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Can We Really Save Everyone?

Rethinking Responsibility for People with Functional Needs

In [*The Vision of The Anointed*](#), his study on social policy, academic Thomas Sowell identifies two opposing views on government policy. The first assumes that all the resources to deal with social issues already exist and that applying them is merely a question of political will. The other view is more pragmatic; it recognizes that resources are finite, and trade-offs must be made in applying them to social problems.

These two oppositional views tend to play out in planning for functional needs populations. On the one hand, the public, particularly advocates for people with disabilities, demand that all resources necessary be directed to aiding at-risk populations in disasters. On the other hand, emergency managers, who must meet these needs, have limited resources with which to respond to a crisis. Maybe it is time to acknowledge that responsibility for resolving this problem does not belong solely to emergency planners.

Personal Responsibility

One of the first concepts learned by emergency managers is that of triage,

the necessity to set priorities for limited resources. By definition, disasters exceed the resources of the affected jurisdiction. Immediately available resources are limited and priorities for their application must be set. In stark terms, emergency managers do not have enough resources to save everyone and must attempt to do the most good for the most people.

There was a time in which reliance on government services was not as extensive as it is now. In colonial times, for example, the government refused to indemnify frontier settlers against Indian raids on the basis that the risks were known and voluntarily accepted by the settlers. Over the years, the United States has moved away from this sense of personal responsibility to accept that it is the government's role to protect its citizens from all risk.

But this doesn't tally with what is known about disasters. Research into numerous disasters and the historical record both demonstrate that majority of disaster survivors are aided not by the government but by other citizens.

Planning Failures

In 2010, the City of Los Angeles were successfully sued by several advocacy groups for failure to include people with disabilities in emergency plans. This was the first court ruling to find a governmental entity liable for failing to address the needs of people with disabilities. It was not to be the last. The City of Oakland CA was sued in 2007, New York City in 2013, and Washington DC in 2014. There have also been suits related to school emergency planning, 911 centers, and airports.

There is a depressing sameness to these lawsuits. They all revolve around issues of accessibility in notification, sheltering, medical supplies, and evacuation and failure to include disability advocates on planning.

A similar result was found in a recent audit in California. The audit focused on the emergency alert, evacuation, and shelter plans in place for the California Office of Emergency Services and Ventura, Sonoma, and Butte counties prior to their respective wildfire disasters in 2017 and 2018. A significant finding was that the planning guidance issued by the state was inadequate, failed to ensure a uniform approach across the state, and did not identify best practices.

Taken as a whole, the suits and audits suggest that despite years of activity, government does not plan well for people with functional needs.

Social Isolation

One factor that is often overlooked when discussing people with functional needs is the concept of social isolation. In his study of the 1995 Chicago heatwave, [Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago](#), sociologist Eric Klinenberg traced the majority of deaths in a neighborhood to a lack of social contact with other members of the community.

While there is still only limited data available, it is highly likely that social isolation may have played a role in many of the deaths in California's devastating Camp Fire in 2018. Almost all the 86 fatalities were elderly, ranging in age from early 60's to the high 90's.

The problem with social isolation is that it is not a problem that can easily be addressed by emergency managers; it requires a coordinated community approach that is outside the responsibilities of local emergency managers. All emergency managers can do is make people aware of the problem and serve as a gadfly in getting other government agencies involved.

What Can Be Done?

The common thread that runs through the lawsuits mentioned above is a failure to include advocates for people with functional needs in the planning process. Including advocates as planning team members has benefits for both sides. Emergency planners identify potential problems and solutions through the insight and expertise of the advocates. At the same time, emergency managers can educate advocates in the realities and limitations of disaster response.

Secondly, government leaders need to accept that functional needs are not just an emergency management issue but a community one. Emergency managers can only be peripherally involved in strengthening personal responsibility and combatting social isolation. These are community issues that require a broad-based approach. Emergency managers can support these efforts but, in most cases, they lack the resources or influence to lead them. We may not be able to save everyone but a communitywide approach can help us save many more than we would have. 