

King County Office of Emergency Management Podcasts

Disasters: Are you ready?

Managing Perceptions

- Is it fair? No, but perception is reality in today's world and so this week's Podcast is about managing perceptions from an emergency management point of view.
- How do you answer the question, "Are we prepared for the next disaster?"
- If you say we are totally ready then the expectation is that the response and coordination thereof should be pretty well flawless.
- If you answer this same question and say, "We are not ready" then your qualifications will come into question and naturally the next questions will be, "And why are you not prepared?"
- Can a local or state-level jurisdiction be totally prepared for every eventuality—I think not. Especially in those areas of the country that could experience a catastrophic disaster.
- Catastrophes come in many forms. Along the Southern Gulf Coast and the Eastern Seaboard it could be hurricanes, on the West Coastal communities it could be a tsunami, and definitely there are some very high risk areas of our nation that could experience a devastating earthquake. These include California, Oregon, Washington State and then there is the New Madras Fault zone in the central mid-west. Even New York has an earthquake risk to go with their terrorism risks.
- So, to say that you are completely prepared for any eventuality is to in my belief, is wrong. It gives people a false impression and false perception.
- If government is totally prepared, then why would businesses and individuals need to personally prepared for a disaster. The

image of FEMA riding in on a white horse to save the day was certainly tainted by the Katrina fiasco, but still there is this national perception that someone will send a helicopter to pick me off my roof and save my life, repair my home and make me 100% whole following a disaster.

- As we professional emergency managers know—It just is not true!
- If you say that you are totally prepared as an emergency management agency, then why is it that you would need any additional resources. Your budget should be adequate and perhaps there might even be a little fat there that can be cut.
- So how you describe your preparedness levels is critical to the way in which people and organizations will perceive your organization.
- Who are the people and organizations you are concerned about: Elected officials, the media, your internal departments, outside agencies, and the general public
- Sometimes I will say, “We are working diligently with our regional partners to forge as strong a preparedness posture as budget resources will allow.
- Another message is that we will never be totally prepared until every individual and family is prepared.
- To counter the notion that it is up to government to take care of “everything” at the time of a disaster—it is important to be up front with people on how many resources are really available.
- The example of one typical suburban city here in the Puget Sound is a case in point. On any average day/shift they have 12-15 fire and police available to support a population of 40K. This may be enough for day to day “emergencies” but woefully inadequate for any disaster—regional or not.

- So, it is up to all of us to bring some reality to our preparedness levels and manage those perceptions. And, if you think you have a hard nut to crack, what if you were FEMA?