

Private, government concerns largely the same

People with disabilities article raises questions for planners

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The Washington Times carried an Audrey Hudson article headlined "Disaster plans leave disabled behind; Report finds little progress since Katrina"

The article, at <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/aug/12/disaster-plans-leave-disabled-behind/>, synthesizes a 500-page report prepared by the National Council on Disability.

The article's bottom line is that while there has been some progress in accommodating people with disabilities, there remains much to be done.

Two things caught my attention

Thing 1: Lack of inclusion of the "clients" in the planning process

Thing 2: A need for full integration of government (at all levels), private industry, and individuals in planning and implementation of actions before, during, and after an event.

Thing 1: No one asked

"Although some improvement in this area is evident, catastrophic events such as Hurricane Katrina and the California wildfires exposed the gaps that still exist in many emergency plans and preparedness efforts," said the report, a copy of which was obtained by The Washington Times.

"These events reinforce the need for additional action to protect the lives of people with disabilities against the destructive nature of disasters."

With the exception of a single recent simulated-emergency exercise by the Department of Homeland Security, government agencies continue to ignore the disabled population when crafting emergency plans, the report said, repeatedly stressing the need for planners to consult directly with those who are disabled to better understand their particular needs during a disaster.

"Disabilities' generally were placed into one large category, without consideration for the unique needs associated with each type of disability. Emergency planners often decided what people with disabilities needed without consulting those people," the report said. "This practice further alienated people with disabilities and increased their vulnerability during disasters."

A separate report from the Special Needs Assessment for Katrina Evacuees (SNAKE) project found that many emergency shelter planners had little interaction with the disabled community before Hurricane Katrina.

"Many of the problems incurred by emergency personnel during the response phase of a disaster could be addressed if planning included people with disabilities. It is imperative that people with disabilities have a voice and be at the table for all stages of disaster planning," the National Council on Disability's report said.

I have, on too many occasions, had to talk to people who either had been ignored or lied to by others before me.

I once had a boss, a VP of MIS, who told me that he didn't care WHAT his clients wanted or needed; he would decide what they would get from InfoTech. He made his attitude clear to his clients. When I came along and asked "What do you need from MIS?" most people either passed on my question or answered with the caveat: "What's it matter, anyway?"

As a reporter, I once told a group of angry people that I would air their grievances in the local daily; they replied that they had heard THAT before. In the end, my effort failed to convince the editors to run the comments I recorded. I became one of "them."

It's often difficult to clean up someone else's mess, especially when it has been accumulating over time, but it must be done.

Whether it is working to break down the walls of distrust built by the disabled community or restoring faith in IT, we - risk management professionals - have to undertake the task if we have any hope of helping our clients survive an event and of sleeping soundly at night.

For all that, vendors - be they governments or MIS or whatever - and clients must develop a trust in the other. It is my understanding that people were told to evacuate New Orleans prior to Katrina's arrival and that many elected to remain in town.

I also understand that for many, there was no way to evacuate.

An aside: Should destitution be included as a "disability?" Often it goes hand-in-glove with other disadvantages, but sometimes - as in trying to find bus fare to evacuate - it is the primary disability.

There is a "flip side" to this issue. Persons with disabilities - permanent or temporary, of any type - must tell their potential rescuers. No one should expect emergency personnel to go door-to-door as a Katrina-type event nears, asking "do you need assistance?" Given HIPAA restrictions and the *perception* of HIPAA restrictions, **it is incumbent upon the beneficiaries of the emergency assistance to advise their potential rescuers of their condition.** The agencies receiving this information have an equal obligation to safeguard the data.

Thing 2: Lack of coordination

Coordination of activities at all levels is crucial.

Along with coordination is a requirement to know who really is in charge.

In the case of Katrina, who should have run the show? The mayor's office? The state's emergency management people, or the federal's FEMA?

No matter what agency is running the operation, one person (and that person's alternate) needs to be in absolute command BUT that person likewise must listen to, and carefully consider, the advice of others at all government levels and appropriate non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as well.

People were left behind when Katrina hit. Some lacked the resources to evacuate.

Some might have evacuated if the means were available.

Some tried to evacuate but ended up stalled in miles-long highway congestion.

Had coordination with highway officials, the quasi-governmental railroad (Amtrak), private transportation (buses, airplanes, perhaps even freight rail) been in place, more people could have moved rapidly. Keeping personal vehicles off the road allows a better flow of (relative) high-capacity vehicles (e.g., buses). Commercial buses could be supplemented with school buses - assuming the school board or whatever agency "owns" the school buses was involved in the planning.

The planning and coordination must be in place before an event.

For example, New Orleans is served by several rail lines. Amtrak runs east-west, but there is a north-south line as well. In Katrina's case, Amtrak trains were unable to reach Crescent City from the east, but had an evacuation been planned and coordinated, Amtrak might have sent coaches to town from the west or from the north. Box cars could be used to transport non-ambulatory patients - not fancy, but riding in a box car is better than the alternative (possible death).

Granted, most risk management practitioners work in the private sector and we really don't have any more input into local, state, or federal planning than Joe and Jane Citizen.

For all that, we can - at our level - learn the lessons of Katrina and apply them to our own "world." If we work for an organization that has resources appropriate to mitigate an event, we could suggest that management make these resources known and available to government and NGOs; it at least would be good PR for the organization.

Private risk management/business continuity is in many ways similar to government emergency management. In both cases, the primary concern must be protecting life. Both government and organization management then should work to save the organization; the business because it IS the business; the government because the business is the tax base.