Nancy Daneau
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Three Perspectives on Preparedness

Government agencies are responsible for protecting the welfare of people and property during disasters. A key aspect of disaster preparedness and response at the government level includes the activation of an Incident Command Center, in one form or another. It is not only essential for real-time, prescient, continuous risk assessment, prioritizing activities, and coordinating the allocation of resources, but clearly organized, guided disaster management drills, exercises, and experience serve as measurable determinants of impact mitigation. Tom Chin, Response Coordinator for San Francisco's Department of Emergency Management (OEM) describes the breadth, scope, and challenges of governmental emergency planning for his department as "everything outside the yellow tape (where EMS works), managing the entire city in a disaster scenario"[i]. OEM provides mutual aid and resources EMS needs, and with just 16 Duty Officers, activate the city's integrated public alert and warning system (IPAUSE), give directions to ameliorate the threat or mitigate the disaster impact, and notifies all city partners about the active situation so there is sure to be a response to 911 calls and other emergencies that arise at the same time as an ongoing disaster. Tom makes a key point in that preparedness, response and recovery are all equally important and inextricably linked; therefore, each segment can influence a situation as much as the other, as is the case with coordination efforts across government agencies.

In contrast, the goal of disaster preparedness for business is to maintain (or restore as quickly as possible) continuity of operations and the supply chain for goods and services for those who need them most. Carmela Hinderaker, Director of Business Continuity at CNS headquarters affirms the company's commitment to diligence in its preparation efforts. Key aspects of her work include tracking trends and weather conditions in anticipation of disasters that have the potential to impact the supply chain for both perishable and non-perishable items, pre-planning by ramping up the volume and advance delivery of certain items, and working with transporters and warehouses to minimize disruptions to deliveries to large grocery chains that might be affected by power outages, road closures, evacuations, curfews and the like[ii]. In contrast to government entities or individuals, a business like CNS has the additional burden of tracking and ensuring transported items meet regulatory compliance requirements around shelf life, temperature, that the company monitors driver hour requirements, the weight of trucks, and more. Similar to emergency personnel working in the public trust, Carmela has a 24/7 high-pressure job. She is responsible for millions of dollars worth of products and has the potential to affect either positively or negatively the lives of countless people waiting for groceries and supplies, all in the midst of disasters.

Last, and equally important are the goals and key aspects of disaster preparedness at the individual level, as these have the potential, as we saw for example with 9/11, to have the biggest impact on the human condition. The interview with Peter Miller made clear that in contrast to government and business, individuals in the community, more often than not, lack important basic emergency preparedness information or training. In fact, most of the people in the tower with Peter had no knowledge of the building layout or that it had three sets of stairs as possible escape routes. It took people six minutes to start evacuating and there were those who wanted to shelter in place, awaiting instructions that would never come. Peter Miller, who had been at the WTC during the '93 bombings reflected that earlier experience may have given him a false sense of confidence because in '93, limited information served people well because not having full comprehension cushions the blow of the realization of what's actually happening.[iii] Survivors of 9/11 say is that it was very quiet and calm and people were orderly. When people

did freak out, others helped calm them. Thankfully, as Dr. Gershon notes, some individuals, irrespective of emergency response training, don't succumb to paralyzing fear but instead step in and take control of a group, known as the "Emergent Norm Phenomena". People's most important tools are each other and coworkers becoming one another's first responders wound up a key aspect of preparedness and response for 9/11 survivors.

Themes conveyed amongst the interviewees suggested a number of core principles that prove to be mission-critical in building a strong foundation on which to prepare for a disaster. These include relationship building, collaboration/coordination, and communication. Individuals play a key role in community, business, and government. Situational awareness and practice at even the most basic level contribute to the safety and well-being of one's self and others, leading to resilience. As events increase, personal responsibility and accountability for active engagement should become the social norm. This can only serve to benefit individuals supporting one another across organizations during events that cause severe strain and contribute to the broader interest of serving one another in global public health.

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[i] Chin, T. Coordinating at San Francisco's Dept of Emergency Management.

[ii] Hinderaker, C. Business Continuity at CNS.

[iii] Miller, P. World Trade Center Survivors Network. 2015.