

Recovery Planning

Preplanning is vital



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Some years ago, my colleague Valerie Lucus McEwen performed an analysis of data from the Emergency Management Accreditation Program's assessments. Her findings confirmed what we had always suspected: emergency managers do well in the areas of preparedness and response but give little attention to mitigation and recovery.

This is not surprising. Preparedness and response tend to be tactical in nature while mitigation and recovery are more strategic. Once the action moves beyond coordinating hierarchical agencies to the rather messy world of politics and community action, emergency managers find themselves outside their comfort zone and tend to avoid mitigation and recovery planning.

The problem, however, is that in the long term recovery may well be more important than response in terms of community survivability. One can certainly argue that if you don't respond well, recovery may be irrelevant but if we examine history we find that we *will* respond, either well or poorly. Whatever the nature of that response, the true challenge

will be the restoration of the community's infrastructure, environment, economy, and social systems.

Private sector dependence

While no political leader will ever admit to it, the simple fact is that government at any level is ill-equipped to meet the needs of our citizens in a major disaster. We rely on a system that has a tremendous capacity to mobilize resources but our delivery systems tend to become overwhelmed and lack the granularity to deliver aid to specific individuals. For this we are coming to rely more and more on volunteer efforts.

Further complicating recovery is that much of the critical infrastructure in the United States is in the hands of the private sector and beyond government control. We rely on the good will of corporations and utilities to support the restoration of damaged infrastructure.

This private sector dependence extends to funding for reconstruction as well. Contrary to popular belief, the federal government provides little funding for reconstruction – most private sector funding is provided through insurance.

While the federal government does offer a considerable amount of reimbursement for disaster costs incurred by local governments, these funds are just that: reimbursement for funds already expended.

Political dimension

Recovery is largely political. We have research that shows links between political party affiliation and disaster declarations. Pre-disaster social issues may be exacerbated by the disaster, creating a political crisis. Polarization between those favoring immediate rebuilding and those espousing more stringent building standards is not uncommon. Newly-emergent groups may seek to gain political clout to implement their agenda, frequently in conflict with existing community groups.

Over time, political leadership will change and the political will to complete projects may be redirected to other priorities. Public support may disappear. Economic factors may prevent the completion of projects. The result is a morass of conflicting political and community agendas.

Recovery planning

There are certainly many, many other areas affecting recovery but these two should be sufficient to make the point that *emergency managers will have little to no opportunity to influence recovery following a disaster.*

Unfortunately, emergency managers are closely associated with response activities. Once response activities transition from the responder community to the political realm, emergency managers are rarely consulted or involved in decision making. Consequently, recovery planning *before* an event is the sole mechanism for influencing leaders to consider community resilience during recovery.

It is difficult to predict what issues may arise during recovery, so the type of detailed planning common to response is not really possible. Instead the focus of recovery planning should be towards developing process and governance. This means identifying how and by whom decisions will be made during recovery and the policies that will guide these decisions. Essentially, it requires the development of a concept of operations for recovery that enjoys broad-based community and political support.

Secondly, just as in response there will be certain response-generated needs that can be identified and for which concepts and plans can be developed. For example, it is a rare disaster that does not generate issues around housing replacement, debris management, and historical and cultural sites.

Recognize that there are different areas of recovery that might require different approaches or involve different actors. Recovery can generally be divided into several broad inter-related sectors: social, economic, infrastructure, and environmental. Each has unique issues and subcategories that must be separately addressed but ultimately must be integrated.

Finally, given the changing actors, having a written recovery plan alone may not carry enough weight to ensure its use in the absence of any legislative requirements. There is a need to codify concepts and policies in a recovery ordinance that can serve to governance and policies and ensure their application.

Preplanning positions the jurisdiction for a more rapid and effective recovery. It cannot predict and address all issues but it can provide the process and structure needed to drive an effective recovery operation. 