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Should We Evacuate?

The decision to evacuate depends on many complex factors

As I write this, the city of Houston is underwater after days of continuous rain from Hurricane Harvey. The Mayor of Houston is being criticized for his decision not issue a mandatory evacuation order.

I can understand the concern but I believe it is unfair to judge decisions made in a crisis until the crisis is over. Once the results are known and the after-action reports completed there will be time to apportion any blame.

I'm willing to bet that those criticizing the mayor do not have a clue about the complex issues involved in deciding whether or not to evacuate a major urban area. It's not just a case of saying, "Everybody leave now." Making the decision to evacuate requires balancing key elements of risk, time, and preplanning.

What's the Risk?

Any action carries within it the potential for liability exposure and this is true of any evacuation.

Accidents happen, people are put at risk, businesses suffer losses. During the evacuation for Hurricane Rita, for example, 60 people died of heat stroke when they became stuck in traffic gridlock.

Added to the potential loss of life is the risk of financial loss. This loss is more than just lost business; an evacuated zone is an invitation for theft if security isn't adequate. If the decision to evacuate turns out to be unnecessary, the jurisdiction could well be the target of loss claims and lawsuits.

The decision to evacuate requires weighing the potential loss of life from the disaster against the potential loss of life and liability exposure. When dealing with hurricanes where the forecasts are constantly shifting, this becomes an extremely difficult call.

How Much Time Do We have?

Houston has a population of around 6 million people. You don't move that many people in a short period of time; it takes days. For this reason, many jurisdictions plan for a phased evacuation over several days. This involves evacuating high risk populations first. However, plans that make sense on paper or in computer models don't always consider the risk of spontaneous evacuation. The result can be the type of gridlock seen in the Hurricane Rita evacuation where it took hours to go a few miles.

The potential for gridlock and limited time for evacuation was one of the concerns cited by the Mayor of Houston for his decision. His fear was that traffic delays would result in people being caught in flooded roadways.

There comes a point where even if the situation is not clear, officials need to decide about evacuation. After that point, there is no longer sufficient time to evacuate. You may still be able to evacuate facilities such as hospitals or nursing homes but any attempt at an evacuation of the general population would put people at risk of being caught without shelter during the event.

Is My Preplanning Adequate?

Emergency managers are used to operating on an ad hoc basis in disasters. We are adept at pulling together interagency teams and task forces to solve problems. This won't work in a major urban evacuation.

The typical emergency plan relies heavily on the assignment of responsibility for response generated needs, that is, on demands that stay relatively constant in disasters. Evacuation planning, however, demands detailed contingency plans. Moreover, it requires regional rather than local planning.

Within the jurisdiction itself, evacuation planning requires a plan for how traffic will flow. This means identifying key routes and traffic control points and deciding if and when contraflow (the use of all lanes of traffic in one direction) will be used.

There are human factors to consider as well. People will have medical emergencies. They will need to refill gas tanks. They may need rest stops. They may need food and water. People will also require updated reports on traffic

conditions and instructions for alternate routes. These issues continue as the evacuees move beyond jurisdictional boundaries, hence the need for regional planning.

Jurisdictions don't always consider the need for regional planning. I once helped develop evacuation protocols for a large urban area whose planning team felt that their responsibilities stopped at the city limits and then became the county's problem. They were not happy with my final report.

The key issues for regional planners is deciding where evacuees will go and how they will be supported until they arrive at host sites. Host sites are usually located in rural jurisdictions with limited resources. Without regional support, these jurisdictions will be severely taxed to provide the resources to support continued travel (e.g. traffic control, fuel and food, emergency medical services) or to support the establishment of sufficient congregate facilities to shelter large numbers of evacuees.

Jurisdictions don't always understand that they may ended up hosting evacuees. During the National Plan Review, I interviewed one emergency manager who felt he didn't need to do evacuation planning because he could not envision any need to evacuate his city. I pointed out on his wall map that there was a major metropolitan area to his south only an hour or two away and asked where he thought those people would go in a disaster.

What Next?

Moving a population to a safe area is only the first step in evacuation planning. Issues of security and reentry are just as complex. This is why evacuation planning is probably the most complex task an emergency manager may be called on to perform. 