

The

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FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES

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Is Your EOC Ready?**By: William Sager, Senior Associate**

Many communities, particularly in the disaster prone west, are feeling the threat of disaster and doing something about it. They realize they cannot wait for calamity and hope that their Emergency Operations Center (EOC) will be up and running. They learned the lessons of Katrina and September 11, and they do not want to be the next case study after action report.

Unfortunately, not all communities have the staff depth to examine their disaster plans, review their EOC layouts, and conduct the necessary training and drills. Disasters rarely happen, even in large cities, but major events such as marathons, parades, and conventions keep their emergency managers skills honed.

Smaller communities do not have this luxury and drills to test the readiness of the EOC and its personnel take a further toll on already stretched staff. If the community is small to mid-size it often makes no sense to keep a full time position on the payroll to conduct infrequent drills. This is where an outside consulting firm with the necessary expertise can be of great assistance.

One mid-size city in Southern California, a community of over 60,000 people and over 90 full-time employees, found itself in the very predicament of having a need but limited staff. The new City Manager, within a few weeks of her appointment, was in the EOC leading a city experiencing serious localized flooding. Being new to the city she wanted to be sure that her city could perform best when it needed to most -- during an emergency. Having had previous experience with Citygate in another community, she called on Citygate's Fire and Emergency services group to see if they could review the city's Disaster Plan, ensure that it was correct, and provide some basic training for staff.

Plan Review

Foremost, the community Emergency Plan needs to be current, effective, and compliant with the new National Incident Management System (NIMS) require-

ments. In actuality, if the plan is NIMS compliant it should also be current and effective. FEMA has developed requirements that are logical, workable, and ensure that the Emergency Plan meets the community's specific needs. In this city's case, the plan was in good shape, but like anything, it had a few wrinkles to straighten out. Citygate reviewed the plan and made specific recommendations to bring it into NIMS compliance.

EOC Training

Once the plan review was complete, Citygate assessed the training records of the personnel assigned to the EOC, and while some had extensive training and some experience in EOCs, many had little or no training and most lacked an Orientation Exercise (OX). Citygate conducted an OX to familiarize the participants in the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) with the layout of the EOC, the main roles of the participants, and most importantly, what the City expected of them when they reported for duty during an actual emergency. Personnel who have never worked in a disaster often do not realize that they will be away from home for any number of days or even weeks. Preparing for this does not happen by chance, it requires training.

Being comfortable with the plan is essential to smooth operation of an EOC. Since communities rarely activate their EOCs for a real disaster, participants must rely on the plan to give them direction during activation.

The next step was to conduct a Tabletop Exercise (TX), essentially a facilitated discussion of the disaster plan and systems in place during EOC activation. In this city, with the help of the Citygate instructors, this activity brought the staff to the next level and they began to see how the plan plays a vital role during a disaster and is there as a tool for their reference and use.

The final step in the training process was to conduct a Functional Exercise (FX), which required participants to role-play as though it was a real incident. In this case, Citygate built a four-hour exercise scenario around a mudslide, land subsidence disaster. In the FX, simulators in a Simulation Control Center submit messages into play by phone, radio, FAX and orally. Observers record the players' actions, and evaluators determine effectiveness of the event. The evaluators also act as "coaches" to guide the EOCs; this is a learning process -- not an exami-

nation. Because of this exercise, permanent staff now has a realistic outlook on disaster management and has identified ways to improve. Citygate coaches and an exercise director provided the guidance and "staffing" for the city to conduct this vital "capstone" exercise.

Conclusion

This is not to say that this city's next disaster or major emergency will be trouble free -- every disaster brings on new and unanticipated problems -- but they will be able to look at the citizens squarely and say they did what they could to be prepared. At the conclusion of the exercise the City Manager remarked, "Conducting regular disaster preparedness exercises is vital for every city. Citygate provided us with a thorough multi-agency exercise to properly evaluate our levels of preparedness. I am happy to report that we are very well prepared, but we learned valuable lessons during this experience that we are changing so we can be even better in the future."

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