

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

Raking rocks

If you have not figured it out yet, I love analogies and metaphors. This week's Podcast is all about raking rocks.

When our family moved to Western Washington 19 years ago we purchased a brand new home. Everything was in place except for the landscaping.

How anything grows in this area of the country is anyone's guess. I suppose it is the constant supply of rain that makes the difference. Our yard had been scraped bare. There was no topsoil to begin with, just glacial till, which I call "South Hill Potatoes." Or, others would call rocks. Most smaller than a cantaloupe, many the size of potatoes of all types, all held together with some form of sandy soil.

Our son, Elliot, then age 14 wanted to get started on the yard, so I sent him out to rake the rocks into piles. After about two hours he came back inside all discouraged about the task. He had raked rocks and raked rocks with little to show for his effort.

This issue was he had raked a few here and there, but with no consistent pattern to his labors. He could not see where he was making a difference.

Doesn't that seem like how it feels to us in the business of emergency management? Most offices are small affairs with only one or two people to do the work, or even many tasked with the job as either just a portion of their time, or as an additional duty. We work hard, but when we look for some measure of success or bench mark of progress, we can see no visible progress.

Back to my raking rocks story. What I did with Elliot was we went to the side yard, much smaller than the entire back yard and I said let's just rake up the rocks in this area. It maybe took an hour, if that, to do the work. Then I said, let's stop, step back and admire what we've

accomplished. Let the eye take in that some progress has been made in one defined area. It took us several more days of “rock raking” to finish the yard, but we did one section at a time, breaking up the bigger areas into smaller ones and always stepping back to look at what we’d accomplished before moving on to the next section of the yard. These were the small victories along the way that we used to sustain us in the larger mission of removing rocks from the yard.

Raking rocks can feel amazing similar to the task of being an emergency manager. Not enough staff, funding, and time to do everything that needs to be done to prepare our communities for the next disaster. On a day to day basis it can be mentally and physically overwhelming to us.

My suggestion is like in raking rocks, to set some smaller, manageable goals for yourself. You can’t be expected to do it all. If you do spread yourself out thinly across all the areas of emergency management you will no doubt accomplish little that is visible or measurable.

So then, what do you work on? The expectation is that first you will have a plan, and that you will be able to respond during times of disaster. I’d start there. Don’t expect perfection, nor try to accomplish it. An 80% solution is normally adequate to set a standard for what needs to be done. Again, you don’t have the resources to get to 100% in each program area.

After you do accomplish something, take time to look back and admire your handy work. It will invigorate you for the next section of your program that you endeavor to make progress in. Happy raking!