

## **King County Office of Emergency Management Podcasts** ***Disasters: Are you ready?***

### **Disaster myths**

Barb Graff, City of Seattle's Emergency Management Director, spoke for a few minutes at the Partners in Preparedness Conference that was held last week in Tacoma, Washington. One of her topics was disaster myths. Since this was a topic I had on my list of things for future Podcasts, I decided to share with you today the source of her information and what the Top Five Myths are.

This information came from the Center for Bio-security of the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center.

**Myth #1—Disaster are equal opportunity events; they happen in random and quirky, but essentially democratic ways. Hurricanes, outbreaks, heat waves, earthquakes, and chemical spills kill indiscriminately. They do not care “who the victim is.**

One only needs to look at the record of disasters to see who is most impacted. It is the Elderly, low income, minorities and the poorly educated are the people most at risk from disasters.

**Myth #2—Whether people comply with evacuation plans, isolation and quarantine, or other public health and safety orders is strictly a matter of “personal choice.”**

Yes, there are the Harry Truman's in life who willfully disregard warnings. Harry lived in the shadow of Mt. St. Helens and is now buried somewhere near there from the 1980 eruption. But, he is not the norm. People who don't evacuate from a hazard are more likely not to have a car, or enough funds for airfare, or a bus ticket out of town. Their social status is more likely to dictate their ability to evacuate.

**Myth #3—When life and limb are threatened on a mass scale, people panic. They revert to their savage nature, and social norms readily break down.**

According to extensive social research, people rarely fall apart and put themselves first. People may be anxious and fearful, but they do not panic. It is only when people feel trapped, like in a building with too few exits in a fire, that people might panic.

**Myth #4—Centralized, insular decision-making and authority structures among trained professionals guarantee the least harm to people and property. Ordinary civilians and everyday institutions are inadequate to deal with crises.**

Shared problem-solving across sectors and social groups, rather than imposing authority from outside, is more effective tool for handling extreme and/or unanticipated events. For example, in the 1989 Loma Prieta Earthquake in California it was a group of eight Mexican construction workers who saved 49 of the 50 people trapped in rubble.

**Myth #5—Acts of God and Nature are pre-ordained. There is no real way to thwart their ultimate outcome. The same goes for bureaucratic red-tape, another so-called immutable force.**

The outcomes of a disaster, whether so-called natural, technological or terrorist driven are not set in stone or predetermined. Look at New Orleans, God had little to do with where people chose to live or the failure of the levees. We humans are active participants in our futures when it comes to disasters.

I'd add a sixth Myth, that being the issue of looting that some feel comes with every disaster, but I'm out of time and that will have to be another topic for another Podcast.

Fact or fiction, it is up to us as emergency management professionals to share the facts not the myths with decision makers and the general public.