

Last Word
Public Education: Is it Important?
By
Eric E. Holdeman

How do you prioritize your emergency management program elements? NFPA 1600 sets up standards and defines what a “good” emergency management program looks like. If you want to have your program “Accredited” you can go through the audit process, by having an outside group of experts review your program from top to bottom.

In my experience I’ve found that it is difficult to be at 100% functionality in all areas of emergency management. When I dialog with new emergency management directors my advice to them is, “What you choose to work on will define what your program is, since you can’t do it all.”

Which leads me to public education and its rank of importance on your list of “to do’s” within your overall work program. It is easy to argue that first priority for an effective emergency management office is a disaster response plan followed closely with the operational capacity to execute the elements of your plan. Clearly, if you are looking to stay out of trouble in the disaster business, these two elements are key. I’d also argue that public education is a primary responsibility that cannot be ignored by the emergency manager.

Public education, which for a business translates into employee education, is a force multiplier when disaster strikes. For every person and family that is prepared there is one less problem to be solved by either the government or business. This also means that businesses have employees who will return to work sooner because they are not dealing with personal problems at home caused by the disaster.

Public education is not just about going out and doing presentations to groups of people or handing out disaster preparedness literature at the county fair and other public events. Overall, most people have the general knowledge that disasters do happen and that they should be prepared. The fact of the matter is they choose not to be prepared. Most people are not motivated enough by the potential for disasters to strike them personally or the ones they love, to become prepared or stay prepared.

So what is needed is not a disaster education program, but a disaster education *motivation* program. Our efforts need to focus on motivating people to do what they know needs to be done to protect themselves and to continuing doing it in order to maintain a level of preparedness for them and their family. Red Cross studies have shown that people must hear a disaster preparedness message over 20 times before they will take the first step towards becoming prepared.

What I've found by experience and observing others is that disaster public education is not valued by all, especially when it comes to allocating scarce budgetary dollars. Unlike purchasing equipment, after the money is spent on public education, there is nothing to touch, hold, or inventory to show that you have achieved a tangible result. Here in our own county in the last eight years we have allocated \$20 million on equipment for first responders and others, whereas we have expended only \$1.5 million on disaster public education.

There are other areas of disaster public education that need resolution. Nationally we have achieved a common message of becoming prepared for a minimum of three days (sometimes expressed as 72 hours). One of the wake-up messages that I got from Katrina is that three days is much too short for catastrophic events that can overwhelm the response system.

Here in the Northwest our Katrina-like event will be an earthquake. For these types of disasters the message needs to be not three days, but seven days of disaster supplies, since it will take that long for meaningful federal assistance to arrive. But who will lead the national discussion to make a change in our public education messaging consistent?

If you are interested in seeing the types of awareness campaigns we have worked on with our regional partners I suggest you look at these web sites: www.3days3ways.org which I call a "non-denominational" Web site of partners, and also our King County Office of Emergency Management Web site, www.metrokc.gov/prepare. Check out the Preparedness Page for copies of the media partnerships, radio and television ads we've run, along with our "Safe at Home" campaign being done in collaboration with the Seattle Mariners Major Baseball League team.

Lastly, on our Web site are copies of the surveys and professionally conducted studies that have sought to frame our messaging, target specific demographics and measure the results of our motivational campaigns. The last of which showed an 11% increase in the general population's recognition of the 3 Days, 3 Ways campaign. Now I call that measurable and tangible!