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Guess What's for Dinner?

Comfort Food for Disaster Victims

For many of us, the true pleasure of the holidays is the time we spend with friends and family.

An important part of those gatherings is the food we serve – seasonal specialties, traditional recipes, family favorites, and so on. This food has meaning for us and raises our level of comfort and feelings of satisfaction. Food has a psychological value beyond its nutritional worth. Yet we sometimes forget this when we deal with feeding during crisis.

Our principal concern during a crisis is to provide appropriate nutritional content – taste or cultural acceptance is not generally a big consideration. After all, if people are hungry, they should be willing to eat anything, right? Unfortunately, the answer is, “no”. While one could possibly make this argument in the case of people who are actually starving, it's not always the case with people affected by a crisis who are hungry but not starving.

Years ago, the US Army used to offer ham and lima beans as one of the entrees in a case of C-rations. This entrée was so universally despised that it was tossed away by any soldier unfortunate to get it, except for the

few oddballs (myself included) who could actually stomach it. These were men who were getting the one meal a day while engaging in heavy physical activity. As hungry as they were, they would not eat the ham and lima beans.

I've had similar experiences in providing disaster relief in the Pacific. One of the first things that a relief worker learns in the Pacific is that many of the islanders feel the same way about fruit cocktail that GIs felt about ham and lima beans. They will not eat it. Any other canned fruit was perfectly acceptable but for some reason fruit cocktail was not.

The second thing we learned was that there is a difference between short and long grain rice. This seems a silly distinction if you don't know anything about rice (I didn't). You're tempted to assume that the recipients can't really be all that hungry if they are arguing over the length of a grain of rice. However, we're not talking about nutritional value here but cultural acceptance. There is a very distinct difference in taste, texture and adhesion between short and long grain rice. If you're used to eating one type, the other just seems “wrong”.

It's this issue of cultural acceptance that sometimes gets misunderstood in relief operations. It's not sufficient to provide bland, generic food as we sometimes try to do. It's even worse to provide military rations that are designed for men and women engaged in heavy physical activity and that are deliberately high in carbohydrates and sodium.

In the initial stages of an incident, people are usually grateful for any immediate assistance. But while they may be willing to temporarily put aside cultural, religious, and health concerns over food, this does not last for very long. There is a desire to return to normalcy and that includes the desire to taste food that they are used to eating. And that food is not always what relief workers think should be provided.

Following the Loma Prieta earthquake in 1989, one of the hardest hit communities was Watsonville, CA, a town with a large Hispanic population. The FEMA officials in charge of the relief operation wanted to do something nice for those in the shelters and planned a traditional Thanksgiving dinner with all the trimmings.

Problems began when word came back from the shelters that what people really wanted was red beans, rice and tortillas. The FEMA leaders were appalled – they could just see the press stories if they served such simple fare on Thanksgiving. They had forgotten two important cultural issues. Among Hispanic immigrants, Thanksgiving is not really a significant holiday. Secondly, turkey with traditional stuffing, gravy and mashed potatoes is not part of the Hispanic culinary tradition. The solution was obvious – serve both and that's what the FEMA staff opted to do.

A good friend in the American Red Cross told me a similar story that happened to him during a relief operation in Alaska. A local hunter came to the shelter and offered a freshly killed moose (or an elk – I can't recall) to the staff.

Unfortunately, to accept this gift was against Red Cross policy because of health concerns. However, the shelter population was almost exclusively Inuit who were not excited about the shelter rations and who viewed the fresh meat as a delicacy. My friend was smart enough to officially decline the offer but to turn a blind eye to whatever came through the back door of the kitchen. The entire shelter helped with the preparation and turned the meal into a party with a resultant increase in morale that lasted for days.

The use of food to improve morale is not only appropriate in a shelter operation or in the recovery phase. I've seen it successfully done in major fires in San Francisco where local restaurants provided culturally-appropriate food to displaced victims. Having a meal that you really enjoy doesn't make up for losing your home and possessions to a fire but it does help with the shock and pain of the loss. It also suggests that those providing the relief see you as an individual.

Here are a few things we you can consider in your planning:

- Encourage households to maintain emergency supplies that reflect their tastes rather than just purchasing the popular compressed food bars.
- Consider standby contracts with local restaurants and caterers.

- If you use MREs, consider the specially formulated disaster MREs.
- Consider options that offer wider menu choices, such as Heater Meals® or similar products.
- Find out what people eat and plan it into your menu. It's not always what you expect: Spam is considered a great delicacy in the Pacific and easily transported.
- Remember that dietary issues are not only culturally-based but may be based on religious practices and health issues.

I'm not suggesting that every meal in a crisis needs to be catered or that each meal has to be culturally appropriate to every victim. Sometimes you're lucky to get a case of MREs and a box of bottled water to the scene. I am suggesting, however, that we recognize that food can be an important comfort factor in times of crisis and that, whenever possible, emergency feeding operations include culturally appropriate food. 

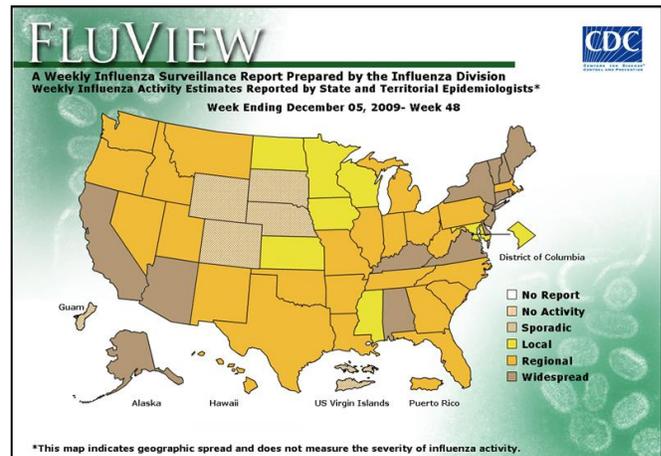
Flu Update

Remember H1N1? As with so many other issues we've dealt with, it's about exceeded the limited attention span of the public and news media. It's a sure indicator when the news shifts from, "Where's the flu vaccine?" to "Whose fault is it that I didn't get mine?"

However, as emergency managers, we know that just because an issue loses media attention doesn't make it go away. We need to be

mindful that planning for pandemic (as distinct from a specific pandemic) is still part of the job.

Here's the latest update from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:



During the week of November 29-December 5, 2009, flu activity continued to decline in the United States as reported in [FluView](#). The number of states reporting widespread flu activity decreased from 25 to 14. Visits to doctors for influenza-like illness and flu-associated hospitalizations declined from the previous week, however flu-associated deaths increased. 

Keeping in Touch

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