2.6: Involving Stakeholders in Emergency Management

Emergency management is a necessary function of local governments that is supported by state and federal governments. Although it provides much needed assistance after disasters, good emergency management practices can raise opposition during other phases of the disaster cycle. Although it would seem that emergency management is an obvious public good, there are always some forces that resist any policy or set of policies. Emergency managers must identify the sources of this resistance in order to be effective in changing their communities’ priorities regarding emergency management.

What features of emergency management can arouse opposition, and why? Disaster relief seldom arouses opposition because it is a *distributive policy* that benefits a “deserving” population and has no identifiable losers. It is thus difficult to oppose disaster relief without appearing to be uncaring and unsympathetic. Not all emergency management policies are distributive, however. Mitigation practices such as land use controls and building codes are examples of *regulatory policy*, which imposes restrictions and limits on behavior and often imposes associated costs. Such policies frequently generate conflict because there are obvious losers. For example, a prohibition against construction on barrier islands produces benefits that are broadly distributed across the entire community when it is protected from hurricane damage. However, these benefits seem speculative at the time the policy is adopted and, in any event, would probably involve a relatively small amount of money for each household protected by the policy. Thus, few of those who benefit are likely to fight for adoption of the policy. By contrast, the “losses” (i.e., the potential profits that would have otherwise been reaped, known as *opportunity costs*) are concentrated among a few influential individuals who are, thus, highly motivated to fight against adoption of the policy. This situation leads to an increase in conflict that emergency managers must learn to manage in order to ensure the adoption and implementation of effective mitigation policies.

In order to develop an effective emergency management system, the local emergency manager must involve the relevant stakeholders in the process. Stakeholder involvement requires coordinating the various groups as emergency operations and recovery operations plans are drawn up and exercised, as well as during an event. Most of an
emergency manager’s work should be conducted between disasters and behind the scenes, as he or she seeks to facilitate relationships among the stakeholders that will strengthen horizontal linkages within the community and vertical linkages of the community with outside resources in higher levels of government (Berke, et al., 1993). These strong linkages will improve the flow of information, services, and supplies during a disaster. Nonetheless, emergency managers should not work in silence or in isolation. Such a mode of operation produces inadequate plans that are not used during disasters. The only way to produce usable emergency operations and recovery operations plans is through consultation and cooperation with all the relevant agencies—taking their needs, resources, and missions into account. Similarly, good emergency management policies are produced through consultation. How is this to be done?

One important way to involve stakeholders is to work with other government agencies. As will be discussed in the next chapter, Local Emergency Management Committees (LEMCs) can become valuable forums for input from other agencies on the emergency management process. Many of these were originally formed for the specific purpose of improving community right-to-know and preparedness for toxic chemical emergencies, but some have expanded their scope to address chemical emergency management and all of them can contribute to the management of other environmental hazards faced by their communities (Lindell & Perry, 2004). Such committees will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

Another important way to involve stakeholders is to work with citizens’ groups. Fostering citizen involvement requires emergency managers to initiate contacts throughout the community. Since it goes almost without saying that budget and staff constraints limit the extent to which such initiatives may be taken, the following paragraphs will sketch a few techniques that can be used with modest resource expenditures. To be successful, the process of community participation must be carefully organized and managed (Glass, 1979). Least likely to be effective would be to simply invite community residents to comment on local disaster plans in the absence of a structured program for presenting the plans and an orderly mechanism for evaluating and accommodating comments. When considering how to involve citizens in emergency planning, one must address four distinct tasks. First, affected residents must be notified that planning is underway and informed who is responsible for planning. In some cases, emergency managers can identify which residents will be affected by their functional relationship to a policy. For example, all homeowners in a watershed are relevant stakeholders for flood hazard management. Second, information must be provided to citizens that describes (as free from technical terminology as is reasonably achievable) the nature and severity of local hazards, the types of mitigation actions that are being taken to reduce these hazards, the assessment actions that are being taken to monitor the hazard, and the types of protective actions that can be implemented in an emergency. Educational contacts include hazard awareness programs intended to familiarize the public with the nature of the hazards to which the community is vulnerable and the basic provisions of the emergency plan. As a method of community involvement, educational contacts have the advantage of reaching large audiences at moderate cost, and the disadvantage of using essentially one-way communication. The emergency services officials get their message out but, except in rare circumstances, the audience cannot respond.

Third, techniques for information exchange involve seeking feedback from citizens, especially about specific planning efforts and emergency management policies that might be used in the operations phase. Fourth, citizen feedback must be incorporated into the preparedness process through support-building in which one seeks to enhance the credibility of the plan (and of the planners and response personnel) in the eyes of the public. Achievement of these information exchange and support-building objectives requires two-way communication, especially direct personal contact.
Specific Techniques for Community Involvement

One very simple technique for obtaining feedback and support requires nothing more than for emergency management staff to “talk up” their work to friends, relatives and neighbors—describing community hazard vulnerability and emergency plans in general terms—and seeking informal reactions. Such grassroots interaction can, of course, be extremely limited in its access to ethnic groups and socioeconomic classes if there are no emergency planners that are members of these groups. In light of their negligible cost, however, the long run value of such exchanges should not be underestimated.

A second technique for interacting with the public involves setting up a “hazard hotline” telephone number. This hotline need not be any more elaborate than advertising an office phone number and training existing staff to handle inquiries or using a recorded message. Citizens could be informed of the information line, perhaps via a mailed brochure, and staff could develop a procedure for promptly responding to questions. This type of phone-in arrangement is quite useful in that it serves to gather and disseminate information on a routine basis and has the potential to be expanded into a rumor control or warning confirmation line during times of disaster (Perry, 1982). Over the course of the year, one would not anticipate a large volume of inquiries. Such nonemergency calls probably would tax neither the ability of staff to respond nor the capability of telephone equipment to handle calls.

A third technique for communicating with the public is to establish direct contact with citizens in the community. Such contact is often achieved by speaking at meetings of school, neighborhood, and community organizations. Neighborhood meetings can deal with very specific and timely topics; they can reach otherwise difficult to contact groups; and they provide both face-to-face contact and an opportunity for dialogue. For example, a community or neighborhood club might welcome a speaker who describes how to prepare for a hurricane at the start of the most vulnerable season. Emergency managers could explain to residents how warnings will be disseminated, when and how to shelter in-place, what roads will serve as evacuation routes, and what procedures will be used to secure evacuated areas. Such meetings also afford an opportunity to ask citizens if they have a family emergency plan that provides for what to do if the family is separated when an evacuation is initiated, where the family plans to seek refuge, what they will pack to take with them, what vehicles will be taken and what route will be followed. Other questions that can be asked include their willingness to use services provided by authorities, such as warning confirmation numbers, public transportation, willingness to use a family message center, concerns about looting, and willingness to participate in emergency response support activities such as citizen patrols. Discussions at this level of specificity can not only provide emergency managers with an assessment of what the members of their community think about such issues, but also stimulate citizen thought, discussion, and preparedness for emergency response. Once again, it is important to remember that neighborhood groups and community organizations tend to have fairly homogeneous memberships. In order to communicate with all segments of the community, one must make contacts with many different types of groups.

Finally, sustained citizen involvement can be achieved by creating citizen advisory committees and citizen cadre opportunities. Advisory committees are usually small in size and attached to departments to provide general guidance, but they can be used for such specific topics as emergency planning. When an advisory committee is created, a significant commitment of time is usually required. At a minimum, officials must devise a schedule for periodic (monthly or bimonthly) meetings and an acceptable mechanism for soliciting information, evaluating it, and then either using it or explaining why it was not used. A properly administered citizen advisory committee can provide timely and accurate information on specific points of planning interest and can also mobilize strong support within the community.
While citizen advisory committees tend to involve people in the administrative aspects of emergency planning, citizen cadre opportunities tend to involve volunteers in selected operational duties. Citizen cadres require some degree of training and usually function as auxiliary personnel acting in support of regular emergency personnel. Citizen cadres have been used to fill sandbags on flood levees, direct traffic, serve on search and rescue teams, provide security in evacuated areas, and help administer family locator services. Citizen cadres incorporate volunteers into the emergency response process in ways that are commensurate with the skills they bring to the emergency response organization. Such auxiliaries can be used to ease the tremendous demands placed on regular personnel during the emergency response phase. Moreover, appropriately trained volunteers are familiar with emergency procedures and the logic behind them. Such persons can build support within the community by explaining emergency procedures to others.

In summary, the purposes of these techniques are to allow emergency authorities to better anticipate the reaction of their community in a disaster and to familiarize citizens with emergency response planning and operations. It might not be necessary or cost-effective to use all of these techniques in the same community. They are identified here as alternative programs from which to select the ones that best meet the emergency preparedness needs and budgetary constraints of a given community.

Forming coalitions with groups interested in related issues can be a valuable strategy for an emergency manager. Emergency managers can join other groups to ensure the adoption of policies that perform multiple functions and, thus, have a larger base on which to build support for emergency management. For example, environmental groups are interested in preserving wetlands or riverine corridors for their aesthetic value and other reasons. These same lands can perform valuable hazard mitigation functions by absorbing the effects of floods or avoiding an increase in community vulnerability by keeping housing out of a floodplain. Emergency managers can be more effective in an increasingly competitive political climate if they work collaboratively with other groups to promote policies meeting the objectives of multiple stakeholder groups.

Sources of State and Federal Assistance

State and federal emergency management agencies are extremely valuable sources of assistance to local emergency managers. These agencies can provide technical guidance on hazard/vulnerability analyses, hazard mitigation, emergency preparedness, emergency response, and disaster recovery. Of course, the types and quantities of state assistance vary from one state to another, so it is important for local emergency managers to contact their state emergency management agencies and to join their state emergency management associations to obtain information about the available resources.

Emergency managers can also take advantage of resources from other states. In a disaster, they rely on the Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC, see www.emacweb.org), which was established in 1996 by an act of Congress. Since then, EMAC has been joined by all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the US Virgin Islands. EMAC facilitates direct mutual aid from one state to another in response to any type of disaster. Because they are located closer to the impact area, these resources from neighboring states are likely to reach a stricken area faster than federal resources. Like other mutual aid agreements, EMAC provides for financial reimbursement, legal liability, and workers’ compensation for any injuries incurred during the disaster response. In addition, EMAC recognizes the credentials of out-of-state emergency responders.

An EMAC operation begins when the governor a requesting state declares a state of emergency. An authorized
representative who has the legal power to commit the requesting state’s funds asks for assistance from the EMAC National Coordination Group. This unit is the nationwide point of contact for activating EMAC in response to a declared emergency.

An A-team deploys to the requesting state where it conducts a needs assessment, alerts EMAC members about these needs, and receives offers from assisting states that provide resources under the compact. The requesting state and the assisting state negotiate the availability and cost of requested resources and, after reaching agreement, dispatch the requested resources.

To facilitate this process, each EMAC member state has a designated contact who is an expert on EMAC procedures. There also is an EMAC National Coordinating Team that can be activated by DHS/FEMA to coordinate federal response and recovery operations. This team deploys to the National Response Coordinating Center, located in Washington, D.C., so it can help to coordinate with any EMAC teams responding to the incident scene. The EMAC National Coordinating Team can be complemented by an EMAC Regional Coordinating Team, which mobilizes at a Regional Coordination Center to coordinate regional response and recovery operations. From there, the EMAC Regional Coordinating Team coordinates with any EMAC field units providing assistance at the incident scene.

There is also an enormous amount of assistance available from federal agencies. Many types of technical and financial assistance are addressed throughout the remainder of this text, particularly the chapters on hazard/vulnerability analysis, hazard mitigation, emergency preparedness, emergency response, and disaster recovery. There is an almost bewildering variety of technical support that the federal government makes available during disasters. The appendix to this chapter lists the emergency support functions (ESFs) into which federal emergency response activities are organized and the assignments of federal agencies to ESFs.