



# A Disaster Report Card

by Mick Mortlock

**Almost five years after 9/11 and nearly a year after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, how well prepared are we for the next disaster?**

**D**oes anyone doubt that if terrorists were to plant time-delay explosive devices on ten tanker trucks at a truck stop in Salina, Kansas, that mass chaos would result? Picture an octopus of horror, trucks going north, south, east, and west, each counting down to ignition. The first explosion would seem like an accident, the second a coincidence, and the third would immobilize America's heartland from Chicago to Denver. Hospitals from Dallas to Minneapolis would be trying to respond to untold injuries. Interstate travel would suddenly become unthinkable. In Washington, DC, Homeland Security officials would be trying to figure out what is happening and why. We would learn once again that we are not really prepared for disaster.

Because we know such incidents are possible, we expect that government officials—federal, state, and local—would have disaster response as their number one priority. This article examines each level of responsibility.

## **The State of the States**

In 1999, the federal government initiated a program to certify the states in disaster preparedness and response. They used fifty-four national standards to create the *Emergency Management Accreditation Program*. Since 9/11, only Illinois and Montana have joined the original five states and the District of Columbia in the program.

Because of the federal failures in responding to Katrina and Rita, we would expect the states to be filling the deficit of management in Washington, but that does not appear to be the case. According to Thad Nodine, who wrote *The Governors Speak* for the National Governors Association, only 55 percent of the governors mentioned issues related

to disaster preparation in their 2006 state-of-the-state messages, and 36 percent described their efforts to improve state preparedness for both manmade and natural disasters. Six governors pointed out that it is the responsibility of the federal government to fund major disaster operations.

Only two states, Louisiana and Oregon, have produced significant case studies for the National Governor's Association:

- ◆ The association's Center for Best Practices has designated "Louisiana's Campaign to Restore its Coastal Buffer and Mitigate the Effects of Future Storms" as a best practice. The foundation for this program is to develop an integrated plan for rebuilding levees and coastal restoration that involves the federal government, state, and parishes. Mitigation efforts in addition to planning involve elevating or acquiring severely damaged and repeatedly damaged homes. About one-third of these nationally are located in Louisiana. Further mitigation efforts are directed to coastal restoration. The state will work with local governments to "conserve, restore and create wetlands and barrier shorelines" to protect against tidal surges.
- ◆ Oregon's case study fully integrates disaster mitigation and land-use planning. Oregon provides local land-use plans that minimize disaster risk. Building codes require that buildings take into account seismic risk, wind, snow, wildfires, and flood hazards. Options are provided for moving buildings located in high-risk areas. The state attempts to pull together all of the stakeholders to ensure that decisions are as broadly supported as possible.

Overall, the response of the states has been underwhelming. Citizens expect the government to develop programs that will safeguard the well-being of our families; at the state level, it does not appear to be happening.

## Safety in Our Nation's Schools

Historically, schools have been a haven for students and staff. Built as both educational and public buildings, little thought was given to security and safety, beyond the basic fire or earthquake. Routine drills are very common, so school staff members and students are used to fire drill evacuations and "duck, cover, and hold"

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*Mick Mortlock is executive director of Democracy Talking, Inc., a nonprofit organization in Portland, Oregon. He can be reached at [Mick.Mortlock@DemocracyTalking.org](mailto:Mick.Mortlock@DemocracyTalking.org).*

earthquake drills. Yet this minimal level of safety practice leaves gaping holes in any sort of comprehensive plan. The obvious question is what happens after the earthquake or fire? Where do the students go? How are they fed or housed? How are their parents notified of the situation and where to find their kids?

Very little energy has gone into planning for any sort of armed attack as witnessed in Littleton, Colorado, and Breslan, Russia. Local school districts report various levels of preparation for unforeseen emergencies as well as more common occurrences.

In the Portland, Oregon, metropolitan area, larger districts have internal security, including an armed security staff. Smaller districts have, at best, limited security in high schools and possibly a person responsible for security district-wide as one (usually secondary) aspect of the job.

What hazards lurk in schools today? High schools often have hazardous chemicals, purchased in the frenzied times when the Soviet Union launched Sputnik and the United States was striving to keep up on the scientific front. Cleaning supplies are stockpiled and left in storage. Mercury and radioactive material are still common in schools. Lack of adequate maintenance results in leaks and mold. Heating, ventilation, and air-conditioning systems are inadequate and difficult to maintain, resulting in poor air quality. Older buildings have never been retrofitted for earthquakes. Police agencies have limited access to schools, thus restricting their knowledge of the buildings should an emergency occur. Ambulance agencies are rarely in communication with school officials prior to a mass casualty event. Schools provide excellent incubators for disease due to the demographics of the population using the buildings and the inherent difficulties in cleaning them with constrained staff and financial resources.

Every day, some school in the country has a police, fire, or ambulance-related emergency, yet according to a recent American Academy of Pediatrics survey, only about half have a written prevention plan for mass casualty incidents (although most have a response plan). Limited consideration has been given to students with special needs.

If the daily issues of health and public safety are being met reactively, what happens when the inevitable disaster occurs? Earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, blizzards, gang activity, drugs, alcohol problems, arson fires, theft, and health problems

(seizures, for example) regularly happen in schools or nearby, but school officials consider paper plans adequate preparation.

What really happens when an armed terrorist enters school property? Who's in charge? Who locks the doors to keep the bad guys out? Can communication continue or, like in most buildings, will the steel and concrete block emergency communications? Are mental health professionals available for counseling? Are the local police force, ambulance crews, and fire department ready for the stream of parents, media, and general onlookers? If there's an earthquake, will the teaching staff run for home and their families or stay to care for their twenty to thirty charges?

The Web has a plethora of material for developing solid emergency response plans for everything from terrorism to flu, including resources for learning about and teaching prevention and precautions. Police and private individuals are available to conduct site surveillance of facilities to reduce risks. In other words, free expertise abounds for pulling together comprehensive prevention and response plans for any sort of disaster.

The missing components boil down to three: the collaboration of all affected parties (teachers, kids, community, first responders, mental health, community health, etc.); practicing existing plans; and regularly reviewing and updating prevention and response plans.

## FEMA and Federal Government

Having been roundly and righteously criticized after the hurricanes, can FEMA rehabilitate itself? The public relations people should not be in charge because it could give rise to claims like "When disaster strikes we are at our best," on the FEMA Web site. The view FEMA offers kids is as follows:

### *FEMA for kidz Rap*

*Disaster. . . it can happen anywhere,  
But we've got a few tips, so you can be prepared  
For floods, tornadoes, or even a 'quake,  
You've got to be ready—so your heart don't break.*

*Disaster prep is your responsibility  
And mitigation is important to our agency.*

*People helping people is what we do  
And FEMA is there to help see you through  
When disaster strikes, we are at our best  
But we're ready all the time, 'cause disasters don't rest.*

—Scott J. Wolfson

Twenty-five years ago when I was a young manager at Intel Corporation, my mentor and manager, Joe Foye, said to me, "Always drive work and decision making to the lowest, competent level." We know that the "FEMA for kidz Rap" is just intended to be entertainment, but it has an important (and wrong) message in it: "Disaster prep is your responsibility." Well, children are not responsible for the failures of the last couple of years. Adults must determine where the appropriate level of responsibility is and then put an infrastructure in place to protect us. Years from now, Doctor Phil, our nation's shrink laureate, is still going to be dealing with the mental illness caused by our inability to appropriately react to this series of disasters.

## If I Were in Charge

If I were in charge of the federal government's disaster mitigation and response team and needed to rebuild credibility, I would do these things:

- ◆ Do at least what we say we will do, on time.
- ◆ Ensure the budget is enough to protect the American people. As the president has said, "My job is to keep the American people safe, and that is what I am going to do."
- ◆ See that government responses are coordinated at all levels. Anyone who plays politics with the safety of people needs to find another job.
- ◆ Independently verify that communication reaches all levels.
- ◆ Put politically astute people in charge of every organization. (Some put the narrow interests of the few in front of the needs of the majority. Politically savvy people are more able to see this happen and stop it.)
- ◆ Prepare every organization for all conceivable adversity.
- ◆ Solve the "failure of imagination" problem.
- ◆ Hire empathetic people whose approach reflects caring about and for all the people.
- ◆ Mandate a level playing field for everyone.
- ◆ Ensure that all taxes extracted from the people for the common good are used for the betterment of all Americans.
- ◆ Focus all energies on the public interest, not on special interests.

We care, we act responsibly, we want a level playing field for all to succeed, and we want a sense of national

community. This is what makes us Americans; we want a federal government that reflects these values.

## Citizen-Based Solutions

Professor Robert Putnam, in *Bowling Alone*, describes how people have abandoned discourse over the last twenty to thirty years. When I was a child, people walked around the neighborhood in the evenings and engaged their neighbors. The conversations touched on a wide range of subjects, but politics were clearly part of the mix. Since then, many of the places where people voiced their ideas have gone by the wayside. The American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and union halls, social clubs, and even bowling leagues have dwindled.

I have been involved in a small but growing movement in the Pacific Northwest, Democracy Talking. It is a nonprofit organization that is building a network of small groups of people, Democracy Circles, who actually meet each other face to face. They may come from the same neighborhood, school, union, or any other community. In the course of several weeks together, they reach an understanding, through respectful dialogue, of their shared values. By building a common, shared framework, people are able to determine how to leverage their political power. This allows a stronger framework to build toward better mitigation and response to crises. Other citizen-initiated, Web-based programs include the ConversationCafé.org and AmericaSpeaks.org.

## A National Dam Disgrace

What if the Cherry Creek Dam above Denver were to burst? The dam overlooks Interstate 225, business centers, expensive homes, recreation areas, and schools. We would learn (like they did in Hawaii this past March when the dam at Kilauea burst, sending 300 million gallons of water across the land) that we have not done the work necessary to keep our people safe. According to the American Society of Civil Engineers, more than 3,500 dams are at risk. Many are located above significant population centers and could involve billions of dollars of property damage. The bill to fund these repairs has been sitting in Congress for over a year with no action.

Sometimes people are thrown into situations where their life or livelihood depends on taking action. Such

is the case with the citizens of the Schoharie Valley in upstate New York where the Gilboa Dam is sited. They have responded assertively and sometimes aggressively to reports that there is a chance that the dam will collapse. They acknowledge that the chance is small, but given the potential catastrophe, they are taking the risk very seriously.

They have formed Dam Concerned Citizens and opened a Web site critical of county officials. Three months after water began pouring over the dam spillway, effective evacuation routes had still not been published. Dam Concerned Citizens was able to get enough attention, and the county began marking the evacuation routes in mid-February. In addition, the Web site publishes real-time data on the level of water behind the dam and keeps up to date on all the latest fixes, both long and short term. It notes the following:

There is so much water behind the Gilboa Dam that nothing downstream stands a chance if the dam fails. There is a very slim chance that it may fail. Therefore, (1) you must be able to receive and understand the warning signs and the alarms, and (2) you must be ready to run for your life. None of that is an exaggeration. Millions of dollars have been spent on this problem since it was figured out in October of 2005. You cannot fool around with this issue if you live or work in the Schoharie Valley. The only way to deal with the possibility of a dam break is to get out hours before it breaks.

These few citizens, supported by larger numbers in the background, have begun to more critically supervise the government. It is worth a trip to their Web site—because the odds seem to be getting better that we all will find ourselves in an uncomfortable crisis. Let's take care of each other. ❖

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