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Practical Preparedness Revisited

Is Our Preparedness Message Effective?

April is earthquake month in San Francisco, the anniversary of the 1906 earthquake and fires. We use the opportunity to encourage preparedness among the public. But with the passing of the years, I have begun to question whether our message is as effective as we would like to think.

Back in 2010, one of my first white papers dealt with the issue of practical preparedness. In revisiting that paper, I was disheartened to see that nothing has really changed.

Are Kits Realistic?

One of the things that has always concerned me was the emphasis we have put on disaster kits. I have nothing against the concept and I encourage everyone to make one. The problem is that we haven't really thought through what a kit entails.

We have made kits an end in themselves rather than integrating them into daily life. Because a kit is something separate from the rest of our lives, it tends to be neglected once it is assembled. I'd love to see a study that looked at what percentage of emergency kits have outdated supplies.

Another issue is that we have no empirical evidence for the three-day period on which we base our recommendations. We all think we know the reason but when you dig into it, no one really knows where this recommendation came from.

There is also the question of how many families have the resources to buy or assemble a kit. Roughly 14% of US citizens are below the poverty line and 29% are considered lower class.

Aside from these concerns, are our recommendations for emergency kits realistic? Do they make sense to the public? Let's consider two main components of our kits: food and water.

Three Days of Food?

We recommend three days' supply of food. What exactly does this mean? For many people, "three days supply" is meaningless. Also meaningless are terms like six ounces of protein or five cups of fruits and vegetables. This type of information has meaning to a nutritionist but not to the public.

The problem is compounded by the various commercial kits on the market. The typical commercial kit contains

compressed food bars that were originally developed as lifeboat rations. They assume that the user will be sedentary. Consequently, they contain about half of the minimum daily calories needed (women need 1500-2000 calories per day, men about 2000 to 2500).

Military rations, a common alternative, are based on the opposite assumption – that the user will be engaged in hard physical labor. They are high in sodium and three meals (the recommended daily serving) contain 3,750 calories.

Neither of these two options really meet the needs of survivors. If instead we provided nutritional information that correlated with recognizable products, we would not only make the requirement more easily understood but could encourage gradual stockpiling of food through normal shopping.

How Much Water Do We Need?

We recommend one gallon of water per person per day for three days but then we encourage the purchase of disaster supply kits that contain about half a quart of water a day per person. This about quarter of the daily requirement recommended by nutritionists.

A gallon of water weighs 8.35 pounds. This means that the weight of water we are recommending is around 25 lbs. Remember that this is before considering the weight of food and other supplies. Are we really suggesting carrying a 40-50 lb. emergency kit?

So how much water is really needed? While the answer depends on several factors, such as exertion and temperature, the generally accepted rule among nutritionists is that the average person needs at least two quarts of water per day, which works out to a more

manageable 12.5 lbs. for three days. We clearly need to distinguish between the minimum amount of water necessary for survival and the recommended amount for multiple uses.

Rethinking Our Approach

Thinking in terms of “the kit” ignores the fact that a single approach doesn’t work in all circumstances. The contents of the kit you keep in your car or office is not the same as the one you keep at home. We are better off encouraging a “preparedness mindset” in the public that teaches them to prioritize their needs and make use of the resources available to them at the time of the disaster.

Instead of a single kit, we should encourage thinking in levels of preparedness:

1. Identify the things that you need to have on you always: e.g. identification, small flashlight, whistle, etc.
2. Prepare a “grab and go” bag that includes only absolute essentials. This is the bag you would use to evacuate or take to a shelter.
3. Identify supplies that will be need if you remain at home or the workplace. This doesn’t need to be a kit. Why buy and store tools or food when you already have them available? But knowing where these things are and making sure you can access them after an incident should be part of your personal planning.

Thinking Beyond the Kit

Focusing on the emergency kit is focuses our preparedness solely on response. We also need to prepare the public to deal with complex recovery issues such as safeguarding the documentation needed for insurance claims. Preparedness shouldn’t be limited to response alone. 