them to augment centralized response centers? And what about those who are unable to report to work because of washed-out bridges, damaged roads or other hazardous circumstances? Is administrative leave a logical and appropriate solution?

Since people become even more dependent upon their incomes for survival in the aftermath of any major disaster, the withholding of pay is certain to have serious repercussions and should be avoided. This is especially true when the disaster has long-term implications and the recovery process stretches into weeks. While clear and simple solutions may be evasive, there are numerous options to be considered.

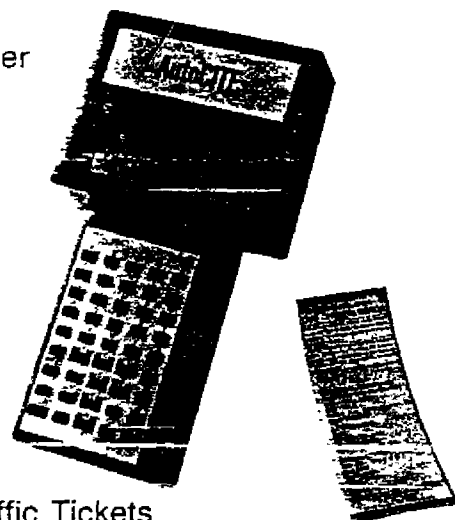
One tactic would be to pay a base salary to all employees, including those who did not (or could not) report for work. However, be prepared to award some form of additional compensation to those who actually worked, whether this is "comp time" or special bonus pay. Otherwise, your well-intended gesture is certain to generate heated controversy. Furthermore, if employees are paid for staying home during a major disaster, the incentive to work through any subsequent crisis has essentially been removed. You may find that your employees simply decide to stay home next time.

A related problem might be experienced with those employees who are "exempt" from receiving overtime wages,

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especially if there are exceptions to class distinctions. For example, an exempt lieutenant performing duties identical to those of a nonexempt lieutenant is likely to question the fairness of compensation policies. This is particularly true if both are assigned to work in the same location (i.e., a command post). This problem might be mitigated somewhat by simply waiving all exempt classifications during times of emergency. If this measure proves to be cost prohibitive, you can focus on specific positions or functions.

Because disaster response can be chaotic, we sometimes concern ourselves with compensation and time sheet preparation after the fact. Not only is this method difficult and inaccurate, but it can also jeopardize the awarding of state and federal grants. Timely establishment of an accurate system for tracking hours worked is imperative.

Since many officers have citizens band radios and cellular phones installed in their cruisers, it is important to establish liability policies for the destruction of personal equipment. This is particularly important since personal equipment is normally not covered by grants. Does departmental approval to use the equipment incur a replacement liability?

Mental Health

As a result of fatigue, disruptions to eating and sleeping routines and various other incidental stressors, mental health and endurance is certain to be cause for major concern during a prolonged disaster. Public safety officials must sacrifice the welfare of their own families in order to meet the needs of the communities they serve. And if officers are compelled to neglect their personal responsibilities while coping with the additional stress of meeting professional demands, departmental efficiency may diminish.

Because of Hurricane Hugo, Charleston County police officers were assigned to work continuous 12-hour shifts. As a result, weeks passed before many were able to see their own homes in daylight. This was particularly traumatic for those who had to neglect homes that were seriously damaged and in need of immediate repair. Other officers, whose homes had been totally destroyed, had to cope with the additional frustrations inherent in finding interim shelters.

When a crisis begins to abate and officers become more aware of the disaster's impact on their environment, they sometimes find themselves disoriented and traumatized by the shock of seeing the destruction of familiar sites and surroundings. During periods of great stress, the loss of places and things that have acquired sentimental value over the years can wreak havoc with public safety officials. Since most mental health con-

cerns fall within the realm of trained and qualified professionals, prudence dictates the provision of such assistance for the members of your department.

Endurance

Most contingency plans identify backup systems and make other provisions that will supposedly ensure continuous operation under emergency conditions. Many of these plans are limited in scope, however, and fail to provide for long-term requirements and associated problems. For example, emergency communications facilities usually depend on generators for power, but how long can they run before it becomes necessary to refuel them? This can be a serious problem if access routes are blocked or destroyed and fuel is unavailable.

How long could your department coordinate its response efforts if your headquarters facilities and command post were severely damaged or destroyed? And what is the endurance of those employees who are marooned at one of your facilities—do you have sufficient facilities and provisions to sustain them? What happens if access is blocked and you have no means for ensuring fresh replacements?

Is your department capable of operating without telephones, typewriters or computers for two to three weeks? Since official vehicles are often required to function in the midst of major disasters, they are at risk and susceptible to damage. Do you have sufficient numbers of spare vehicles and parts to sustain operations in the event of loss? What about batteries for flashlights or proper clothing and protective equipment?

Incidentally, interdepartmental cooperation is certain to reach optimum levels during times of emergency, and organizations typically find themselves compromising normal accountability procedures when sharing responsibilities, equipment and personnel. However, by the time relative calm has been restored, resources have often been depleted and patience strained. Officials consequently find themselves embroiled in controversy as they strive to locate and recover assets.

Conclusion

While it is impossible to forecast every problem that might arise during a major disaster, contingency planning and frequent exercises are essential. Consider, too, the possibility of detailing observers from your department to temporary duty with organizations involved in actual disaster scenarios and obtaining copies of their post-event critiques for careful review and analysis. Finally, if you can accept the fact that surprises are inevitable, your overall response strategy is less likely to be jeopardized. ★