

Communications: The Critical Function

Communications has become an increasingly critical function in emergency management. The dissemination of timely and accurate information to the general public, elected and community officials, and the media plays a major role in the effective management of disaster response and recovery activities. Communicating preparedness, prevention, and mitigation information promotes actions that reduce the risk of future disasters. Communicating policies, goals, and priorities to staff, partners, and participants enhances support and promotes a more efficient disaster management operation. In communicating with the public, establishing a partnership with the media is key to implementing a successful strategy.



Communicating with the Public

“Communicating with residents is one of the most important tasks that elected officials perform in the wake of a disaster. The public needs concise, accurate, timely information to know what to do, and to be reassured that local government is responding appropriately.”

Source: *City of San Jose Memorandum*, August 6, 2007, http://www.sanjoseca.gov/clerk/Agenda/082007/082007_01.pdf



Information sharing and its corollaries—collaboration and coordination—are key to effective, sustainable, timely, and participatory post-disaster recovery. “Unimpeded communication and the free flow of information are cornerstones of any post-disaster relief framework. . . .”¹

When that coordination doesn’t occur it hinders response and recovery efforts. “. . .[O]ne of the central facts documented in the aftermath of Katrina: the importance of maintaining a timely and accurate flow of information in a disaster zone. When information was neither timely nor accurate, people suffered.”²

¹ D. Gillmor (2006). *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People*. O’Reilly Media Inc.

² A. L. May (2006). *First Informers in the Disaster Zone: The Lessons of Katrina*. The Aspen Institute.

Communication failures by government responders in Hurricane Katrina were noted in the report prepared by the United States House of Representatives that stated, “The lack of a government public communications strategy and media hype of violence exacerbated public concerns and further delayed relief.” The House report also asked “why coordination and information sharing between local, state, and federal governments was so dismal. . . . Why situational awareness was so foggy, for so long. . . . Why unsubstantiated rumors and uncritically repeated press reports—at times fueled by top officials—were able to delay, disrupt, and diminish the response.”³

This chapter defines the mission of an effective disaster communications strategy and outlines five critical assumptions that serve as the foundation for such a strategy. Examples of effective communications in disaster events and promoting disaster reduction efforts are included in this chapter; examples of ineffective communications and the effect these failures had on disaster response operations are also included.

Mission

The mission of an effective disaster communications strategy is to provide timely and accurate information to the public in all four phases of emergency management:

- *Mitigation*—to promote implementation of strategies, technologies, and actions that will reduce the loss of lives and property in future disasters.
- *Preparedness*—to communicate preparedness messages that encourage and educate the public in anticipation of disaster events.
- *Response*—to provide to the public notification, warning, evacuation, and situation reports on an ongoing disaster.
- *Recovery*—to provide individuals and communities affected by a disaster with information on how to register for and receive disaster relief.

Assumptions

The foundation of an effective disaster communications strategy is built on the following five critical assumptions:

- Customer Focus
- Leadership Commitment
- Inclusion of Communications in Planning and Operations
- Situational Awareness
- Media Partnership

³ Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation for and Response to Hurricane Katrina, 2006, *A Failure of Initiative: Final Report of the Special Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation for and Response to Hurricane Katrina*, Government Printing Office, February 15, 2006, <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/congress/index.html>.



Five Critical Assumptions for a Successful Communications Strategy

1. *Customer Focus*—Understand what information your customers and your partners need and build communication mechanisms that deliver this information in a timely and accurate fashion.
2. *Leadership Commitment*—The leader of the emergency operations must be committed to effective communications and must participate fully in the communications process.
3. *Inclusion of Communications in Planning and Operations*—Communications specialists must be involved in all emergency planning and operations to ensure that communicating timely and accurate information is considered when action decisions are being considered.
4. *Situational Awareness*—Effective communication is based on the timely collection, analysis, and dissemination of information from the disaster area in accordance with basic principles of effective communications, such as transparency and truthfulness, to be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.
5. *Media Partnership*—The media (i.e. television, radio, Internet, newspapers, etc.) are the most effective means for communicating timely and accurate information to the public. A partnership with the media involves understanding the needs of the media and employing trained staff who work directly with the media to get information to the public. And now that citizen journalists and new media technologies (cell phones, laptops, digital cameras) have become more vital and accepted sources of information and imaging from the front lines of a disaster, methods for incorporating this data and information must also be implemented.



Customer Focus

An essential element of any effective emergency management system is a focus on customers and customer service. This philosophy should guide communications with the public and with all partners in emergency management. A customer service approach includes placing the needs and interests of individuals and communities first, being responsive and informative, and managing expectations. In the 1990s, when disaster communications was valued, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) emergency information field guide illustrates the agency's focus on customer service and its strategy of getting messages out to the public as directly as possible. The introduction to the guide states the following:

“As members of the Emergency Information and Media Affairs team, you are part of the frontline for the agency in times of disaster. We count on you to be ready and able to respond and perform effectively on short notice. Disaster victims need to know their government is working. They need to know where and how to get help.

They need to know what to expect and what not to expect. Getting these messages out quickly is your responsibility as members of the Emergency Information and Media Affairs team.”⁴

The guide’s Mission Statement reinforces this point further:

“To contribute to the well-being of the community following a disaster by ensuring the dissemination of information that:

- is timely, accurate, consistent, and easy to understand;
- explains what people can expect from their government; and
- demonstrates clearly that FEMA and other federal, state, local, and voluntary agencies are working together to provide the services needed to rebuild communities and restore lives.⁴”

The customers for emergency management are diverse. They include internal customers, such as staff, other federal agencies, states, and other disaster partners. External customers include the general public, elected officials at all levels of government, community and business leaders, and the media. Each of these customers has special needs, and a good communications strategy considers and reflects their requirements (see Fig. 1.1).



FIGURE 1.1 Camilla, GA, February 14, 2000—Vice President Al Gore, Senator Max Cleland, Congressman Sanford Bishop, FEMA Director James Lee Witt, FEMA Region 4 Director John Copenhaver, and other officials express concern and pledge federal assistance for the victims of Monday’s devastating tornado. Photo by Liz Roll/FEMA News Photo.

⁴ FEMA (1998). *FEMA Emergency Information Field Guide* (condensed). Washington, DC. FEMA.

Leadership Commitment

Good communication starts with a commitment by the leadership of the emergency management organization to sharing and disseminating information both internally and externally. One of the lessons learned from Hurricane Katrina according to a report authored by Donald F. Kettl of the Fels Institute of Government at the University of Pennsylvania in the report entitled *The Worst is Yet to Come: Lessons from September 11 and Hurricane Katrina* is “We need public officials to lead. Communicating confidence to citizens and delivering on promises are both critical in crises.”⁵



Lessons for State and Local Officials

“Create a single public face to encourage citizens’ confidence—citizens need a voice of confidence from the scene. In the 1979 accident at the Three Mile Island nuclear plant, near Harrisburg, PA, Governor Dick Thornburgh and Harold Denton, from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, brought unified command (UC) and consistent communications with citizens. Mayor Rudolph Giuliani underlined that lesson with his steady leadership following the September 11 terrorist attacks. One of the things that worsened Katrina’s aftermath was the sense that no one was in charge because the public did not have steady communications from an official who should speak confidently about what was being done.”

Source: D. F. Kettl. *The Worst is Yet to Come: Lessons from September 11 to Hurricane Katrina*. Fels Institute of Government. University of Pennsylvania. September 2005.



The leader of any disaster response and recovery effort must openly endorse and promote open lines of communications among the organization’s staff, partners, and public in order to effectively communicate. This leader must model this behavior in order to clearly illustrate that communications is a valued function of the organization.

Recent examples of leadership commitment to effective disaster communications include the efforts of California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger during the 2007 wildfires in southern California. The Governor participated in multiple planned and unplanned press conferences and availabilities in order to deliver timely and accurate information to the public on the progress of response and recovery efforts during the wildfires. The Governor was credited with assuring the public and ensuring that the response was properly handled (see Fig. 1.2).

⁵ D. F. Kettl (2005). *The Worst is Yet to Come: Lessons from September 11 to Hurricane Katrina*. Fels Institute of Government, University of Pennsylvania, September 2005.



FIGURE 1.2 San Diego, CA, October 30, 2007—California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, San Diego Mayor Jerry Sanders and FEMA Administrator David Paulison address the media at a press briefing in San Diego following the Southern California wildfires. Photo by Andrea Booher/FEMA.



Governor's Star Turn Masks Work Ahead

“Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger’s constant, reassuring presence throughout the firestorm that lit up Southern California has won him praise even from opposition Democrats and a firefighters union that had been one of his harshest critics.

The Republican governor, a former bodybuilder and actor who relishes action outside the office, took command at news conferences and public appearances, political veterans of both parties agreed.

Behind the scenes, he had a more personal impact during hours spent mingling or posing for pictures with thousands of displaced residents huddled in evacuation centers, his aides said.”

Source: J. P. Sweeney. Copley News Service. November 5, 2007. http://www.signonsandiego.com/uniontrib/20071105/news_1n5firegov.html



In the 1990s, FEMA Director James Lee Witt was a strong advocate for keeping FEMA staff informed of agency plans, priorities, and operations. Director Witt characterized a proactive approach in communicating with FEMA’s constituents. His accessibility to the media was a significant departure from previous FEMA leadership



FIGURE 1.3 Laguna Canyon, CA, February 26, 1998—Federal Emergency Management Agency Director, James Lee Witt, addresses the questions of the media at the site of the Laguna Canyon mud flows that led to at least one death, and caused a great deal of damage. Photo by Dave Gatley/FEMA.

(see Fig. 1.3). Director Witt exhibited his commitment to effective communications in many ways:

- He held weekly staff meetings with FEMA’s senior managers and required that his senior managers hold regular staff meetings with their employees.
- He published an internal newsletter to employees entitled “Director’s Weekly Update” that was distributed to all FEMA employees in hard copy and on the agency electronic bulletin board that updated employees on agency activities.
- He made himself and his senior staff available to the media on a regular basis, especially during a disaster response, to answer questions and to provide information.
- During a disaster response, he held media briefings daily and sometimes two to three times a day.
- He would held special meetings with victims and their families.
- He led the daily briefings among FEMA partners during a disaster response.
- He devoted considerable time to communicating with members of Congress, governors, mayors, and other elected officials during both disaster and non-disaster times.

- He met four to five times per year with the State Emergency Management Directors, FEMA's principal emergency management partners.
- He gave speeches all over this country and around the world to promote better understanding of emergency management and disaster mitigation.

Through his leadership and commitment to communications, FEMA became an agency with a positive image and reputation. Communications led to increased success in molding public opinion and garnering support for the agency's initiatives in disaster mitigation.

Inclusion of Communications in Planning and Operations

The most important part of leadership's commitment to communications is inclusion of communications in all planning and operations. This means that a communications specialist is included in the senior management team of any emergency management organization and operation. It means that communication issues are considered in the decision-making processes and that a communications element is included in all organizational activities, plans, and operations.

In the past, communicating with external audiences, or customers, and in many cases internal customers, was not valued or considered critical to a successful emergency management operation. Technology has changed that equation. In today's world of 24-hour television and radio news and the Internet, the demand for information is never-ending, especially in an emergency response situation. Emergency managers must be able to communicate critical information in a timely manner to their staff, partners, the public, and the media.

To do so, the information needs of the various customers and how best to communicate with these customers must be considered at the same time that planning and operational decisions are being made. For example, a decision process on how to remove debris from a disaster area must include discussion of how to communicate information on the debris removal operation to community officials, the public, and the media.

During the many major disasters that occurred in the 1990s, FEMA Director Witt assembled a small group of his senior managers who traveled with him to the sites of disasters and worked closely with him in managing FEMA's efforts. This group always included FEMA's Director of Public Affairs. Similarly, when planning FEMA's preparedness and mitigation initiatives, Director Witt always included staff from Public Affairs in the planning and implementation phases. Every FEMA policy, initiative, or operation undertaken during this time included consideration of the information needs of the identified customers and a communications strategy to address these needs.

Again the response to Hurricane Katrina clearly illustrates the downside of failing to include consideration of communications issues in conducting a response operation. The Lessons Learned report prepared by White House Homeland Security Advisor Francis Townsend noted, "The lack of communications and situational awareness had a debilitating effect on the Federal response."⁶

⁶ F. F. Townsend (2006). *The Federal Response to Hurricane Katrina Lessons Learned*. The White House.



Lessons Learned from Hurricane Katrina

“The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) should develop an integrated public communications plan to better inform, guide, and reassure the American public before, during, and after a catastrophe. The Department of Homeland Security should enable this plan with operational capabilities to deploy coordinated public affairs teams during a crisis.”

Source: F. F. Townsend, February 2006. *The Federal Response to Hurricane Katrina Lessons Learned*. The White House.



One reason for this failure is the fact that the information centers were established late in the recovery process, as noted in the White House report:

“The DHS Public Affairs Office established a Joint Information Center (JIC) in Baton Rouge on Wednesday, September 6, to provide accurate and timely information on the Federal response and relief efforts as well as to counter misinformation. The formation of a second facility in New Orleans three days later improved the flow of accurate information back to the Baton Rouge JIC. These JICs helped to stem the spread of rumors and unsubstantiated reports that had plagued public information efforts during the first week after landfall.”⁵

These JICs were established on September 6 in Baton Rouge and September 9 in New Orleans. Hurricane Katrina made landfall on August 29. These JICs should have been established long before 8 and 11 days after the storm made landfall.

One positive development recently is the inclusion of Public Information as one of five objectives that guided the planning for the Department of Homeland Security’s Top Officials 4 (TOPOFF 4) Full-Scale Exercise in October 2007.



Planning Objectives for TOPOFF 4 Full Scale Exercise— October 2007

- **Prevention:** To test the handling and flow of operational and time-critical intelligence between agencies to prevent a terrorist incident.
- **Intelligence/Investigation:** To test the handling and flow of operational and time-critical intelligence between agencies prior to and in response to a linked terrorist incident.
- **Incident Management:** To test the full range of existing procedures for domestic incident management of a terrorist WMD event and to improve top officials’ (federal/state/local) capabilities to respond in partnership in accordance with the National Response Plan (NRP) and National Incident Management System (NIMS).

Continued

- **Public Information:** To practice the strategic coordination of media relations and public information issues in the context of a terrorist WMD incident or incident of national significance.
- **Evaluation:** To identify lessons learned and promote best practices.”

Source: *After Action Quick Look Report. National Exercise Program. Top Officials 4 (TOPOFF 4) Full-Scale Exercise*, October 15–20, 2007. November 19, 2007. http://www.fema.gov/pdf/media/2008/t4_after%20action_report.pdf



Situational Awareness

Situational awareness is key to an effective disaster response. Knowing the number of people killed and injured, the level of damage at the disaster site, the condition of homes and community infrastructure, and current response efforts provide decision makers with the situational awareness necessary to identify needs and appropriately apply available resources. The collection, analysis, and dissemination of information from the disaster site are the basis for an effective communications operation in a disaster response. This is also true during the disaster recovery phase, especially early in the recovery phase when the demand for information from the public, and therefore the media, is at its highest. Developing effective communication strategies to promote community preparedness and/or mitigation programs requires detailed information about the nature of the risks that impact the community and how the planned preparedness programs will help individuals and communities to be ready for the next disaster and the mitigation programs will reduce the impacts of future disasters.

Sharing this information is all important and this will require creating a culture among emergency officials where information sharing is valued. Information available to citizens at times of crises—man-made or natural—is often inadequate, biased, incorrect, or late. “Studies show that the problem lies not with the technologies (or lack thereof) but with the culture of information sharing. The access, dissemination, and archiving of information is often controlled by government agencies, institutions who have a parochial interest in controlling its flow—what gets out where, to whom, how, and when.”¹

The government culture can get in the way. The government officials uniformly said that they would not abandon the public information apparatus that is engrained in the governmental culture and hierarchy. “Responsibilities are limited and decided with specificity, and you do not get out of your lane,” said Chet Lunner, 9 DHS director participating in the Aspen Institute’s Katrina debrief. “You do not get to be a GS-14 or GS-15 by going on television, by upstaging your boss. That is a very big cultural issue.”²

A glaring lack of situational awareness was identified as a severe hindrance to the government response to Hurricane Katrina.



Situational Awareness in Hurricane Katrina

“While authorities recognized the need to begin search-and-rescue missions even before the hurricane winds fully subsided, other aspects of the response were hindered by a failure to quickly recognize the dimensions of the disaster. These problems were particularly acute at the federal level. The Homeland Security Operations Center (HSOC)—charged with providing reliable information to decision-makers including the Secretary and the President—failed to create a system to identify and acquire all available, relevant information, and as a result situational awareness was deeply flawed. With local and state resources immediately overwhelmed, rapid federal mobilization of resources was critical.

Yet, reliable information on such vital developments as the levee failures, the extent of flooding, and the presence of thousands of people in need of life-sustaining assistance at the New Orleans Convention Center did not reach the White House, Secretary Chertoff, or other key officials for hours, and in some cases more than a day. FEMA Director Michael Brown, then in Louisiana, contributed to the problem by refusing to communicate with Secretary Chertoff opting instead to pass information directly to the White House staff. Moreover, even though senior DHS officials did receive on the day of landfall numerous reports that should have led to an understanding of the increasingly dire situation in New Orleans, many indicated they were not aware of the crisis until sometime Tuesday morning.

DHS was slow to recognize the scope of the disaster or that FEMA had become overwhelmed. On the day after landfall, DHS officials were still struggling to determine the “ground truth” about the extent of the flooding despite the many reports it had received about the catastrophe; key officials did not grasp the need to act on the less-than-complete information that is to be expected in a disaster. DHS leaders did not become fully engaged in recovery efforts until Thursday, when in Deputy Secretary Michael Jackson’s words, they “tried to kick it up a notch”; after that, they did provide significant leadership within DHS (and FEMA) as well as coordination across the federal government. But this effort should have begun sooner.

The Department of Defense (DOD) also was slow to acquire information regarding the extent of the storm’s devastation. DOD officials relied primarily on media reports for their information. Many senior DOD officials did not learn that the levees had breached until Tuesday; some did not learn until Wednesday. As DOD waited for DHS to provide information about the scope of the damage, it also waited for the lead federal agency, FEMA, to identify the support needed from DOD. The lack of situational awareness during this phase appears to have been a major reason for DOD’s belated adoption of the forward-looking posture necessary in a catastrophic incident.”

Source: Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, 2006. *Hurricane Katrina: A Nation Still Unprepared*. S. Rept. 109–322, Government Printing Office, May, 2006.



The U.S. Senate report on the Hurricane Katrina response listed the following findings regarding situational awareness:

- The HSOC failed to take timely steps to create a system to identify and acquire all available, relevant information.
- The HSOC failed in its responsibility under the NRP to provide “general situational awareness” and a “common operational picture,” particularly concerning the failure of the levees, the flooding of New Orleans, and the crowds at the Convention Center.
- On the day of landfall (Monday), senior DHS officials received numerous reports that should have led to an understanding of the increasingly dire situation in New Orleans, yet they were not aware of the crisis until Tuesday morning.
- Louisiana was not equipped to process the volume of information received by its emergency operations center after landfall.
- Lack of situational awareness regarding the status of deliveries created difficulties in managing the provision of needed commodities in Louisiana and Mississippi.⁷



Situational Awareness and Media Stories

“Without sufficient working communications capability to get better situational awareness, the local, state, and federal officials directing the response in New Orleans had too little factual information to address—and, if need be, rebut—what the media were reporting. This allowed terrible situations—the evacuees’ fear and anxiety in the Superdome and Convention Center—to continue longer than they should have and, as noted, delayed response efforts by, for example, causing the National Guard to wait to assemble enough force to deal with security problems at the Convention Center that turned out to be overstated.”

Source: Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation for and Response to Hurricane Katrina, 2006, *A Failure of Initiative: Final Report of the Special Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation for and Response to Hurricane Katrina*, Government Printing Office, February 15, 2006, <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/congress/index.html>



FEMA’s National Incident Management System (NIMS) includes a section on Public Information in its Incident Command System (ICS) component (see Fig. 1.4). One of the three top command staff reporting to the Incident Commander (IC) in ICS is the Public Information Officer (PIO).

⁷ Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs (2006). *Hurricane Katrina: A Nation Still Unprepared*. S. Rept. 109-322, Government Printing Office.

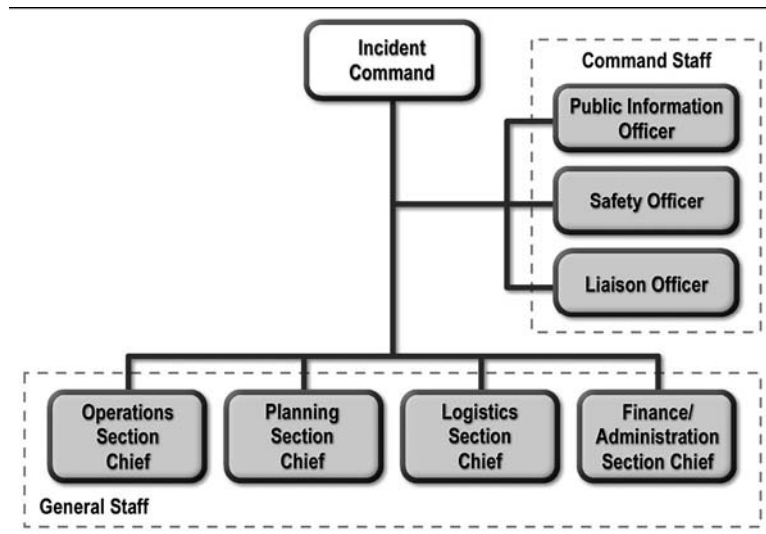


FIGURE 1.4 Incident Command System: Command Staff and General Staff (Source: FEMA. National Incident Management System: *FEMA 501/Draft*, August 2007).



Public Information in the National Incident Management System (NIMS)

“Public Information consists of the processes, procedures, and systems to communicate timely, accurate, and accessible information on the incident’s cause, size, and current situation to the public, responders, and additional stakeholders (both directly affected and indirectly affected). Public information must be coordinated and integrated across jurisdictions and across agencies/organizations; among Federal, State, tribal, and local governments; and with the private sector and NGOs. Well developed public information, education strategies, and communications plans help to ensure that lifesaving measures, evacuation routes, threat and alert systems, and other public safety information is coordinated and communicated to numerous audiences in a timely and consistent manner. Public Information includes processes, procedures, and organizational structures required to gather, verify, coordinate, and disseminate information.”

Source: FEMA. *National Incident Management System: FEMA 501/Draft*. August 2007.



According to the most recent version of NIMS, “The PIO gathers, verifies, coordinates and disseminates accurate, accessible, and timely information on the incident’s cause, size, and current situation; resources committed; and other matters of general interest for both internal and external use.”⁸ Fig. 1.5 shows a PIO in action.

⁸ FEMA (2007). *National Incident Management System: FEMA 501/Draft*, August 2007. Washington, DC: FEMA.



FIGURE 1.5 New Orleans, St. Bernard, LA, February 27, 2006—FEMA Public Affairs Officer Dave Passey talks to reporters in front of the cruise ships *Ecstasy* and *Sensation* about the progress of relocating residents into land-based temporary housing. FEMA is helping victims living on the cruise ships find long-term housing before the ships' contract expires March 1st and the ships set sail. Marvin Nauman/FEMA photo.

The duties of the PIO are defined as follows:

The PIO supports the Incident Command structure as a member of the Command staff. The PIO advises Incident Command on all public information matters relating to the management of the incident. The PIO handles inquiries from the media, the public, and elected officials, emergency public information and warnings, rumor monitoring and response, media monitoring, and other functions required to gather, verify, coordinate, and disseminate accurate, accessible, and timely information related to the incident, particularly regarding information on public health, safety, and protection. PIOs are able to create coordinated and consistent messages by collaborating to:

- identify key information that needs to be communicated to the public;
- draft messages that convey key information and are clear and easily understood by all, including those with special needs;
- prioritize messages to ensure timely delivery of information without overwhelming the audience;
- verify accuracy of information through appropriate channels; and
- disseminate messages using the most effective means available.⁷

During a disaster response, an effective information management system involves three critical elements:

1. **Collection of information at the disaster site**—This effort may involve numerous groups including local first responders (police, fire, and emergency

medical technicians), local and state emergency management staff, Federal damage assessment teams, the local Red Cross chapter and other voluntary organizations on the ground, community leaders, and individuals. Increasingly, the public has been using online tools to share directly or through the traditional media information and images from the front lines and information from “First Informers” needs to be acknowledged and included.

2. **Analysis of information**—This effort is undertaken to identify immediate response support needs and early recovery phase needs and is used by decision makers to match available resources to these identified needs.
3. **Dissemination of information**—This involves sharing of this information internally with all stakeholders in a timely fashion and externally with the media and through the media with the public.

In the Incident Command System (ICS) as defined by FEMA, this information is collected, evaluated, and disseminated by the Planning Section.



Planning Section Responsibilities in the Incident Command System (ICS)

“The Planning Section collects, evaluates, and disseminates incident situation information and intelligence to IC/UC and incident management personnel. The Planning Section then prepares status reports, displays situation information, maintains the status of resources assigned to the incident, and prepares and documents the Incident Action Plan (IAP) based on Operations Section input and guidance from IC/UC.

The Planning Section is normally responsible for gathering and disseminating information and intelligence critical to the incident, unless IC/UC places this function elsewhere. The Planning Section is also responsible for assembling the IAP. The IAP includes the overall incident objectives and strategies established by Incident Command. In the case of UC, the IAP must adequately address the mission and policy needs of each jurisdictional agency, as well as interaction between jurisdictions, functional agencies, and private organizations. The IAP also addresses tactics and support activities required for the planned operational period, generally 12–24 hours.”

Source: FEMA. *National Incident Management System: FEMA 501/Draft*, August 2007.



Media Partnership

The media plays a primary role in communicating with the public. No government emergency management organization could ever hope to develop a communications network comparable to those networks already established and maintained by

television, radio, newspapers, and online news outlets across the country. To effectively provide timely disaster information to the public, emergency managers must establish a partnership with their local media outlets. (See Eric Holdeman's "Another Voice")



Another Voice: Eric Holdeman

Eric Holdeman, former director of the King County (WA) Office of Emergency Management, is a principal with ICF International.

The Media is My Friend

Here in the 21st Century we are living in the information age. Media in all its forms dominates our lives. Old media in the form of newspapers, magazines, television, and radio is being challenged by "new media" in the form of the internet, podcasts, wikis, and blogs. Trust in the traditional media is at a historical low as people are using new media to get their news and evaluate the "truthiness" of what traditional media is telling them. In this internet age there are intense pressures to be first with the story and to verify all the facts later. It is interesting to note that the very first media call we received at the King County Emergency Operations Center (EOC) following the Nisqually Earthquake in 2001 came from Australia.

Into this mix come emergency management professionals who are seeking to provide disaster public education before an event, and then warnings and disaster public information to tell the story of disaster response and recovery once a disaster has come and passed.

Generally, emergency managers recognize that they cannot have an effective program without interacting with the media, but because of mistrust of the media in all its forms they avoid contact and treat the media as the enemy.

I believe that the media is a critical partner in your efforts to educate, inform, and warn the public. Like all relationships, they are best built before an event occurs. Initiating contact with all types of media representatives will enable them and you to begin building a relationship that acknowledges the role of the media while still being a person who they know they can trust. Hence you can either provide them with information or, failing that, refer them to other reliable and knowledgeable sources that can provide information and commentary on what is happening.

News rooms like EOCs are 24/7 enterprises that may never sleep. After all, it is drive time sometime everywhere. In order to be of use to the media you must first be accessible. Providing reporters, assignment editors, and news rooms all of your contact information, including your home phone number, is perhaps the one single thing that you can do to be responsive to their needs. You must realize that if they don't talk to you, they will talk to someone since they need to fill their news with content. It only makes sense that you should be that resource to them.

Disasters don't respect our artificial and man made jurisdictional boundaries. Therefore, when a large scale disaster strikes, it is typically a regional event.

Continued

Media cannot have staff at the multitude of EOCs that activate to respond to an event. They will gravitate to scenes that have graphic images and to EOCs that are prepared to share information in a consolidated manner, that paints the big picture for their audiences. To accommodate media getting the story it is important that technology systems and operating methodologies are put in place before an event that enables them to get the story. When building the Regional Communications and Emergency Coordination Center (RCECC) we invited television and radio engineering representatives to participate in the design process to ensure that we could provide them with space, connections, power, and other tools that would enable them to efficiently get the story from our center.

Katrina showed that even the media can be impacted by a disaster. Television and radio stations had damaged facilities, lost power, and went off the air. Recognizing that an earthquake in the Pacific Northwest will have the same effect on our local media they were invited to become signatories to the Regional Disaster Response Plan. This will enable them to share resources between media companies if they choose to do so, and it also provides a legal instrument for the sharing of government resources to the media that might enable them to continue broadcasting during a disaster.

There are other things that can be done to improve the media's ability to get the story. For instance, the primary warning radio station in the Central Puget Sound Emergency Alert System (EAS) Network has pre-positioned a portable "radio station in a box" which would enable a remote broadcast from the King County EOC should the situation warrant its use.

In the end, the media has been shown to be a critical partner in the preparation for a future disaster. Instead of looking at the media as the enemy, it is time we start thinking of the media as a friend. If you are having trouble with this concept, just repeat, "The media is my friend" over and over to yourself. Then, get out there and start building working relationships.

The goal of a media partnership is to provide accurate and timely information to the public in both disaster and non-disaster situations. The partnership requires a commitment by both the emergency manager and the media to work together, and it requires a level of trust between both parties.

Traditionally, the relationship between emergency managers and the media has been strained. There is often a conflict between the need of the emergency manager to respond quickly and the need of the media to obtain information on the response so it can report it just as quickly. This conflict sometimes results in inaccurate reporting and tension between the emergency manager and the media. The loser in this conflict is always the public, which relies on the media for its information.

It is important for emergency managers to understand the needs of the media and the value they bring to facilitating response operations. An effective media partnership

provides the emergency manager with a communications network to reach the public with vital information. Such a partnership provides the media with access to the disaster site, access to emergency managers and their staff, and access to critical information for the public that informs and ensures the accuracy of their reporting.

An effective media partnership helps define the roles of the emergency management organizations to manage public expectations and to boost the morale of the relief workers and the disaster victims. All these factors can speed the recovery of a community from a disaster event and promote preparedness and mitigation efforts designed to reduce the loss of life and property from the next disaster event.



Improving Disaster Communications

Moderator of the Aspen Institute's discussion about communications before, during and after Hurricane Katrina, Charles Firestone, "divided the ideas for improvement—all trust-building notions—into three broad categories: first, more *openness*, including more accessibility by the media to decision makers and experts and more transparency in government for the media and the public; second, greater *collaboration* between government and the media, between the various forms of media, and between the media and the community; and, third, enhanced *exchanges* between all of the above.

The following are the highlights of the proposals that surfaced:

Openness

- Centralized communications centers in the disaster zone that are pre-announced and staffed quickly by local, state, and federal responders.
- A premium on communication as part of the job descriptions of disaster officials, taking a page from the public diplomacy effort.
- Enhancing transparency by providing more information on disaster-related Web sites that incorporate techniques for making this information easier to find.

Collaboration

- Pre-planning among media to share information dissemination facilities, including transmitters that offer wireless hotspots to the public.
- Suspension of proprietary and competitive urges to create distributive networks that share content across media platforms.
- An experiment to bring together traditional media and new media for crisis planning, including BarCamps (to use the latest Internet jargon).

Exchanges

- Finding teachable moments when media and government can best seize public attention to communicate with citizens to enhance individual preparedness.

Continued

- A national effort in which media entities band together for a public education campaign to stimulate personal preparedness.
- Participation by journalists, including representatives of new media, in tabletop exercises and other drills that simulate government and media response in a crisis.”

Source: A. L. May (2006). *First Informers in the Disaster Zone: The Lessons of Katrina*. The Aspen Institute, Communications and Society Program. Washington, DC.



Communicating in the Era of Homeland Security

Communicating with the public is an area that needs to be improved if the nation is going to have a truly effective homeland security system. To date, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has shown little interest in communicating with the public, and when it has the results have not always been positive—the “duct tape and plastic” fiasco serves as a classic example. FEMA’s failed communications in



FIGURE 1.6 New Orleans, LA, August 13, 2007—U.S. Department of Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff addresses the news media after reviewing Louisiana’s emergency preparedness plans with commander, Eighth Coast Guard District, Rear Adm. Joel R. Whitehead; Federal Emergency Management Agency Administrator R. David Paulison; Louisiana National Guard Major Gen. Bennett C. Landreneau, The Adjutant General; Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco; Governor’s Office of Homeland Security Acting Director Col. Jeff Smith; Lt. Gov. Mitch Landrieu and Gulf Coast Principal Federal Official Gil Jamieson. The presentation and press conference were at the Eighth Coast Guard District Offices on Lake Ponchartrain. Photo Manuel Broussard/FEMA.

Hurricane Katrina is another (see Fig. 1.6). DHS and its State and local partners need to address three factors to improve its communications with the American people.

First, there must be a commitment from the leadership, not only at DHS and its State and local partners, but at all levels of government, including the executive level, to communicate timely and accurate information to the public. This is especially important in the response and recovery phases to a terrorist incident.

In a disaster scenario, the conventional wisdom that states information is power, and that hoarding information helps to retain such power, is almost categorically reversed. Withholding information during disaster events generally has an overall negative impact on the well-being of the public, and on the impression the public forms about involved authorities. In practice, sharing of information is what generates authority and power, when that information is useful and relates to the hazard at hand. Two shining examples of this fact are the actions of former FEMA Director James Lee Witt and former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani. Both leaders went to great lengths to get accurate and timely information to the public in a time of crisis, and their efforts both inspired the public and greatly enhanced the effectiveness of the response and recovery efforts they guided.

To date, DHS leadership and the political leadership have been reluctant to make this commitment to share information with the public. This is something that must change if they expect the American people to fully comprehend the homeland security threat and to become actively engaged in homeland security efforts. Few citizens have any idea of what actual terrorism risks they face, and fewer can actually relate those risks in any comparable fashion to the risks they face every day without notice.

Second, homeland security officials at all levels must resolve the conflict between sharing information with the public in advance and in the aftermath of a terrorist incident that has value for intelligence or criminal prosecution purposes. This is directly linked to the commitment issue discussed in the previous paragraphs and has been repeatedly cited by homeland security officials as reasons for not sharing more specific information with the public.

This is a very difficult issue that, in the past, DHS has tried to ignore. However, the continued frustration among the public and State and local officials with the Homeland Security Advisory System (HSAS) is just one sign that this issue will not solve itself nor just go away.

Also at issue is the question of when to release relevant information to the public without compromising intelligence sources and/or ongoing criminal investigations. This is an issue that rarely, if ever, confronts emergency management officials dealing with natural and unintentional man-made disasters. Therefore, there is little precedent or experience for current homeland security officials to work with in crafting a communications strategy that balances the competing need for the public to have timely and accurate information with the need to protect intelligence sources and ongoing criminal investigations. To date, the needs of the intelligence and justice communities have clearly been judged to outweigh those of the public—but at a cost.

Withholding information leaves the public vulnerable and suspicious of the government. Lucy Dalglish, executive director of the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, & Participant in the Aspen Institute's debrief on Hurricane Katrina, said her task, and the task of journalists, was to convince government officials that, over the long run, transparency can build trust and save lives: "The same information that a terrorist can use to do great damage can possibly give families information about which escape route to use to get away from a nuclear power plant. I think we're going to find that if we have a flu pandemic, the information that can be used to terrorize and scare people can also be used to save their lives. I think what we have to do is work very hard at convincing people that access to information is ultimately going to be our friend.²"

Members of Congress and DHS Secretary Michael Chertoff have spoken often about reworking the HSAS. This would be a critical first step in reestablishing trust with the public for the warning system. From this starting point, if the commitment is there among the homeland security leadership, additional communications mechanisms can be developed to ensure that the public gets timely and accurate information both in advance of any terrorist incident and during the response and recovery phases in the aftermath of the next terrorist attack.

Third, more effort must be invested by Federal departments and agencies to better understand the principal terrorist threats that our nation faces (i.e., biological, chemical, radiological, nuclear, and explosives), and to develop communications strategies that educate and inform the public about these threats with more useful information. The 2001 Washington, DC, anthrax incident is a perfect example of uninformed or misinformed public officials sharing what is often conflicting and, in too many instances, wrong information with the public.

The nation's public officials must become better informed about these principal risks and be ready and capable of explaining complicated information to the public. As the anthrax incident made clear, this is not a luxury, but a necessity if the response to similar incidents in the future is to be successful.

Decades of research and a new generation of technologies now inform emergency managers as they provide information about hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, and hazardous materials incidents to the public. A similar research effort must be undertaken for these five new terrorist risks and communications strategies that will ensure that homeland security officials at all levels are capable of clearly explaining to the public the hazards posed by these threats.

These communications strategies must consider how to communicate to the public when incomplete information is all that is available to homeland security officials. In the vast majority of cases, this partiality of information is probable. A public health crisis will not wait for all the data to be collected and analyzed, nor will the public. Homeland security officials must develop strategies for informing the public effectively, as the crisis develops, by forming effective messages that are able to explain to the public how what is being said is the most accurate information available based on the information that, likewise, is available—despite its incomplete nature. Clearly, this is not an easy task, but it is not impossible. The public will increasingly expect such communications efforts, so the sooner such a system is in place, the better the next incident will be managed.

Conclusion

Whether dealing with the media, the public, or partners, effective communication is a critical element of emergency management. Media relations should be open and cooperative, the information stream must be managed to provide a consistent, accurate message, and officials need to be proactive about telling their own story before it is done for them. A customer service approach is essential to communicate with the public, a collaborative approach should be taken to promoting programs, and great care should be given as to how and when risk is communicated to citizens. Multiple agencies and unclear lines of responsibility make communications among partners a challenge; political skill and acumen are needed to overcome such hurdles, and efforts are under way to improve communications in this area.