

The Large Role of Public Works in Emergencies

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Since disasters are considered rare events in NH, public works officials may not receive the emergency response training or resources they need to properly respond in a disaster. The fact is, public works officials are busy completing their main jobs - the daily maintenance of municipal infrastructure. I know road managers take pride in being first responders and I know they accept this duty as part of their job. We saw many public works employees become engaged during the infamous tornado in July 2008 and the relentless ice storm in December 2008. This article will discuss some tools for road managers to use and implement to serve their community to the best of their ability as emergency first responders.

Public Works Deemed First Responders

The horrific events of September 11, 2001 and Hurricane Katrina in August 2005, have taught many of us (the hard way) that municipal and county officials have a primary responsibility, and burden, of managing emergency events. In fact, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Presidential Directive 8 (HSPD-8) established the National Response Framework (NRF) as a guide for preparing for emergencies. The NRF emphasizes that local agencies must manage disasters on their own entirely or in some cases, without state or federal assistance for at least the first 24 to 72 hours.

Part of this preparation involves engaging public works in the planning and response of emergencies. HSPD-8 officially recognizes public works officials as first responders (*see www.dhs.gov/xabout/laws/gc_1215444247124.shtm*). In addition, a National Advisory Council (NAC) to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) was established by Congress in 2007 and includes representatives from the American Public Works Association.

The New Role of Public Works in Emergency Management

Public works departments have the primary responsibility and authority for snow removal and they take great pride in delivering the best service they can. Snow removal is one example where public works officials in NH are well prepared. However, planning for other emergencies may be new to some public works officials

in NH, due to the fortunate lack of catastrophic events our state has seen. In other areas, like Los Angeles, California, where earthquakes are common, the public works agencies have been more involved in planning, prevention, mitigation, preparation and response. They have developed detailed plans and participated in regular training with other responder groups.

Emergencies in NH that would likely involve public works could include flooding, tornadoes, hurricanes, snow and ice storms, heat waves, oil, water, or gas pipeline ruptures, electrical system black-outs, explosions, haz-mat spills, or acts of terrorism. Public works officials can play a role in all of these emergencies by providing traffic control and planning evacuation routes, administering first aid, helping with fire suppression, rescue, or evacuation, transporting supplies or equipment, providing site security and control, or removing debris and clean-up.

Another emergency category that usually does involve public works is Traffic Incident Management (TIM). A traffic incident could be a collision, a breakdown, a spill of material, flooding or icing on the road, heavy fog, animals on the roadway, pavement damage, or a bridge failure. Traffic incidents can cause property losses, deaths and injuries, and delays can result in costing businesses billions of dollars annually. Road managers can aid in TIM by providing scene management, sand for absorbing spills, information to motorists, or equipment to clear debris. Road managers can also establish alternate routes for traffic, repair transportation infrastructure, and set-up TTC (Temporary Traffic Control) devices.

Develop a Plan

Public works officials must develop a proactive plan to aid them during emergencies when time is limited and quick organized procedures are critical. Long-term planning and preparation for disasters can easily be postponed due to the daily maintenance activities public works are responsible for. However, road managers have been deemed, by law, a first responder so the community will depend on you. Start developing your plan now. Delaying will only cause more frustration and cost more in the long-term. The goal is to change from a reactive

mode to a proactive mode about managing emergencies.

Plan Essentials

The four essential elements in a disaster response and recovery plan are Prevention and Mitigation, Preparedness, Response, and Recovery. Prevention and mitigation include a detailed inventory of assets that may be affected by a disaster and what steps can be taken to reduce that damage or loss. Preparedness includes planning, training, and evaluating. Response is determined by the disaster and would change with each incident. Recovery includes final actions to restore the area to the pre-disaster state and any after-action reports and changes to be implemented for next time.

Join NH Public Works Mutual Aid

Once your plan is complete and weaknesses are identified in your system - such as lack of staff to handle tasks in an emergency - a mutual aid agreement can be enacted. The New Hampshire Public Works Mutual Aid Program is available to all NH municipalities (highway and/or water dept.), municipal building inspectors, and private water systems. For \$25 per year, you can join and gain instant access to a variety of hundreds of personnel and equipment at your disposal in an emergency (see www.t2.unh.edu/ma and join the network of 136 members in the state).

Get the Proper Training

Emergency response training is critical to save valuable time and energy and to minimize duplication of effort. All employees need formal and on-the-job training in operation and safety of any equipment they will be responsible for. Employees will also need training concerning what specific tasks they will need to complete during an emergency. Routine exercises and drills are crucial to allow simulation of the event and reinforce learning. In particular, public works employees should be regularly retrained on the basics of the National Incident Management System (NIMS) as NIMS will apply until the situation has been officially declared over. Some training available in NH for public works:

1. National Incident Management System (NIMS) **IS-100 & 2: are both required for nearly all employees of public works agencies in order for those entities to be eligible to receive federal disaster reimbursement.** Watch for this training offered

by the New Hampshire Public Works Mutual Aid Program (see www.t2.unh.edu/training).

2. NIMS IS-700.A - An Introduction: can be taken online for free at <http://training.fema.gov/EMIWWeb/IS/is700a.asp>
3. New Hampshire Public Works Mutual Aid offers training on using the NHPWMA Program throughout the year (see www.t2.unh.edu/training).
4. UNH Technology Transfer Center offers classroom workshops, such as emergency communication and public speaking to aid in emergency response (see www.t2.unh.edu/training).
5. USDOT FHWA offers online training in emergency transportation operations (see http://ops.fhwa.dot.gov/eto_tim_pse/training/index.htm).

Summary

Public works employees are officially regarded as first responders as they have a pivotal role in planning, preparing and responding to disasters. It can be overwhelming to stay abreast of new laws, receive the proper training, and develop the necessary protocols needed for emergency management, especially for smaller agencies. However, most disasters occur at the local level. Therefore, response will depend on municipal governments to plan accordingly. The unique and diverse wealth of knowledge among public works officials will certainly aid in the flexible response needed to keep citizens safe and orderly.



Locate these additional resources on our website:
http://www.t2.unh.edu/video_pub/publist.html

1. *Emergency Response Guidebook*
2. *Roadway Safety and Disaster Response CD*
3. *The Role of Public Works in Emergency Response*
4. *Emergency Management Assistance Compact for Water Sector*
5. *Best Practices of Road Weather Management CD*
6. *Guide for Preparing Hazardous Materials Incidents Reports*
7. *Incident Sign Installation Guide*

Reference: Bergner, David L. Public Works Superintendent, City of Overland Park, Kansas. Member, APWA Winter Maintenance Subcommittee, APWA Reporter, January 2010.