

Are We Ready Yet to Deal with Large-Scale Disasters?

By Irwin Redlener, MD

This year marks the fifth anniversary of the 9/11 terror attack, and the first anniversary of Hurricane Katrina and subsequent flooding of New Orleans. While the focus on both of these events was appropriate on many levels, there is no question that the intense politics of a mid-term Congressional election season clouded much of the objectivity needed to accurately assess how the country is doing and where we stand with respect to our ability to prevent, mitigate and respond to disasters. Still the two anniversaries gave ample opportunity to reflect on large-scale disasters in two very different categories: terrorism and a natural weather-based catastrophe.

There has been some progress in certain key areas. For instance, our ability to disrupt the financial networks of terror groups is very good. And communications among federal and international anti-terror agencies is much improved.

What seems to be abundantly clear, however, is that the United States is still not where it should be in terms of the general response capacity following major disasters, whatever their cause. Part of the problem is unchanged from last year. We will have not defined what we mean by "prepared" whether we are speaking of this concept on a national or local level. Not that this is in any way easy. The concept of preparedness or readiness is understood to be arbitrarily determined, so that it is always possible to under- or over- prepare for future disasters. No two major events are exactly the same and the consequences can encompass a relatively wide range.

That is precisely why it is essential for appropriate officials - particularly on the federal level - to establish criteria for what it means for the nation and for communities to be sufficiently prepared. That definition should take into account the major threats that the U.S. faces, guidelines for appropriate planning on a regional basis and, ultimately, an arbitrary decision with respect to much will be spent on preparing.

Planning for an avian flu pandemic is a good case in point. Should the plan consider the possibility of severe pandemic, such as was seen in 1918? That disaster killed millions of Americans and somewhere between 30 and 50 million people world-wide. Or should the planning be based on a less severe situation? Local, community level planning for this type of disaster should be based on (a) consensus-derived recommendations by national experts in the field and (b) a federally prepared "planning roadmap," accompanied by sufficient funding, to allow for local planning and implementation. The process, of course, must balance the risk and consequences of the event against the costs of preparing. That in turn needs to be measured against the potential of consuming resources which might well be put to other uses.

The same case could be made for how to approach the planning for a major terror attack utilizing nuclear explosives. Is it certain that such a dreaded weapon will be used on an American city? Clearly, not. Is it possible? Assuredly, yes. The question is how does one plan for a catastrophic event that could kill 100,000 to 200,000 or more people in a city, injuring perhaps multiples of that number?

Appropriate planning for large scale events should include federal leadership, strong scientifically-based data about the type and range of consequences and an emphasis on trying to imagine every manner of direct, indirect or derivative impact that might be seen. For instance, protocols should be in place now to guide and deliver the message of whether (and when) to evacuate, or shelter-in-place, following detonation of a nuclear device. If a large portion of an

American city is devastated by such a weapon, many of the hospitals and medical facilities would be lost. What are the back-up plans to make sure that medical facilities are in place beyond the major impact zone? Even if such discussions are in place on a federal level, precious little has been released locally where it would be needed in a time of true emergency.

Besides the current inadequacy of basic planning, expectations have not been met in other important areas, such as:

- * Port security is still, at best, a work in progress. Far fewer than 10% of U.S. in-bound shipping containers are inspected. The technology exists to do much more, but it is not purchased or implemented.
- * Our borders are not secure. The northern and southern borders of the United States, comprising some 7,500 miles remain extraordinarily porous.
- * Cargo shipments on passenger airplanes are largely unscreened, posing an enormous danger to jetliners.
- * Surface to air missile protection has not yet been implemented on passenger jets.
- * Radio interoperability among first responder agencies is still inadequate in almost every community in the United States. This is particularly disconcerting, since the failure of communications was responsible for the death of many New York firefighters who were trapped in the collapsing Twin Towers on 9/11.

Regarding natural disasters, although Michael Brown's replacement, the highly praised new chief of FEMA is qualified and experienced for that position, the agency remains understaffed and is caught in the bureaucracy of the Department of Homeland Security, leaving it unclear how the agency would perform in the event of another Katrina-like storm.

Although clearly we are not where we expected to be long after these events, this is not meant to indicate that there is major concern about the management of the "typical" disaster that occurs almost every day, somewhere in the nation. Whether a tornado touchdown, a low-level hurricane, mild earthquake tremors, the first responder networks are very capable of managing much of the consequences. And relatively simple terrorist plots are foiled more than we hear on the news. The real concern is what happens when a megadisaster occurs? Our experience tells us that the larger the disaster, the less we can depend upon an appropriate response from federal agencies.

The bottom line is that saving lives is key - and precisely what preparing is all about. This fourth edition of The Grey House Directory of Homeland Security provides an important piece of the preparedness puzzle, with where to call and who to talk to, whether you want to contact the Directory of Emergency Preparedness in your state, or find a supplier for employee ID cards.

Irwin Redlener, MD is the Director of the National Center for Disaster Preparedness and author of Americans at Risk: Why We Are Not Prepared for Megadisaster and What We Can Do Now (Knopf), which defines megadisaster as a catastrophic event which overwhelms local capacity to maximize survivors, care for the injured, protect key infrastructure or prevent social disorder.