

## Assumptions Can Kill

### *A Case Study*



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By now you may have heard of an incident in Alameda, California where a man committed suicide by wading into the Bay while being watched from the shore by police and firefighters. Department policy prohibited firefighters from entering the water because budget reductions had eliminated the department's shore rescue program.

A number of my colleagues have been arguing about the appropriateness of the actions of the emergency personnel on scene. I do not intend to add my uninformed two cents to that debate. However, I think there is a point that is being over looked in our discussions. This man died not because of inaction by responders or the budget cuts that prevented them from doing their job. He died because of bad planning assumptions.

### **Assumptions Drive Plans**

All plans are based on assumptions. In theory, the closer the planning assumptions are to the actual event, the more likely it is that the plan will work as anticipated. (This is not always true – see the Exxon Valdez oil spill case study in my book, *Emergency Management: Concepts*

*and Strategies for Effective Programs*).

Clearly identifying assumptions is therefore the starting point for any serious planning effort. In my experience, failure of emergency plans, particularly contingency plans, can often be traced to unrealistic planning assumptions.

Sometimes these assumptions are explicit and spelled out in our plans. For example, we make assumptions about earthquake magnitudes or the height of flood waters when developing building codes and evacuation routes. At other times, our assumptions are not so clearly spelled out. In many of our emergency plans, an unstated assumption is that our command and control mechanisms will survive and that responding agencies will be able to perform the tasks specified in our plans.

It is these unstated assumptions that can cause us problems. They are usually so intuitive that we take them for granted. We expect that because these assumptions hold up under most circumstances that they will hold up in all circumstances.

This may well have been the problem in Alameda.

## The Assumptions

Alameda is a small city of about 73,000 people situated on two islands adjacent to the city of Oakland. In 2009, the city council eliminated the fire department's shore-based rescue program as a cost saving measure. The fire chief issued an order forbidding personnel to enter the water as there was now no funding to train and certify them in this type of rescue.

Why would an island community eliminate such an apparently vital program? The assumption was that these resources could be provided by the Coast Guard, which is based on an island adjacent Alameda and has both surface and aerial rescue capabilities.



If you look at the proximity of Alameda and the Coast Guard base on Coast Guard Island, this does not seem like an unreasonable assumption. Faced with the need to make drastic cuts to the fire department budget, cutting a program that could easily be handled by mutual aid resources may have seemed a reasonable solution that did not increase the risk to the public.

There has also been a major push in the Bay Area for regionalization, partly as a result of

Federal funding for the Urban Areas Security Initiative. There is a strong ethic that specialized assets should be shared throughout the region rather than duplicated in each jurisdiction.

So what went wrong?

A small rescue boat from the Coast Guard arrived on scene within 20 minutes. Unfortunately, the water was too shallow for the boat to reach the victim. The Coast Guard helicopter was on another rescue mission and did not arrive for over an hour, by which time the victim was dead. The mutual aid resources that the assumption called for were simply not available.

## The Lessons

What can we learn from this tragic incident? The first lesson is that we need to think through our planning assumptions. We frequently make unstated assumptions about the availability of mutual aid resources that might not necessarily be valid for all incidents. In this case, did the decision-makers consider the other demands on the Coast Guard's resources? Did anyone speak to the Coast Guard about their capabilities? Did anyone remember that the program was originally instituted in 1999 because of slow Coast Guard response times?

Secondly, consider what would happen if your assumptions are wrong. Such a failure certainly has immediate operational implications but it can have long term effects as well. The city of Alameda is now redirecting funds to provide the needed training to its fire department and will no doubt be dealing with a substantial lawsuit in the near future.

Assumptions are important planning tools. However, they are double-edged tools and we need to use them carefully. 