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Pandemic Planning

Think Strategically

Over the past week I've received several calls from colleagues and friends in the media about what emergency managers should be doing about the coronavirus crisis. In the course of those discussions, several themes emerged that reinforce the need for emergency managers to think strategically rather than just focusing on operational issues.

Localize Your Risk

One of the things we learned in the previous pandemic scare was that we need to consider local impacts rather than global ones. That is, tying triggers in our plans to a national or international warning level means that we run the risk of being too late to intervene in a crisis or overreacting to one.

The city of San Francisco recently declared a state of emergency. Was this premature? When you are a major port of entry, reliant on tourism, have a large Asian population, and strong economic ties to China, you have an elevated risk and the decision is a prudent one. Remember that an emergency declaration removes a lot of purchasing restrictions and allows access to many facilities.

Operational Response is Multi-agency Response

Since this crisis is a public health crisis, it makes sense for public health agencies to take the lead. However, this all too often leads to reinventing the wheel as plans for mass inoculation and emergency treatment centers are somehow viewed as separate from other emergency plans. We need to rethink this.

Instead of creating standalone public health plans, we need to consider how we can leverage existing plans. We already have plans for mass care; it makes sense to identify what additional changes would be needed to convert them to other uses.

For example, what training would be needed by shelter management teams to convert a shelter to an emergency ward? What additional staff and resources would be needed?

What role will the emergency operations center play? Can it serve as a central point of coordination that monitors information and provides resource allocation support? Can a Joint Information Center support the release of public service announcements?

Multi-agency coordination is the most important skill set that emergency managers can offer to a community facing a pandemic.

Kill the Fake News

There's an old saying that the first casualty in any war is the truth. The same could well be said in any crisis, particularly in a country where people are pouring out Corona beer to avoid contracting the coronavirus. Part of the problem is that the news media sensationalizes news by failing to provide context.

The lead in any story about COVID-19 is the number of deaths caused by the virus. The missing context is that most of those deaths are among those with compromised immune systems, such as the elderly. For example, the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention puts the death rate for ages 70-79 at 8 % and 80-89 at almost 15% compared to 0.2% for all groups under 40. At this stage, it appears that most healthy people who contract the virus will experience flu-like symptoms and will recover.

During the flu pandemic of 1918, there were numerous attempts by the media, encouraged by government, to downplay the lethality of the disease. Bad information about potential "cures" was another problem. People aren't stupid; the result was a lack of trust in the government. It essential that our message be honest, easily understood, and provide adequate context.

Think Beyond the Operational

We tend to inhabit the world of operations. It's what we do and we're good at it. It's usually urgent and demanding of our attention. However, emergency managers need to consider the big picture. Yes, our current emphasis is on preparing for the impact of the

pandemic. The real risk, as we know, is the volume of patients with which we may have to deal. But there are other long-term issues we need to be thinking about.

We're talking primarily economic impact. The 2003 SARS pandemic cost the Canadian economy an estimated \$5.25 billion, primarily in the transportation and tourist sectors. We're already feeling the impact on tourism and in the hi-tech industry. Even poor Corona is feeling the impact: its stock dropped 8% this week and its buzz score (a score that tracks popularity of the brand) fell from 75 to 51. While dealing with economic issues may be a bit outside our purview, it's important that we identify the risks and ensure someone is planning for it.

There are social concerns as well. Canada experienced a wave of anti-Chinese racism in 2003 during SARS. We're already seeing disquieting articles and conspiracy theories popping up on social media. Even innocuous stories can be used to fuel racism, which is why maintaining control over your media message is so important and favors the use of a JIC.

Looking Ahead

The COVID-19 crisis is still in its early days and we really don't know where it's going. It seems likely that the virus has already broken containment and we'll soon be dealing with a widespread pandemic. But distinguishing the virus from season influenza is impossible without testing, so many people will get sick and eventually recover without knowing the cause.

It is incumbent on us to limit the impact on our health care system by providing context to our messages, calm fear, and dispel rumors. This will allow us to focus on those who truly need help. 