

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

Virginia Tech Shooting

As I write this Podcast, it is only 1:30 PM on Monday, April 16, 2007, the day of the Virginia Tech shootings. Information is incomplete. The death toll is still yet to be determined and the impact to shatter lives will be measured in lifetimes, not in how long the media covers this story.

I had another Podcast all ready to go for this week, but decided to postpone it for another time. Unfortunately, it is events like today's, and other disasters that provide teachable moments, windows of opportunity for us emergency managers and other responders to get our message across.

Undoubtedly you will hear phrases like, "I didn't think it could happen here." Or, "It was like we were in some surreal experience," when the magnitude of what just happened wasn't sinking in. But it did happen again; in a place that will now be remember for this day in history.

Unfortunately for us Americans, living in a free and open society these events seem to continue, and this is only the latest in a series of shootings at schools and universities. I won't go into the whole gun control issue, but I recall a shooting in England, at an elementary school that also had tragic results. This, in a country with much stricter gun control than we can imagine ever being allowed in our country.

As noted in my notes from the Partners in Preparedness Conference and detailed in this week's Eric's Corner Blog update, citizen's attention spans rarely last more than two years following disasters, and politicians move on to new topics within six months.

So, what can you do? First, as parents, grandparents and neighbors, demand that the schools in your community take student safety seriously.

Believe it or not, locked doors even though they are an everyday inconvenience to staff, can serve as a deterrent to someone bent on doing harm. Typically these are emotional crimes and the inability to access a building can be a simple solution to keeping harm from being done. Staff challenging strangers who are not wearing a badge is another simple deterrent.

Imagine that a shooting is ongoing at the school where you work or your children attend. What are the procedures that will be followed? Do you lock down? Do you evacuate or pull the shades, and where do you reunite students with their parents?

Most schools now have disaster plans on their shelves. The question you should ask is “when were these last updated?”, and “when were they exercised by the staff and students?” Plans can quickly become “shelf art” when no one knows what is in them and the procedures have not been exercised.

People remember what they do, not what they read, or what they are told. So, practice, practice, practice. Use different scenarios. We have plenty of hazards to contend with. Sheltering in place for a hazardous materials release, earthquakes and yes armed intruders provide plenty of fodder for these practice sessions. Then, revise your plans based on what you learn from the exercises.

For instance, when you have a substitute teacher in a building (not that it ever happens in your school) how is that person suppose to know what to do?

Preparedness is not really complicated. Simple steps taken collectively by our school community and the first responders and elected officials who support them can make a real difference in the community we call home.

In the days ahead, let's grieve for those impacted by this terrible event, but then let's also resolve to forge a better and safer tomorrow for where we live and work, and for the people we love.