

“What we have here is a failure to communicate”

ARE WE READY FOR WHAT HAPPENS NEXT???

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Engine 1, Medic 1, Respond to the cafeteria at Jones Middle School, student reported having a seizure at this time, condition unknown.

Engine 1, Medic one on the scene, several students running out of the main building at the school, has the fire alarm been activated?

Dispatch to Engine 1, several phone calls now reporting 5 students convulsing in the auditorium...

What happens in the first second on the call change it from a normal routine call to one that will tax the resources of the response community?

WMD, are we prepared?

The scene described above may be chaotic and overwhelming. We must begin the process of sorting out our response objectives BEFORE we answer the call. Our nations public safety agencies have been practicing for our standard caseload of calls, EMS runs, Building Fires and vehicle rescue.

Now as we turn into the 21st century, we must be prepared for the next wave of incidents, the WMD (Weapons of Mass Destruction) event. WMD is much more than a standard Hazardous Materials Call, or as my friend Lt. Joe Bartholomew (Aurora, Il. Fire Dept) says “HAZ MAT WITH AN ATTITUDE”

Are we prepared for this event?

Planning, preparation and practice are the keys to survival.

We, as first response agencies are the FRONT line of defense. We will have our units committed, our hospitals inundated.

The threat to our specific community may vary, BUT the need for adequate preparation and training is constant.

We cannot legislate away the potential, just as we cannot change the weather, and as much, we must continue our role in “ ALL RISK, ALL HAZARD PLANNING”

We have heard for a long time that all events are local, and that the community is the “ owner” of the incident. We must focus on our own capabilities. Broaden our scope to be multi-jurisdictional. Events do not respect borders or time of day. We have learned that the Government is working towards providing more assets, BUT the fact remains that it is OUR incident. Think LOCAL first and foremost. Partner with our agencies; don't do this lone.

The Federal Government is ready to assist us. BUT, they won't be here first.

We must practice response with ALL units of government. Our local response must include all elements of Police Fire rescue, Emergency Medical Services and Emergency Management. Public Health e Services, the Hospitals and ENTIRE medical community MUST be Engaged in this process.

Our threats can be boundless, and we must be prepared for Chemical, Biological and Nuclear Events.

Many schools of thought give potential for certain percentages of events. I wont.

The event that may occur on the north may not occur in the south. WE JUST DON'T KNOW.

Rapid detection and containment is the key. There have been many novels written about methodology to be used. We can look at history, the Tokyo Subway incident that released Sarin gas and killed several. Hundreds more went to seek medical care on their own.

The anthrax scares, the hoax and real bombs.

I worked at the Oklahoma City Bombing in April 1995, and saw first hand the 169 deaths and hundreds of injured people. This IS what can occur. BUT, that is not the first attack on American soil. The World Trade Center Bombing in February 1993 in New York killed six and injured hundreds.

Preparation and training are keys to survival. Threat Assessments can help YOUR community determine some of its unique vulnerabilities. In doing these, we MUST take into account all factors.

Usually, A multi disciplinary team can best do this. We MUST include Law Enforcement, Fire, EMS, Public Works, Public Health, and Emergency Management and Hazardous Materials.

There is absolutely NO room at the table for *Turf Battles, egos* or other such NON-productive expense. Any emergency event, tornadoes, floods and WMD do not observe jurisdictional boundaries. We must gather all key individuals and agencies to the table to have a frank, open discussion on the project. THEN, we must roll up our sleeves and begin work.

What are your capabilities, truly? Don't say what you would LIKE to do, say what you ARE ABLE to do.

Now is the time to determine where the holes are in the system. They will best be resolved with open discussion, although the FACTS may be unpalatable to some.

To utilize these assembled resources for the common good is the way WE can benefit our citizens.

Major Adrian T. Bogart III, US DOD has aptly stated...

“For no greater cause exists today than that embraced by our nation’s first responders in taking the front line and standing ever vigilant to protect this country from those who would attempt to deny us our freedom.”

Well put Major, as WE are the front line of defense for our communities. Our communities rely on US to make the right decision. TOGETHER we can be better than alone.

My career has spanned 3 decades of public service, Law Enforcement, EMS, Haz Mat and Emergency Management. I have seen a great deal of cooperation among those agencies, BUT it has not always been that way. We must work everyday to improve at all levels, and avoid the “*turf intramurals*” that continue to plague cooperation to this day in some organizations, BIG and small.

One of the best ways to prepare is to do a full-scale drill of YOUR capabilities.

Assembling all the key agencies and staffers that have been identified above best does this. Make a list that DOES NOT exclude planners, partners and support staff.

Look over the expected and think OUTSIDE the box. The National Guard Civil Support Teams (CST) are a good resource during the drill and event. Look to industries that may have experience in dealing with chemicals. Remember, Knowledge is power, and is the key to survival.

Communications is one of the key elements in any process.

We just don't mean electronic, telephone, radio, and such. The KEY is COMPLETE communications and being frank and open during the planning process.

All too often we have material that is "close hold" for whatever reason. We must support maintaining Operational Security. BUT, we must have a continuing dialogue that centers on open communications.

At numerous drills, I have witnessed communications fail.

Part of this failure is not by design, BUT by the lack of coordination. As communications systems become more sophisticated, we are now learning that architecture is not designed to let other systems operate together. Numerous studies have been done to try to determine where the failures occur. Generally, because of a lack of planning that coordinates all phases of communication. During the crisis is no time to figure out where the problems lie. That's why we practice drills and really determine who will bring what the table.

Thinking outside the box may be difficult for some but and emergency planning it must be a reality. We no longer have the luxury of complacency. Threat levels may change, but the need for preparedness is constant. What have we learned in the last several years? It's really quite simple.

We all must do a better job of communicating, planning and practicing. There's no time for turfno time for egos... and no time for complacency.

The key to survival is communications it also includes involving all potential team players during the process. Don't forget public works, public health, hazardous materials, law enforcement, fire, emergency management, and emergency medical services. All of these listed specialties must work together and communicate on a regular basis.

Let's start the process now by organizing a joint mission with all your key players. Reach out and COMMUNICATE for the benefit of our communities, OUR Customers.

That's why we are here doing what we do, for the common good, and there is

"No greater cause!"

We must begin now to prepare for the inevitable. It is not a question of IF!

It is a question of when.

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The opinions contained in this article are that of the author alone and not that of any federal, state or local agency. The author can be reached at MJFAGEL @AOL.COM or 630-897-0551

