

Not My Fault: The disaster management cycle

Lori Dengler/For the Times-Standard

Posted: Oct. 4, 2017

Disasters have been on the news and in many peoples' minds the last few weeks. It has been particularly so for me as I spent last week in Emmitsburg, Maryland with fifty Del Norte County emergency professionals and others with disaster response responsibilities. We took an emergency management class to improve the county's ability to respond to a major disaster.

Emmitsburg is the Federal Emergency Management Agency's National Training Center. This is the third time I've been here, previous trips were both with Humboldt County personnel. Emergency management is a relatively new discipline. Of course people have always been responding to emergencies and disasters from time immemorial and all cultures have developed ways to adapt to common threats. But a systematic, multi-agency approach to managing disasters didn't emerge in the US until after the 1991 Oakland Hills Tunnel Fire.

The Oakland Fire was horrific – killing 25 and destroying more than 3,500 structures. Fire units and public safety personnel from all over the state responded to give aid but many found that their hose connections didn't work in Oakland and there was no common system to coordinate the different teams. One of the houses that burned belonged to State Senator Nicholas Petris. The next year, Petris authored SB 1841 mandating that California adopt a system of Standardized Emergency Management (SEM) to make sure that response roles and agencies were coordinated in future disasters.

The Federal Government followed California's lead by adapting much of the California program into the National Incident Management System (NIMS) and eventually mandated that all entities hoping for disaster expense reimbursement must use the system. SEMS and NIMS are frameworks that provide clearly defined roles for responders, a mechanism for coordinating mutual aid, facilitate the flow of information and track resources and deployment.

The Del Norte County group spent four days reviewing emergency management fundamentals and participating in exercises to simulate response to a real emergency. We focused on a flood scenario – something similar to

what happened on the North Coast in 1964. The highlight of the week was a functional exercise – where an actual emergency operations center was established and everyone took on the roles they would perform in a real activation. The FEMA facility is great at making an exercise feel real. I was in the simulation cell where we made calls to the participants – some gave situation reports from “the field” like rising flood waters, isolated and injured people, blocked highways. Other calls were from officials, state agencies or members of the public. The participants made decisions about coordinating search and rescue, requesting heavy equipment, establishing shelters and prioritizing limited resources. The more real the simulation feels, the better everyone will do when the real emergency comes.

In between the exercises and simulations we heard presentations from experts on various aspects of disaster response. The former emergency manager of Oakland talked about damage assessment – he was the one in the hot seat for both the Loma Prieta earthquake and the Oakland Fire. There were presentations on resource management, documentation, and handling volunteers – both wanted and unnecessary. After major disasters there is always an outpouring of community support and an inevitable flood of used clothing, appliances, food and other items most of which just complicate the response effort and end up in landfills.

I was impressed with the Del Norte group – while some had been involved with emergency issues for years, it was new for many. Just as in a real emergency, the initial parts of the functional exercise were a bit chaotic and not everyone was sure of their role. But everyone persevered and became part of a smooth running machine. They took home many lessons of how to improve communications and documentation and gained confidence that they had tools to cope with a real disaster.

A real disaster will be messy and the most skillful, well-trained professionals won't be able to stop losses, confusion and discomfort. By definition, a disaster is an event that is too big for our normal public safety officials to handle. In the first hours or days the professionals will probably not be able to reach you. This is where personal preparedness really can make a difference. Do what you can to reduce hazards and make a family emergency plan. Take a First Aid class or become involved with a Community Emergency Response Team (CERT). You can find more information at Prepare Del Norte (<http://preparedelnorte.com/index.html>) or Humboldt CERT Coalition

(<https://www.facebook.com/groups/HumboldtCERTCoalition/>).

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