

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

Social behavior during disasters

I think we've got a problem, or at least I think I've got a problem.

In emergency management we do a lot of planning. We plan for hazard specific issues, we try to look at specific needs like evacuation planning, and even our disaster response procedures are an aspect of planning.

But, what about how the people will react? By people, I mean the citizens who live in our jurisdictions, the workers who commute to our fair cities, and the tourists and other "passer throughs" who are perhaps, as is the case with King County just going north or south along I-5, headed for Canada or Oregon and places south.

What got me thinking about this was a recent Harvard study that looked at how people would behave in a flu pandemic. In the study they found that, "one in four adults said there was no one to care for them at home if they got sick, another one in four couldn't afford to miss work for even a week, and one in five said their bosses would insist they come to work even if they were sick and contagious."

How then does this jive with our plans to enact voluntary quarantine as specified in the latest CDC flu mitigation planning guidance? What about our plans to enact social distancing by having people stay home from work if they are non-essential? Will employers who are trying to stay in business be telling workers, "damn the social distancing get in here, or you won't have a job to come back to."

My previous thinking on this issue of what will people do was centered on issuing warnings. For a warning to be effective the hazard must be detected, the warning disseminated and then have people comply. We have more control over the first to elements of detection and issuance of the warning, but little control over people complying with either evacuation orders, sheltering in place, or other such measures designed to keep them safe.

From Katrina and other disasters we've learned that if people can't take their pets with them, then there is a huge incentive not to evacuate, even if it means putting them and their families at risk. Also, if people are warned, but don't see others heeding this warning and complying, they are more likely not to comply and justify it by their thinking that they want to be part of the norm and not function outside the boundaries of what their peers are doing.

It is not enough for us to sit in our offices at our keyboards doing planning, but we need to get out and somehow "test" what we believe will work with "real people." Our interface with the social scientists in colleges and universities needs to become stronger so that we don't make false assumptions, since we know what assumptions will do at the time of the event. Tough to do, yes! Impossible task, no. Time to do work like this is not readily available, but absolutely necessary.