Continuing critical services during lean times

JL Smither explains how the increasing worldwide turmoil and financial uncertainty evolving from private economic problems can also affect the public sector

ALTHOUGH ECONOMIC PROBLEMS originate in the private sector, the increasing worldwide turmoil and financial uncertainty can affect the public sector as well. As budgets are cut from local to national level, public safety and emergency response departments have to make do with less. Lessons Learned Information Sharing (LLIS) features several good examples of community programmes that require little to no additional resources. By making the most of volunteers' services and donated goods, public safety departments can minimise the effect that decreasing budgets have on their ability to meet the needs of the community. Not only do volunteers help defray the costs of certain services, but they also help promote a culture of citizen preparedness within the community.

■ Fairfax County, Virginia, uses faith-based communities to spread the message of preparedness.

By encouraging pastors and other religious leaders to take responsibility for the preparedness of their own congregation, Fairfax County takes advantage of volunteer time and service to better prepare the community.

Following the message of the American Red Cross and the US Department of Homeland Security's Ready programme, Fairfax County Citizen Corps decided to reach out to faith-based leaders with the 'Ready...Pack... Go' campaign. The three central ideas of this campaign encourage individuals and families to: Get a kit consisting of a supply of water, flashlights, a radio, a first-aid kit, and other important items; make a plan of what they would do in the event of an emergency; and stay informed of potential threats and advisories in the community.

In May 2005, a member of Citizen Corps who served in the Fairfax County Community Interfaith Liaison Office sent a letter and a packet of materials to representatives of local faith communities. The materials were all created with donated resources during regular work hours or unpaid volunteer time and included posters and a guide for implementing the campaign. The letter encouraged faith leaders to distribute the material to their congregations and discuss emergency preparedness at meetings and events.

During the first year of this programme, 72 faith leaders from various religions participated in the campaign. By leveraging the community-wide network of faith-based leaders and their willingness to promote a more prepared community, Fairfax County was able to reach many citizens in a direct and personal manner.

■ The State of Florida's Public Information Officer (PIO) Deployment Team requires no regular funding and relies upon team members who volunteer their time, services, supplies, and expertise.

In 1996, the Florida Association of PIOs established the PIO Deployment Team to support local communities that need extra public affairs assistance during emergencies. When these teams are deployed, they work hand-in-hand with local public communication teams to provide citizens with accurate and up-to-date information. The PIO Deployment Teams are made up of experienced PIOs from throughout the State who apply to volunteer during an emergency. When a community requests assistance through the state emergency operations centre, these volunteers take leave from their full-time PIO jobs to deploy to areas where they are needed.

To make this process easier, all PIO Deployment Team members have signed letters of understanding with their employers to establish their responsibilities and, in addition to donating their time, PIOs provide their own office supplies and communication equipment.

Because the Florida Association of PIOs has encouraged professional PIOs to volunteer and has established a formal, controlled way for them to do so, Florida's communities have the public affairs expertise they require during an emergency without needing any additional funding or resources.

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■ Local governments can also call on citizens to volunteer.

The city of Independence, Missouri, for example, created a robust, co-ordinated volunteer programme to take advantage of many citizens who wanted to volunteer but who were frustrated with being underutilised.

In 2002, Independence experienced a severe snow storm that left thousands of residents without power. Because volunteer organisations were not centrally co-ordinated and communication was difficult, the emergency management department could not contact its volunteers for assistance. In response to this problem, the city's officials asked the emergency preparedness manager to develop a plan to increase volunteerism.

The plan established a volunteer programme director to co-ordinate all community volunteers with all city government departments. Among other tasks, this person is responsible for recruiting volunteers and for assigning them to activities. Since implementing this programme, city volunteerism has provided important services with no cost to the city. In 2005 alone, volunteers provided 32,000 hours of service; an estimated $1 million (£663,629 and €780,423) in salaries.

Through innovative programmes such as these, local emergency response departments and jurisdictions can overcome some of the challenges posed by constantly shrinking budgets. Lessons Learned Information Sharing contains many more examples of good ideas communities can use to address all hazards.

■ *For more information on volunteerism, please see the Community Preparedness page at www.llis.gov.*

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