How would you get food to 1,000 homebound seniors if roads and bridges were destroyed?

city 101, p. 22
AFTER AN EMERGENCY, your top priorities are always to restore vital infrastructure (transportation routes, power, water, sewer) and critical services (firefighting, emergency medical, search and rescue) citywide, as safely and efficiently as possible. How will you do this? Here are a few strategies to keep in mind:

- **Know your internal team and supporting players.** Identify roles, responsibilities, and essential functions. Your departments all know their daily operations inside and out—they provide the highest level of service on a daily basis. During an emergency, they’re uniquely positioned and eager to serve as your in-house subject-matter experts. The key is to have them routinely share information about their response plans and priority functions. If you bring them together, not only will they have familiarity about who does what, but they’ll have established ongoing working relationships with you and will be able to operate as a coordinated team, as opposed to a group of highly skilled consultants.

- **Establish a culture of preparedness.** As training does for an everyday athlete, having a culture of preparedness in your city creates the muscle memory needed when emergencies happen. A slot on the oft belittled Safety Team may not be among your department’s most coveted positions (who hasn’t heard of someone being nominated when they were on vacation or couldn’t make a particular staff meeting?), but a responsive culture stems from leadership. As a small example: How much time would it take to point out emergency exits and appropriate actions to take if something were to happen during a meeting? A couple of minutes? Less? It’s the routine that matters. At your next all-staff meeting or retreat, put it out there. Then commit to keeping it out there.

  A larger, perhaps more salient example: Imagine the cultural impact of adding to every job description the simple line: “during disaster, everyone is an emergency worker.” Every job applicant sees it; every promotional opportunity reinforces it. Combine that with regular performance reviews (with detail and training on what being an emergency worker means to an individual position), and you’ve gone a long way toward instilling the culture of preparedness. People want to know what is expected of them, especially during emergencies. Providing clarity ahead of time is essential to being able to function well during an emergency.

**During disaster, everyone is an emergency worker.**
Establish strong contacts among specific business sectors. Knowing how to connect with specific sectors of your community will be vital to your overall response. Consider the skills, services, assets, and resources that those in the hospitality, restaurant, grocery, finance, banking, technology, and skilled-trades industries could bring to the table. Make the connections. Ask for their assistance ahead of time. Create plans for coordinating communication among sectors.

Ensure multimodal, multilingual communication. You may well win the battle but lose the war, depending on how the community perceives your ability to respond to the scale of the emergency. Develop a comprehensive strategy on what your organization can do to manage the message, and set realistic expectations before you are in the midst of a response. Communicating early and often is key, employing the best-practice “one message, many voices” strategy to reach as wide a swath of the community as possible.

Finally, don’t forget about community groups. Connections established within and among your community will also be instrumental in providing essential human services. As we see in disasters here in the U.S. as well as around the world, people will help. The key is anticipating how to plug into their structure and vice versa. Agreements setting out specifics ahead of time will go a long way toward a smooth operation. Some service organizations, like the Rotary, may have already provided training to their members and decided how they as an organization will mobilize after an emergency. Scouting groups, churches, local PTAs, even athletic organizations will have a number of helping hands waiting to be put to good use. Consider, for example, what happened during Hurricane Sandy, when dozens of elderly living in high rises lost power and couldn’t walk multiple flights up and down dark stairways to get medicine or food after the storm. Clearly identified, credentialed, and caring community teams formed and took urgent food and basic supplies up to people in their apartments. Here’s where strong, youthful arms, legs, and hearts go a long way toward providing emergency essentials.

In short, be creative! Any mission you take on creates an opportunity to really think outside the box. Play with scenarios. How would you get food to 1,000 homebound seniors if roads and bridges were destroyed? Staging areas? Runners? Bikes? Pizza drivers? Grocery delivery? Is there a role for restaurants? Churches? Who else could provide assistance? Imagine the possibilities.
RECORDS TIME

DEALING WITH PUBLIC REQUESTS IN THE AFTERMATH OF OSO

The OSO Mudslide was a monumental disaster, and it triggered an avalanche of public records requests. Numerous people, the media in particular, wanted to know how the county had allowed this area to be developed. The Monday after the disaster, the county was receiving a barrage of media requests. It was my job to respond to the public records requests on behalf of Planning and Development Services.

Assembling requests to respond during an emergency takes big-picture strategy. Many of the requests were wide-ranging in terms of dates and types of records, and they often overlapped. Lacking subject expertise, we had to err on the side of providing more records for the more complex requests. It was too much to decide what records went into which request, so we gave out everything in many of the larger requests. This decision also streamlined the process and created consistency.

Because our department held a lot of the records being requested, we wanted to provide requesters’ most desired records through our website portal as quickly as possible. The guiding premise was to collect and present first what we knew the media wanted: what building permits were issued, how many houses were permitted, when and where the structures were built. Key staff went through microfilm, made copies of permit histories of lots affected by the mudslide, and scanned in records. We gathered and released the most relevant information first, and we tried to identify sensitive materials and confirm accuracy. This initiative helped slow down the deluge of media requests.

As is our normal practice, the county’s public records officer designated a lead department to process each request, which helped streamline the process for us and for requesters. As the lead on many requests, Public Works continued to coordinate with other departments.

Perhaps the hardest part of the records requests was dealing with people’s emotions. Several employees had friends or loved ones affected by the slide. As a staff, we worked to respond as quickly as possible while being concerned for staff time. It helped to clear our calendars and focus on the near term, as well as to schedule regular check-ins with management and legal counsel.

It’s too early to capture all of the lessons learned because it still feels like we are in the midst of the event. We continue to process the Oso requests along with our daily requests. Getting the already existing, everyday requests out to the public can’t be put on hold, even in the worst of disasters.

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Accept that the process will be stressful and confusing.

Respect that the initial focus may not be records.

Recognize your emotional responses.

Be compassionate with others.

Accept that you may not be able to do as much as you want.

Expect both friendly and aggressive media inquiries.

Remember long-term priorities while fulfilling immediate requests.

Ask for help when you feel overwhelmed.

Remember that digging out from under a disaster is a long process.

Perhaps the hardest part was dealing with people’s emotions.
CHECKLIST, PLEASE

PROPER PLANNING IS THE KEY TO SUCCESSFUL DISASTER RECOVERY.

YOU JUST HAD A DISASTER. Now what? You don’t have a plan or a checklist, so you turn to public works or maybe call your insurance. But many jurisdictions with the best intentions take actions that aren’t in line with federal, state, or local rules or requirements, making them ineligible for reimbursement of disaster expenses from FEMA, other agencies, or insurance. In some cases, a jurisdiction can create a bigger mess than the one they’re trying to clean up.

Simply put, the middle of an emergency is the worst time to think about what processes you need to have in place. People don’t know where they need to be. A public works department may check its sites, but parks may not check their facilities or be aware of damages. If you aren’t paying attention to the early signs, you will miss things. What could be fixed early on during an emergency can turn into a much larger problem.

But if you plan smartly, you can possibly recoup your losses through federal disaster assistance programs. Recognizing vulnerable points, engaging your staff, and knowing your planning steps is how you start.

In flash flooding areas, low water crossings are normally dry, but during a rain event rivers of water take over the roads. You know historically where the water goes. Do you have a plan for barricades and for where your sheriff or police should set up detours?

If your city has a river or creek running through it, do you have an early warning system? Do you tap into the local weather forecast? Do you have river walkers who can give you an early sense of minor, major, or catastrophic flooding?

Look at your bridges. Waterways could be filled with woody materials. If you don’t have procedures for cleaning these woody materials, they could dam up, cause greater flooding, or possibly cause a catastrophic bridge failure.

For shore communities, do you know your tidal sequences and approaching weather patterns? Will you lose your roadways? When you have only one road in and one out, that’s your lifeline. Do you have your police, fire, and emergency medical services positioned in the right places, so that they could serve the community if the road were washed out?

Keeping arterials open during exceptional snow and ice events is critical. Do you have a snowplowing priority plan? Is it more important to plow the area going into your hospital, or is your commerce center your highest priority?

Then there’s debris. Where do you put it and store it? Is it in a flood plain or a wetland? Construction debris is often placed in areas causing further problems.
with the community. You must avoid environmentally sensitive areas. Where would you stage debris reduction and reduce it to a manageable quantity? Next to a school or hospital? Don’t put your populace at risk.

Recovery funds are not gifts. They come with strings, and the strings always require documentation. Photos tell your story and bring your documentation to life. Photos also help you set repair priorities and decide where to place limited resources.

Document, document, document. Retain receipts for any disaster-related expenses, like a generator or meals for staff working overtime. Always document the equipment and personnel being used. Capture infrastructure inspections. Document anything dealing with in-water work, and let the permitting and regulatory people know what actions you’re taking. Keep track of staffing hours—insurance won’t pay you for this, but federal disaster grants might. Documentation can save years of negotiation attempting to work through after-the-fact consultations.

Be careful in working with historic buildings or districts or archaeologically sensitive areas. It’s critical that you address the immediate threat to public health and safety, but don’t jeopardize your reimbursement opportunities. Make the area safe with as little change to the historic aspects as possible. Again, document what you do. Once again, photos are your friend.

How will you do the work? If it’s by contract, have you waived your competitive bid requirements by emergency proclamation? Do you have mutual aid agreements in place? Do you have a current emergency proclamation?

Communication is vital, within your city and with citizens and various groups around you. Let special purpose districts and other local governments know what you are doing. They may be able to help, but only if they know what you need. Use social media to send community updates, and use all available tools: reader boards, flyers, media, and community meetings. Being plugged into Twitter during a weather event gives you a good sense of what’s going on.

Most of all, remember that the best and most cost-effective recovery is one that’s planned ahead.