

Well intentioned fools rush in

Robert Jensen explains why too many unrelated organisations responding to an incident can be a hindrance rather than a help

PEOPLE WANT TO HELP, ESPECIALLY first responders. The natural tendency of individuals, government agencies and businesses is to push people at a crisis. A call for help goes out and we all respond. That sense of urgency, and the satisfaction of arriving quickly meet our needs as people, but it puts us and those we may be trying to save at risk. At a minimum, over-resourced and under-planned response complicates things, at worst people die. This is not a new lesson to the crisis management community; it is, however, one that needs constant reinforcement and visibility.

Internationally, many government agencies have organised systems and standards such as the Incident Command System, or Standardised Emergency Management Systems. Similarly, business crisis management organisations also have various systems, although far fewer standards. For many governments and businesses these systems generally work for the more common events, such as smaller industrial accidents or fires. Even then, there are still enough injuries and occasional fatalities occurring from people being where they should not.

However, for large scale events, with their potential for large numbers of injuries or fatalities, and the added complication of instant and widespread media coverage, the scenario changes. Many different agencies, volunteers and leaders emerge. Plans which looked good on paper start to fall apart; spokespeople start to cover areas outside of their expertise and to speculate and point to other agencies as being responsible for management decisions. Political leaders then step in and make decisions based, not on needs, but on the pretence of getting people into action. Things go downhill from there. More people show up, often with different communication systems and related – but different – missions. Once that happens it is almost impossible to turn that tide of manpower back or slow it down.

In addition to the obvious risks, having too many people places an additional burden on support systems. In natural disasters, for example Hurricane Katrina, where life support (housing, water, transportation) assets are at premium and are often taken on a first-come-first-served basis, there may be little, or no,



Organisations must work together to offer a planned response to major incidents. Over-resourced and under planned-responses complicate situations and can make things much worse



During larger events the media are often the first source of information for people

support left for those with necessary skills.

This problem has to be tackled both before an incident occurs and during the incident. Beforehand, competent, experienced event planners should address key areas and those plans should then be exercised. Not just at the first responder level, but at the senior manager levels, and by those who will be drawn into the larger events. That means beyond the battalion chiefs, or senior incident manager. In other words it means involving the commissioners, mayors, and

city administrators. It means bringing private industry leaders and government agencies together so business owners understand why it is important for the fire officials to have quick access to information about employees working on site, their evacuation plans, and chemicals stored or manufactured on site.

The solution also involves local media. In larger events they are often the first source of information for many people, including responders, and political decision makers. Yet how often are they involved in drills and exercises beyond the media room? Bring them in at the planning phase; let them observe. By explaining to them, without the emotion of a real event, the complex decisions that have to be made they will perhaps be able to communicate that even though police and fire are waiting outside a burning area or not moving into a disaster zone, it does not mean that rescue or recovery actions are not occurring.

Trying to explain this reasoning during an incident does not work. Senior experienced people are often too busy to brief. Briefings are relegated to those who may not have the credibility to explain – or worse – the skills to fully explain it. Secondly, the media will not have time to learn the details and will therefore not understand the big picture. In some situations it can look like governments or businesses were not ready and simply threw resources at the problem.

PLANNING AHEAD

Taking risks is part of what drives many in the crisis management field; bringing order to chaos. But risks can and should be managed and understood. Recovering the deceased is a hard enough burden knowing that accidents are preventable, but since humans are imperfect, we expect tragedy. One tragedy at a time is enough. We should not be in the business of recovering the first responders because we did not plan or manage properly.

CRJ

AUTHOR

Robert Jensen is Chief Executive Officer, Kenyon International Emergency Services, USA and a member of CRJ editorial advisory panel