

Public Works and Emergency Management – City of St. Charles, Illinois

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The City of St. Charles has a very active Emergency Management Agency (EMA). Functioning as a division of the Fire Department, the EMA is principally charged not only with the development of the City-wide Emergency Operations Plan (EOP) but also the use of functional drills to test it. While all of the departments within the City have a role in both of these operations, the protection of critical infrastructure takes the lead and this is obviously the domain of the Public Works Department.

Drills take place regularly and the Public Works Department has participated in two of these valuable training experiences since October 1, 2014. The first was a simulated tornado that impacted a large swath of the city. Challenges that were presented included a large fire involving an electrical substation resulting in a total loss, debris strewn streets, water leaks, sanitary failures and the need for heavy equipment assistance in rescue operations. Coordinating all of these functions from the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) certainly presented some challenges.

In the drill, the Public Works management staff gathered in the EOC along with other City departments. Vital information needed for decision-making purposes was limited to only what was available and accessible from

the EOC. In today's technological world, it was fairly easy to plug into our computer network to receive all of the information we were used to having at our fingertips every day. That was until the drill organizers threw us a curve ball. In the scenario, the tornado knocked out our computer system, so the drill organizers "unplugged" our computers. Immediately, the Public Works staff had to rely on information that was prepared in advance of the event in the form of saved computer files on a storage disk. It was at that time that the challenges went from manageable to nearly impossible.

We learned very quickly that preparation for a major disaster event is critical. Even though Public Works staff had time to prepare and gather information well in advance of the drill, it was evident that we were underprepared for the event. After the drill, we realized that everything needed to be considered and nothing could be taken for granted. For example, several Public Works managers did not have a simple list of their employees and respective contact information. Why would they need that, they thought? Well, when their computer was turned off and their smart phone deactivated, many managers struggled to even make a complete list of their staff. Remembering contact information for their staff was nearly impossible.

We had similar challenges gathering accurate information about our available equipment, utility locations, vendor resources, GIS data and historical data, to name a few.

Following the tornado simulation, a second exercise was held to test the distribution of the medications contained within the Strategic National Stockpile (SNS). The SNS is a program that functions under the direction of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. It contains large quantities of both medications and medical supplies that are intended to protect the American public in the event of a public health emergency. Examples of this could include a terrorist attack, flu outbreak, earthquake or other disaster significant enough to disrupt the normal supply chain. Upon the agreement of federal and local authorities, medications can be distributed quickly enough to be effective. In order to validate this, exercises must be conducted.

The Public Works Complex for the City of St. Charles was chosen as the location of the exercise as it provides a large facility that has enhanced protections due to the type of operations that take place on the grounds. The exercise that we participated in tested our ability to distribute medications to employees so that critical services (electric, water,

sanitation) could be continued and the continuity of government could be ensured.

Compared to the previous drill, this exercise was much more of a success for the Public Works Department, but did pose some challenges as follows:

- **Parking** – Even though the St. Charles Public Works facility is fairly large, our parking lot was inundated with vehicles. Staff from the entire city gathered in short order to collect their distribution of medication (in this case jelly beans). They arrived at the Public Works facility in fire trucks, police vehicles, public works equipment and personal vehicles. If our drill included staff families and other local communities, the situation would have been worse.

Traffic control and security access into the distribution facility is definitely something to consider and plan for.

- **Who's taking care of the disaster?** – While the entire city gathered on the Public Works campus to receive their medication, it goes without saying that they were not out in the public areas dealing with the particular event. Consideration of a phased distribution plan is recommended.
- **Indoor space** – It was a beautiful summer day when we had our drill, so wandering outside was not too much of an issue. However, if the weather was inclement, which often happens during a disaster, thought should be given to large

amounts of people being inside an active facility. Keep in mind that the facility still needs to operate as usual.

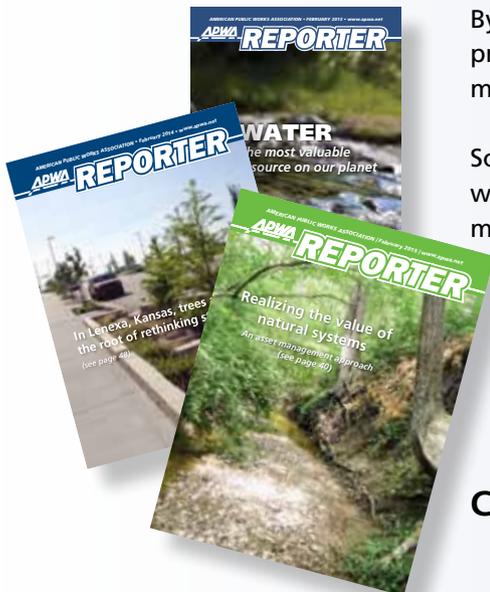
In summary, the importance of the three-legged strategy of planning, preparing and training cannot be overstressed. It is imperative that all participants not only understand, but are also comfortable with their individual roles in disaster response. This familiarity and comfort only comes from the security of a well-thought-out plan that is coupled with adequate training and strategic preparation.

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