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An Exercise in Logistics

Five Tips for Resource Management

There's an old saying that "an army travels on its stomach." It's a reminder to military leaders that logistics are essential to success in combat. Watching the events unfold in Haiti reminds me of a similar lesson I learned early on in my emergency management career: emergency operations are largely exercises in logistics. It's not about lack of resources so much as it is about the ability to use resources effectively.

This seems a bit counter-intuitive when one considers that the accepted definition of disaster is that local resources are exceeded. However, what researchers like Russell Dynes and E.L. Quarantelli have found in studying numerous disasters is that resources become available very quickly. The real problems occur when a local jurisdiction cannot expand operations quickly enough to deal with the onslaught of incoming resources.

This is exactly the problem we're seeing in Haiti today. When one considers the resources being made available by the United States and the international community, it's hard to grasp why the needs of disaster victims have not yet been fully met.

It's not a question of resources but the problems with getting the resources through an inadequate infrastructure to the people most in need. It's certainly not for want of trying – the port facilities at Port au Prince are handling several times the pre-quake tonnage, thanks to the support of the US military. However, it takes time to establish a logistics infrastructure where nothing exists.

The lesson for local governments is that pre-disaster planning has to include some thought for logistics. The usual approach for most jurisdictions, however, is to assign this task to the purchasing department. This has a certain logic to it, given the purchaser's normal duties. It can even be effective in smaller emergencies. However, it rarely works well in large events.

It's important to understand the distinction between procurement and logistics. Procurement deals with the ordering of goods and services. Logistics is broader in scope and considers the movement of goods and services from procurement to delivery to the end user. In other words, just ordering relief supplies isn't enough – you have to get those supplies to the

people who need them.

The average purchaser is very good at what they do. He or she may also be able to arrange delivery in a way that expedites operations or provide for standby contracts as part of their pre-planning. However, most of purchasers have no idea how to establish a logistics system that provides for warehousing, staging and distribution.

During Hurricane Iniki in Hawaii in 1992, one of the issues we faced was the culturally-based reluctance of many Hawaiians to go to shelters. They wanted to remain on their property for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was the fear of what might happen to their homes if they weren't there. In response to this cultural need, the FEMA emergency response team designed a kit that could be issued to those wishing to stay on their property. The kit consisted of a tent and other supplies such as a cook stove, fire extinguisher, and first aid kit.

Since most of our logistics section consisted of GSA purchasing agents, we had all the supplies shipped directly to the disaster assistance centers on Kauai. These centers were to serve as points of distribution with the intent that volunteers would take care of assembling and issuing the kits.

Several weeks later, I visited the assistance centers and what I found was eye-opening. Because we had ordered from various vendors, not all the supplies had arrived at the same time at each center. At one center, people were still "owed" equipment that had been back ordered while another center had excess supplies on hand. One center was following procedures by processing the victims through

the individual assistance program and issuing a chit for the kit. Another center, however, was operating a "drive through" where anyone could pick up anything they needed in any quantity – they hadn't got the word about the kits.

In retrospect, we should have considered establishing a formal logistics chain that called for receiving the supplies at a central warehouse, assembling the kits, and then shipping the assembled kits to the points of distribution, along with specific written instructions on how to issue them.


This example from Hurricane Iniki highlights the importance of having logisticians involved in your planning. Establishing a logistics structure can help avoid spot shortages and prioritize resources. It can also let you know what's in the system. In the same operation in Hurricane Iniki, several federal agencies were ordering plastic sheeting. It wasn't until we assembled all the information in our plans unit that we realized just how much sheeting had been ordered. We had enough inbound that we could probably have covered the whole island of Kauai.

So how do you integrate these lessons into your planning? A good place to start is NFPA 1600, *Standard on Disaster/Emergency Management and Business Continuity Programs* and the Emergency Management Accreditation Program (EMAP) Standard. Both provide guidance on resource management. Here are some other tips I've found useful:

1. Understand the difference between procurement and logistics. More

importantly, make sure that the people who will head your logistics section know it.


2. Provide logistics training to your planners. Seek expertise from the private sector.
3. Develop a logistics planning team that includes private sector representatives.
4. Pre-identify logistics facilities, such as warehouses, staging areas, and points of distribution.
5. Build point of distribution kits that can allow rapid establishment of POD if you can't use a pre-identified site.
6. Develop stand-by contracts and purchasing agreements with vendors. Include emergency clauses in regular contracts for critical resources, such as fuel and medical supplies.

One last thought – just because it's a disaster doesn't mean that accountability goes out the window. Part of your planning must include how you will track and demobilize recoverable resources and how you will dispose of them. Developing this at the time can be done (this was the case in New York after September 11) but it will be difficult. 

Building Codes

Disasters in other countries are both similar and dissimilar to those we experience in the United States. The tragedy that disaster brings to people is universal. However, we sometimes forget that building codes in the United States play a key role in reducing loss of life in disasters. Compare the untold thousands of dead in the earthquake in Haiti with the 62


dead in the Loma Prieta earthquake or the 57 dead in the Northridge earthquake.

Mitigation is not just a word: it works! 

Upcoming Appearances

Here is a list of my upcoming speaking engagements. Please drop on by if you're in the area!

- February 22-25 – *Emergency Management: Building a Strong Program* (pre-conference workshop)/ Keynote address/*Mitigation – Situational Awareness Refined - [Colorado Governor's Emergency Management Conference](#)*, Colorado Springs, CO
- March 30 – *Private Sector Risk Management ABCs – [National Hurricane Conference](#)*, Orlando FL
- May 17 – *Emergency Preparedness for the Developmentally Disabled Community - [Developmental Disabilities Nurses Association](#)*, Reno NV

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