National Preparedness Month – September 2008:

PARTNER FOR PREPAREDNESS:
Community Based Action Plans: Best Practices
By John Cavanagh and Anne Malia

School principals, administrators, board members, parents, teachers, and anyone with input into the operational policies of a school, take note: A community can only truly be prepared for an emergency when *all* citizens are involved in the disaster planning process. It takes cooperation between the various members of a community to develop a thorough plan that efficiently spells out the responsibilities of each sector of the population. In order for a community's emergency plan to function properly, it must depend on the participation of households, schools, businesses, the police and fire departments, and other local organizations. People are beginning to realize that it is essential not only to plan for your family, but also to make sure that the entire community will be prepared for a disaster. After all, should an emergency occur, the more people working together under an organized plan, the more effective the community's response effort will be.

The city of Spokane, Washington, a leader in community based action plans, offers five tips that can help to build preparedness into the workings of a community. Those in charge of educational facilities should pay particular attention to the logistics of these suggestions. Schools exist at the very heart of a community and stand to benefit greatly from communication and cooperation with other key institutions within a community, especially in preparing for an emergency.

Community Based Preparedness Tips:

1. Establish Relationships with Emergency Responders. It is especially important to have an open communication network with emergency workers such as paramedics, the police and fire departments, and EMS. Each of these agencies should be familiar with the community's action plan. Take the time to get to know your emergency responders personally, along with their strengths, weaknesses and areas of specialized knowledge. A common mistake that many

communities make is having only the Police Chief or the Fire Chief be familiar with the emergency plan, thus depending on him or her to direct the rest of the crew. In unexpected emergency situations, this cannot always be counted on. Also, a one-on-one familiarity establishes a "comfort level" that will be helpful when it comes time to implement your emergency plan.

2. Regular Review of Emergency Plans. Many times, an emergency plan is created and then forgotten about, making it essentially useless as time goes on. Communities should set an annual date to review their emergency plan. It is important to regularly review emergency plans, because situations change: People with designated positions retire and are replaced, contact information needs to be updated, and availability of new resources or loss of old ones must be accounted for. Current information is absolutely essential to emergency planning. A regular review also keeps emergency plans fresh in people's minds, so that they will not be forgotten, even at a time of great stress.

3. Transportation and Shelter. These are two of the most important factors in an emergency: a safe place for people to stay, and a safe way to get people there. Considerations for transportation and shelter must be planned out in detail and updated constantly. Be in touch with local bus companies to make sure that they can be on hand if large numbers of people need to be transported. Communicate with other schools or large municipal buildings that can be used as shelters. Make sure that *all* staff members of these buildings—from head administrators to custodial staff—are familiar with the procedures to be followed in an emergency. Specific plans should be in place for each emergency situation, and there should be backup plans for each in case something goes wrong. A key element to remember for every emergency plan: Expect the unexpected.

4. Reach Beyond Your Own Community. Only positive results can come from sharing resources and experiences with other communities. The best way to learn is to network with other communities that are also concerned about emergency preparedness. Invite another town's officials to your emergency preparedness meetings; you should make sure that neighboring towns are prepared too, as the same disaster may affect the entire area! Similarly, try to

meet with officials from communities that have already experienced disasters or emergency situations, and get their advice on forming an emergency plan. Surrounding communities should make sure they are "on the same page", because you never know if you will need to help each other out in an emergency.

5. Training and Drills. Encourage all people involved with the community's emergency plan to receive special training for the different situations that may arise. Hold drills to make sure that everyone on the team is prepared— and get the word out to citizens of the community, so that they can get acquainted with the plan too. The best way to make sure everyone is comfortable with an emergency plan is to practice it and go over it on a regular basis! If people on the emergency response team have specialized roles, make sure that they have at least one or two "backups" who would be able to perform the duty if necessary.

Partnerships with Schools

According to 2007 congressional testimony by Cathleen Henning, president of Region 3 of the International Association of Emergency Managers, the strongest and most important partnerships that are fostered and nurtured in the best-prepared communities involve Emergency Management and schools. Henning spoke of her 30 years as an Emergency Manager and her history of responding to all types of emergencies and disasters, including hurricanes, floods, tornadoes, ice storms, power outages, fires, chemical spills, and explosions, as well as acts of terrorism. Henning said, "This wide variety of events has taught me the importance of a strong emergency management system flexible and capable of responding to all types of hazards and including all parts of the community under an integrated response system." She went on to stress that cooperation between school administrators, social workers, public health professionals, voluntary organizations, and first responders is essential in developing an effective community emergency response plan.

In addition, schools can serve as effective shelters for the general public during emergencies. Since most people in a community are aware of where schools are located, people often do not have trouble finding them. Additionally, school buildings are usually large and stable, making them an excellent resource to temporarily house large numbers of people. All schools should have plans in

place to provide a safe haven for their students and faculty. Schools should also arrange plans with the community in case they will be required to act as emergency shelters for the general public. Many schools are built with this purpose in mind, and have a fallout or bomb shelter in their basements. If schools work together with other local agencies, together they can form the most efficient emergency plans for the public.

Resources for Communities:

Designing a Community Disaster Preparedness Plan
http://nationalserviceresources.org/epicenter/practices/index.php?ep_action=view&ep_id=948

The Corporation for National and Community Service, in conjunction with the National Crime Prevention Council, posts a website with information on how to institute a disaster preparedness plan within your community. These tips can also be modified to create a disaster preparedness plan within your organization.

About The Authors

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