

# **IAEM Disaster Zone Column**

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### **Disasters are no time for Pride**

Why do people have trouble asking for or accepting help in a disaster?

I've often pondered the question above. In my observation, it has happened time and again when people are overwhelmed with a disaster response, yet they wait to ask for assistance. In this column we'll explore some of the reasons and the impacts of waiting too long to ask for help.

There are several factors that cause people and organizations to try to "go it alone" when responding to disasters. The first one being that many disasters do not start with a "bang" but can build slowly over time. They start out as emergencies and they just happen to get bigger and bigger. Another element that factors into when organizations ask for help is the size of the organization itself. Larger entities are not used to asking for or receiving help. They typically have all the resources they need to respond to events, even extremely large ones with organic people and equipment. These types of organizations are accustomed to aiding other jurisdictions or disciplines. They usually do not have a history of asking for help from smaller jurisdictions.

One of the immediate factors that comes into play in delaying a request for assistance is that the length of the event and how long it will continue is not anticipated. Most emergencies last no longer than one operational period, 8-12 hours. The initial "size-up" for an incident may not consider that this event will go more than 12 hours or even multiple days.

Fire and law enforcement typically have more depth than emergency managers or public information officers (PIOs). Speaking of PIOs, they usually operate as "Lone Rangers" doing everything associated with an incident. For example, gathering information on the incident, talking directly to the media, taking phone calls from the media, creating social media postings and perhaps even generating a news release.

I specifically recall the Seattle Aurora Bridge Bus Shooting. It happened the day after Thanksgiving (a holiday of course) when the bus driver was shot, and the bus plunged over the Aurora Bridge in Seattle eventually hitting and landing in an apartment complex courtyard. The dramatic nature of the incident attracted national and international media attention. The PIO for METRO Transit that owned and operated the bus was on scene responding to the event. The accident scene was cleared, and everything was back to normal within a few hours—right? No, the driver was killed in the accident so there was a long on-site investigation, and then a memorial service to be planned. A few days after the funeral it was discovered that one of the victims was HIV positive and there had been a variety of responders on scene, to include potential citizens helping, with no protective measures being taken. In the end, this incident went on for more than two

weeks with all the institutional knowledge contained in one person. More on the implications of this type of single source response later in this column.

Another trait I've observed is that people who see the need for help make an offer, and it is rejected. I call this behavior, "Throwing a rope to a drowning man, and to him or her, it looks like a snake." They think it will be much easier to "gut it out" rather than take time to bring others up to speed on the incident or deal with them asking too many questions, etc. The incident, after all, will be over soon!

Pride can get in the way of asking for or accepting help. "This is my jurisdiction/agency and I'm the one who is supposed to do the work. Having help from the outside means I am not competent or energetic enough to do the work myself. I'm a failure if I need help! Outsiders may criticize me and my organization or the response as being indicative of us not being ready for an event like this one." This is of course all negative thinking.

The result of all the above is that institutional knowledge of an event many times resides in one person's memory, i.e. the bus incident above. You are 48-72 hours into an incident with little or no sleep and your brain is fried, and the body is losing its capacity to function effectively. In the Army I've observed leaders become blubbing idiots due to a lack of sleep. Decision making is degraded, and the once competent person is just hanging on—working tremendously hard, but inefficiently in doing their job.

A few suggestions for you: Early in an incident, determine if the length of the event may extend beyond one operational period. Alert people to become a second shift to come in and replace you or a function. Change your thinking about being totally self-sufficient. If you knew it was going to be a huge disaster, you likely would have asked for help immediately. Practice receiving that help and transferring operational control in shifts to other people—during smaller events.

In reality, you have to be the person to say "Help!" The earlier in an incident that you do so, the better it will go, for you and your organization.

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