

Chapter Fourteen:

Pre-Crisis Planning for Local Communities

When a community crisis occurs, chaos ensues. It is important for every community to have a well defined plan for response that details in writing what resources are available, who will coordinate a response, and what responsibilities will be assumed by which agencies or individuals. The plan should include the following twelve elements.

I. An Inter-Agency Task Force

An interagency task force or coordinating body should be established that will be responsible for implementing the designated action steps in the plan. A hierarchy of authority and responsibility should be outlined. An organization should be identified that can provide leadership and on-site coordination at any time. Mass tragedies often occur on weekends or at night so personnel should be available twenty-four hours a day.

A. Important groups to include in the task force or coordinating body are:

1. Representatives of law enforcement, firefighters, other emergency responders, the coroner's office, the prosecutor's office, the school system
2. Health and mental health professionals and agencies
3. Hospitals and emergency room personnel
4. Clergy and spiritual leaders
5. State or local victim assistance or compensation programs and professionals
6. School teachers, counselors and administrators
7. The coroner's office and representatives of funeral directors
8. The prosecutor's office
9. Representatives of the media

B. The Task Force should serve as a networking force with other disaster response groups

Local crisis response groups should plan to deal with crisis by working with other disaster response organizations. Information on the following groups may be helpful.

1. Government

- a. In most states and communities, there is a disaster response plan. It involves how firefighters and law enforcement will provide rescue assistance; how evacuation will take place; and how shelter will be provided.
- b. Most of these plans deal only with the immediate physical needs of a population after a disaster.
- c. Many plans are designed to deal with expected disasters, such as hurricanes in Florida or earthquakes in California. Plans should be designed to deal with the unexpected.
- d. State or federal government provides assistance to disasters when a disaster is declared by the governor or the President. Money assistance is often provided but there is still little funding for crisis intervention. Local crisis group leaders should know how to reach their regional Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) office as well as their state emergency management coordinators. (NOVA can provide this information.)
- e. FEMA is the official agency for federal response to disasters. In most cases funding for assistance on a local level is directed through that agency.

2. Military installations

If military installations are in or near the local jurisdiction, it is important to coordinate with them and attempt to assess what their resources are and how community and military and cooperate effectively to respond to disaster.

3. The Red Cross

- a. Many people expect that the Red Cross will provide all the assistance that is needed in a

- disaster. The Red Cross does an admirable job of responding to disasters; however, it often does not have the resources to provide a complete response to emotional trauma.
- b. Local crisis responders should find out the nature and the scope of disaster response that they can expect from the Red Cross.
4. National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disasters (NVOAD)
 - a. There should be one point of contact designated to receive all communication in the case of catastrophe. That point of contact should have an alternate point of contact if its representatives are not available in disaster. NVOAD serves as that contact point nationally for voluntary organizations including NOVA, the Salvation Army, the Red Cross and others.
 - b. Almost all states have a "VOAD": a coalition of Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster. Local community crisis planners should network with their state VOAD coordinator.

II. Directory of local, state and national resources

- A. A directory should be organized with listing of local, state and national resources** that can be used for assistance during a mass tragedy.
 1. It should be prioritized based on what resources should be contacted within the first twenty-four hours, in the two days, and in the first week.
 2. Each listing should identify key contact people, telephone and facsimile numbers, and the types of help that can be provided. If possible, communities should begin to develop a database with such information such that it can be routinely updated.
- B. The directory will be an aid when additional resources are necessary to the community.**

1. While local crisis response teams may respond well to local traumas such as a child's death or a community arson, massive catastrophes may need outside resources.
2. Outside resources may be needed when:
 - a. There is national interest in the tragedy
 - b. There are multiple deaths or many serious injuries
 - c. There are many caregivers on the crisis response team who are also directly affected by the tragedy;
 - d. It is expected that the tragedy will continue to affect people for a long time;
 - e. Caregivers do not feel ready to do group crisis intervention sessions for the local population because they have not had recent experience
 - f. The media is causing additional grief for the community.

III. An Emergency Fund

A permanent revolving emergency fund should be developed to assist victims and survivors who suffer physical or financial losses or who may need mental health counseling as a result of a traumatic event. It is recommended that the fund solicit annual contributions to establish a community trust account for future emergencies. Establishing a permanent fund will allow communities to ensure that all legal, administrative, and banking requirements are met prior to a mass tragedy and that the community can immediately solicit and process additional donations or contributions. Guidelines for application for emergency funds and methods for disbursement of funds should also be developed to facilitate response to victim needs. Computerization of application and disbursement processes can ensure speedy turnaround of monies.

IV. A Community Crisis Response Team

A. The nature of a CCRT

A team of crisis intervenors who are available twenty-four hours a day to respond to tragedy should be organized.

The team should involve enough people so that eight or ten members can be ready to serve at any time. Such intervenors should receive a minimum of eighty hours of training in community-wide crisis response, participate in regular preparedness exercises, and be familiar with ongoing changes in community demographics, dynamics, and resources.

B. The functions of a CCRT

CCRT's usually fill one or more of four functions at the scene of a community crisis: planning, training, crisis services, and victim advocacy. In order to ensure that they are most effective, there should be a mechanism in place through which designated victim assistance providers are called to the crisis scene as soon as possible after it has happened. To the extent possible, without harming possible investigations, they should be fully briefed on what has happened, who the victims who have died or been injured are, any points of controversy concerning the tragedy, and any particular issues that might face the survivors. It is advisable to allow them to view the scene of the crisis so that they can get a better understanding of the incident.

C. Arrange a training for CCRT volunteers who want to be involved

1. The NOVA training manual might be useful as a basis for the training.
2. Be sure to modify training to meet specific needs of your community.
3. Training programs should include practice exercises in responding to a disaster call as well as conducting individual or group crisis intervention sessions.

D. Screen and contract with CCRT volunteers

1. All volunteers should be screened to assess their capacity to cope with traumatic events; ability to work cooperatively with others; and their ability accommodate sudden change.
2. Contracts detailing responsibilities and duties of volunteers and obligations of the crisis response team should be developed. Issues such as insur-

ance, liability, potential for injury, commitment to training and participation in activities, and so forth should be addressed.

E. Stay in touch with CCRT volunteers

1. Disaster does not happen every day. Sometimes months or even a year or two may separate disaster calls. Keep volunteers involved by monthly meetings and practice group crisis interventions sessions.
2. Quarterly newsletters can help volunteers stay in touch with each other.
3. If a disaster has happened and your team has not been involved, keep volunteers apprised of what is going on.
4. If a disaster has happened and your team has been involved, keep the volunteers who were not on-scene responders apprised of what went on.

V. Response Identification

Badges, uniforms, or other identification materials for all potential responders to the site of mass violence should be designed so that only those designated in the plan are allowed at the site of the tragedy, shelters, or meeting places to work with victims and survivors. Guidelines for authenticating credentials at the site should be developed so that clearance of personnel is expeditious and efficient.

VI. Guidelines for identifying high-risk populations

As a part of preparedness, communities should give thought to what groups within their community be most in need of immediate services as well as methods for providing such services as soon as possible. Such populations may include children, elderly, rescue workers, people with mental or physical disabilities and specific cultural groups. If certain cultural groups within the community are non-English speaking, plans should be made to ensure that emergency translators can be available during a tragedy.

VII. Designation of response facilities

Facilities should be identified that can be used for crisis response coordination, group meetings, training sessions, or special services while responding. Such facilities might include schools, churches, community buildings, training centers, hotel space. Agreements with owners of such facilities to allow their use during emergencies should be in writing.

VIII. Designation of shelters and evacuation procedures

Current emergency plans for many jurisdictions have designations for shelters in case of natural disasters, however such plans may not include pre-designation of alternative sites for schools or workplaces should there be a criminal attack that would necessitate it nor identification of lodging for crisis intervenors or rescue workers who may be asked to travel to the community to assist local care providers. Due to the phenomenon of convergence, it is important for communities to think through how such alternative space will be provided. Concern for how food and clothing will be distributed should be coordinated with the Red Cross and other concerned responders.

Similarly, most jurisdictions have identified evacuation routes in cases of emergency, but may not have alternative transportation routes for crisis workers who need to enter the disaster area. Types of transportation both for evacuation and for needed responders should be identified.

IX. Communication.

Designation of a communication center and equipment for use by crisis responders prior to a tragedy is essential. Constant communication among caregivers is essential as they come in contact with individuals and groups needing assistance. Telephone communication may be difficult without a coordinating facility; cellular communication is often blacked out due to the excessive demands on service. Designate an emergency telephone number that victims and survivors can call for information and assistance. Establish a link through the Internet, and consider using shortwave radio as a backup if all other equipment fails.

X. Dissemination of information

A public information team should be established and trained to help manage media coverage and disseminate information on emotional aftermath of the tragedy. It is useful if the team could be made up of public information representatives from each of the key decision-makers that might be called upon in a tragedy, as well as a crisis response media specialist. Key decision-makers might include: a mayor's office, county commission office, law enforcement agencies, prosecutor's office, and key state officials.

XI. Morgue facilities

Incidents of mass murders have averaged some two each month in the United States where four or more people have died. Three tragedies in recent history have far surpassed that number: the drunk driving crash in Carrolltown, KY, May 14, 1988, which killed 24 children and 3 adults; the mass shooting in Killeen, TX, October 16, 1991, in which 23 people were killed and 14 more injured; and the Oklahoma City bombing, April 19, 1995, where 168 people died and over 500 were injured. Many communities lack the facilities to deal with the bodies of the dead and arrangements need to be considered in advance for how morgues will be established and coroners will be able to accomplish their tasks. Plans for body identification and death notification should be well thought out prior to disaster.

XII. Medical care

Hospitals and medical emergency response care is available in most urban and suburban jurisdictions. However, immediate care may not be available in semi-rural and rural areas. Even in communities where hospital and emergency staff are available, they may not be prepared to cope with the shear numbers of injured people that a crisis involving mass violence can generate. It is essential to identify priority care facilities that are easily accessible from anywhere in the jurisdiction. Staff at such care facilities need special training in dealing with response to mass injuries.