Evacuation issues: Part I

In the first of two articles, a panel of emergency management specialists consider the issues involved in getting a major city ready for evacuation.

The United States has focused extensively on evacuation from catastrophic events, particularly in major cities, since the experiences of the September 11 bombings in New York City and Washington, DC, and even more so since Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in the southeast in 2005. A 2006 report by the US Department of Transportation and the US Department of Homeland Security questioned the evacuation readiness for catastrophic events of the 75 major urban areas in the United States. The Ad Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation at Harvard Kennedy School convened a panel of emergency management specialists for a webcast discussion in March 2008 to consider the issues involved in getting a major city ready for evacuation. The following edited excerpts from that discussion are the first of two articles to appear in CR/R.

Arnold (Am) Howell: Getting ready for evacuation is a very complex challenge. And certainly, some of the problems that we’re concerned about today are the same that we’ve always been concerned about. The evacuation of an urban area is a very complex task. We have some problems with traffic, with hurricanes, as Hurricane Katrina demonstrated, with bad weather, with cold weather, with whatever. And even that in some ways is connected because we’re having a lot of that in the same way.

Mike Montgomery: One of the things that we have really spent our time in Texas on is developing ways that we can feel confident that those of our citizens with special needs will be able to evacuate. And there are two key groups that we have to focus on. First were those that just needed transportation in getting out of the danger zone. And second are those with medical conditions that would have an impact on their ability to evacuate. And also, we don’t want to overlook those that have pets or companion animals. Prior to 2005, with Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, some of the sheltering operations were very reluctant to accept, or had policies forbidding, pets or companion animals. And we had a lot of pet owners wanting to evacuate. Pictured here is a New Orleans evacuee at a facility that welcomed pets.

Andrew Velasquez: We always need to ask the question of how we’re going to evacuate large cities. And we don’t think about where we are going to place these people. Are we going to have the appropriate places in place to shelter people or transportation to move individuals who may need medical attention or be reunited with family members? The logistics of tracking and identification of individuals will require massive cross-jurisdictional co-operation.

There’s always a crucial question whether people should shelter in place or evacuate. Frequently, shelter in place will be the most sensible policy. But there will certainly be situations where evacuation is called for. Under these circumstances, government’s role is going to be both facilitating the self-evacuation of many citizens who have access to automobiles or some other form of transportation, and providing aid to people whose circumstances make them much less able to do so on their own.

Evacuation also requires a very rich mix of operational capabilities, and the need for complex co-ordination. Not only within a given jurisdiction among the agencies that might be involved – police, fire, emergency management, transportation, public works and others – but also among adjacent jurisdictions and those that are farther away.

Finally, evacuation involves intergovernmental relations – between local governments and the state, and between the state and the federal government.

In the planning phase, we need to be able to identify the evacuation scenarios. We do a lot of that through practicing and simulating with our partners in preparedness, such as the universities, to bring good, strong simulation methodologies to the table. Second, control points. Where are you going to evacuate people to? And we look at different shelters, where we would be hosting and relocating people. Then support. Where do you stage people? If you’ve got something going in that direction, you’ll get your emergency support vehicles and resources into place, command systems, etc.

One of the things that we find about evacuations are regional in concept. You’re not in it by yourself. And it’s important that you approach it from a regional perspective, especially when you consider many of the aspects that you deal with being a regional railroads, metropolitan transit authorities and bus systems. These are regional components in most instances. That’s incorporated with those local or private resources that you would have.

Special needs population planning is very important. It’s not just being about relocating, but those that have to be in place. And then how do we make sure that the evacuation is going to be successful? It’s not a situation where we think we’re doing it, that we don’t have conflicting information, the mayor saying one thing, the governor something else? It’s important, as well, that we take those integrative tools that many cities have – such as traffic management centres – making sure they are incorporated into the process.

Flavio Ciani: A key thing is that we are training in place, not only in our fire and law enforcement, but those other partners in preparedness, whether it’s Department of Transport, public works, etc.

Arnold Howell: I’d like to turn now, to Mike Montgomery. The Houston area was a reception centre for evacuees from Hurricane Katrina and Mr Montgomery experienced massive traffic tie-ups in evacuation from Hurricane Rita.

Mike Montgomery: One of the key things that we learned was that we had three-times as many people on the road as we expected. More importantly, over five-times as many people evacuated as we actually needed to evacuate. So getting the right information out to people is crucial. People need to know how to evacuate and where to evacuate. They have to know how to get there.

We have to look at creating a way to determine the real-time traffic conditions, the real-time demographics, the real-time weather situations, the fire damage to the freeways, and incorporate it into our processes.

Andrew Velasquez: A key thing here is we’re going to focus on our local or regional resources. And then how do we make sure that the evacuation and the transportation is going to be successful? And we have to be very careful how we transport them. For Level Four, Level Five, those with severe medical needs – either chronic or acute –
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Arnold (Am) Hewitt: Getting ready for evacuation is a very complex challenge. And certainly, some threats like hurricanes, will give advance notice, perhaps a week, perhaps a few days. But other events, like earthquakes or terrorist attacks, may be no notice events.

There’s always a crucial question whether people should shelter in place or evacuate. Frequently, shelter in place will be the most sensible policy. But there will certainly be situations where evacuation is called for. Under these circumstances, government’s role is going to be both facilitating the self-evacuation of many citizens who have access to automobiles or some other form of transportation, and providing aid to people whose circumstances make them much less mobile than those who have auto access.

Preparation

Evacuation also requires a very rich mix of operational capabilities, and the need for complex co-ordination. Not only within a given jurisdiction among the agencies that might be involved – police, fire, emergency management, transportation, public works and others – but also among adjacent jurisdictions and those that are far afield from the line.

Finally, evacuation involves intergovernmental relations – between local governments and the state, and between the state and the federal government.

So the question arises, how should we prepare for these kinds of situations? What do we need to do, both as gone fires?

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shelter approach. Hub processing centres will be organised in the largest shelter possible for that city. Hub centres may include arenas, convention centres, stadiums, university buildings, and other large open-space facilities. The main goal for a hub or a processing centre is to evaluate evacuees for any special needs or sheltering issues.

We also have to make sure that we have the appropriate measures in place to receive individuals who have special needs. Once adequately evaluated, we may place that evacuee in a nearby shelter, to ensure that he or she resolves any situation or problems that occurred from the disaster or the evacuation.

It will be very important for institutional players to co-ordinate and address the many obstacles in planning for a mass evacuation. Each local state and federal representative will bring their areas of expertise, and create a response, a realistic response to an evacuation.

**Responsibilities**

We’ve had a number of regional collaboration meetings. That has worked exceptionally well because we brought partners together from Cook County and a number of the other large counties within the State of Illinois to talk about the importance of evacuating folks out of the City of Chicago and even beyond areas within the State of Illinois.

Awareness of responsibilities and execution of those responsibilities will provide for a flexible response, ensuring mitigation measures at all levels. (This requires us to) establish an organisational structure for regional collaboration, identify key stakeholders that should be a part of that organisational structure, develop a governance structure, set organisational goals and objectives, and develop required agreements when we get to the area of communication.

The full discussion excerpted here can be accessed at: www.innovations.harvard.edu/xchat-transcript.html?chid=151.

Top: “We have to look at creating a way to determine the real-time traffic conditions, the real-time demographics, the real-time weather situations, the damage to the freeways, and incorporate it into our processes,” says Ellis Stanley Sr. Middle: An evacuation shelter at Norton Air Force Base held more than 3,000 evacuees following fires in Southern California. Often, shelter in place will be the most sensible policy, but sometimes evacuation is the safest policy. Right: It is vital to consider those who have medical conditions that would affect their ability to evacuate.