

The June, July and August 2005 issues of the Florida Water Resources Journal contained articles on hurricane preparedness and lessons learned from the 2004 hurricane season. Planning often focuses on the operational aspects of disaster preparedness. During disasters, the people we serve need to know what is going on regarding the water and wastewater services they routinely rely upon – services that are often disrupted during disasters. This Tip Sheet provides ideas on what you can do before, during and after a disaster to communicate with the public.

PE TIP SHEET NO. 9:

Planning For Disaster Communications

BY

John A. Giachino
Chair, FWEA Public Education Committee

You can never be too prepared for communicating during a disaster. We all recently watched with shock and dismay as victims of Hurricane Katrina struggled to communicate with each other and the rest of the world, using everything from text messages to ham radio as most every means of communication in New Orleans and coastal Mississippi remained devastated for weeks. Here in Florida, many of us had to deal with the effects of six hurricanes that struck the state in the span of only one year.

For those organizations which provide elements of our critical infrastructure, particularly essential services and utilities (public and private), disruptions can carry much wider social implications than those problems that can be isolated to a single organization and therefore, have limited social impact. The whole community depends on the availability of services from utility systems. Disruption in these systems have significant effects, including rapid deterioration of the social infrastructure, such as we saw in New Orleans after Katrina with people looting stores for water and food.

Secondary and tertiary effects may also develop. Some effects may be anticipated, others are difficult to predict. Disruption of transport links may make replacement parts unavailable, facilities may be closed, loss of electricity may shut down critical elements of the utility infrastructure for extended periods of time, building closure will prevent or restrict staff access. These effects must also be addressed when planning for disasters.

But we must also be ready to communicate effectively with the public when disaster strikes. The public needs routine updates, even if they are tentative or change often. Follow these communications planning and preparedness concepts.

Start With Credible Messages

In the event of an emergency or disaster, it is critically important that consistent and credible messages be communicated. The Emergency Management Office most often delivers these messages using information provided from throughout the organization.

Most every government organization activates an Emergency Operations Center (EOC) during emergencies and disasters and has an assigned person(s) that serves as spokesperson. As you can expect, the wrong sentence, phrase, or even wrong word could cause panic and fear among the receiving audience. Remember that during the early days following Hurricane Katrina's devastating landfall, it appeared as if spokespersons from various agencies seemed to blame each other for the lack of an early coordinated response effort. This certainly did not instill confidence in the thousands of needy victims.

To avoid misinformation and rumors, which can spawn panic and could lead to physical violence as in the case of Katrina, you need to provide specific technical information through the spokesperson to the public involving the services provided by your organization. This "damage control" will inform the public of the real circumstances. Leave the broad scale status reports on a disaster or potential disaster, to the emergency management coordinators and to other designated emergency response individuals.

Make sure that you are prepared to provide information to the non-English speaking public. If possible, pre-print certain "standard" information in languages prevalent in your area. Be ready to circulate this information through the media and other means when disaster strikes.

Develop an outline for daily information packets, which should include updates on status of the affected system, telephone numbers to call for help or more information, routes to locations where relief supplies will be available and other need to know information related to your service. Pre-print this information when possible.

Before the Disaster

Designate your organization spokesperson. Having a designated disaster spokesperson on staff provides journalists and others with a central authority figure in both everyday and emergency situations.

Organize a "what if" brainstorming session with others in your organization. Come up with "what if" scenarios about potential disaster situations. Determine steps on how you would communicate during the "what if" crises.

Have a written disaster communications/emergency communication plan ready before a disaster strikes. With an emergency communication plan in place, spokespersons will be able to respond and perform proactively, as opposed to reactively, thus better controlling the information and news coverage in disaster situations.

Select disaster communication teams. Who is responsible for communicating with the media during a crisis? Who fields telephone calls? Who makes decisions about what to say to the media? Everyone in your organization should know who are on the disaster communication and management teams.

Train Your Spokespersons. It is not enough to have a designated spokesperson on staff; that spokesperson should be trained properly in communication methods. Provide all spokespersons with communications-related training opportunities. Emphasize topics spokespersons believe to be important when communicating with the media. Training program topics could include:

- ◆ Disaster scene preparedness
- ◆ Crisis communication techniques
- ◆ Media relations (understanding how the media work)
- ◆ Computer skills, specifically, how to communicate in an on-line environment
- ◆ Speaking skills, such as media interviewing techniques and public speaking
- ◆ Writing skills (news writing and news releases)
- ◆ Information gathering skills

During the Disaster

Centralize information. Again, designate one spokesperson. A central spokesperson provides a "face" for the public. People begin to become familiar with a central spokesperson, so this is one way to begin building credibility for the organization, especially when the person comes across as trustworthy. Centralized information also will minimize miscommunication.

Get and give the facts. Miscommunication heightens during a crisis and can be exaggerated by half-truths, distortions, or negative perceptions. Get to the heart of the real story and tell it. Gather and classify information into categories, such as facts and rumors. Facts should be routinely updated. Rumors should be verified or exposed as myths. Deal with rumors swiftly. Tell only the truth about what you know to be fact. Do not repeat others' opinions, hearsay, or possibilities. Take the offensive when a serious matter occurs. Be active, not reactive. Tell it all; tell it fast.

Accommodate local media before national media. Local reporters will provide immediate, important information to area residents. Consider "media pool coverage," especially of video footage, and/or media tours to disaster-damaged areas. Remember newspaper reporters have information needs that differ from those of the electronic media.

Be accessible or designate someone to be accessible to the media at all times. The media should have a contact person's telephone number, cellular telephone number, fax number, and electronic mail address for around-the-clock contact. Provide necessary resources (cellular phones, laptop computers) to designated spokespersons in the field. When phone service has not been disrupted, provide a 24-hour telephone hotline for the public to use for emergency updates.

Keep your cool. In an interview or news conference, some questions may be hostile, and some questions and comments may seem to personal attacks on you, but remember that the media are trying to get information on a disaster-oriented story that may have widespread impact to their audiences. So don't get mad when you are asked the "hard" questions.

Stay "on the record" in all interviews. Do not go "off the record." Any comment worth saying should be said "on the record." If you go "off the record," be ready to read it in print the next day. Is this unethical for reporters to report "off the record" comments? Sure, but anything can, may, and possibly will be done to advance a story. You should not be lured into going "off the record" under any circumstance.

No "no comments." Try to have an answer for reporters' questions. But if you don't have an answer, don't be afraid to say, "I don't know, but I'll find out." Saying "no comment" instead, appears to television viewers and newspaper readers that you have something to hide.

Write everything down. Maintain a *crisis communication inventory* of what was said by whom and at what time. This way, you will have a record of the event and how it was communicated. You can evaluate your responses so you will be better prepared if another crisis happens in the future.

After the Disaster

If you just sit back and do nothing, you won't be ready for the next crisis! It is time to evaluate how you handled the disaster. Your review should include the following:

- ◆ A review of why the crisis or disaster occurred. Could you have done anything to prevent or lessen it?
- ◆ An evaluation of how the crisis was handled and communicated. You may want to use the crisis communication inventory you maintained to evaluate how communication was handled. Was information disseminated through one spokesperson? Did miscommunication occur?
- ◆ An examination of similar scenarios. What would you do in a similar situation in the future? What did others do in similar situations?

Conclusion

It is hoped that a disaster situation never occurs for your organization. But if it does, taking time now to prepare -- even if you think it will never occur -- and how to communicate with the public during a disaster is your best defense.

You can download a reprint of this and other PE Tip Sheets from the FWEA web site at <http://fwea.cnsusa.com/cms/index.cfm?primarykeylist=,234,248,266,1669,1675> n