



Bulletin

INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF EMERGENCY MANAGERS

When Did Noah Build the Ark?

Emergency Planning in a Self-Contained Religious Community

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Well before the tragic school attack in 2005 on the Amish community in Nickel Mines, Pa., a highly visible and extremely prominent religious community in the Northeast (unnamed for security purposes) began the arduous process of enhancing its multi-hazard emergency and response capability for the 7,000 children who attend its schools on a daily basis.

For most of us, the notion of a terrorist attack or natural disaster happening here remains a distant and unrealistic thought. For this community, however, emergency planning began with two simple premises:

- That maintaining a safe learning environment was everyone's business, and

- That disaster planning for schools all-too-often resides solely in binders and on shelves, rather than fresh in the minds of those who are destined to react once an emergency occurs.

Commitment to Implementing Mitigation Plan

This in mind, community leaders were determined to be prepared. When coupled with the reality that any violent disruption to learning is one too many, the community committed itself to implementing a plan to mitigate the potentially disastrous effects of virtually any crisis or disaster-type situation that could affect its schools through a program of education, observation, upgrading its equipment, and enhancing its protection on a 24/7/365 basis.

Recognizing that leadership is never put more strongly to the test than in a crisis situation where the objectives are immediate and so are the results, a commitment was made to solid planning, preparedness through training, good infor-

mation management and superior communication. Given world events, the difficult but candid recognition was made that a disaster affecting this community was more than a serious possibility, it was a highly probable one.

That being the case, complacency was not an option, denial could be deadly, and every parent, administrator and faculty member was encouraged to assume the responsibility and adopt the creed: If not me, then who? If not now, then when?

Community Begins Multi-Year Planning Process

After extensive self-exploration and meetings with officials at all levels of the public and private sector, the community began a multi-year process to understand and prepare itself in the following areas:

- **Emergency and response planning:** Preparing for a crisis, mitigation and prevention, preparedness, response and recovery.

- **Our national response doctrine:** Engaged partnerships; tiered response; developing scalable, flexible and adaptable operational capabilities; unity of effort through unified command; and readiness to act.

- **Educating the community:** Providing the community with emergency staff contact information, as well as education about the need to build its capacity to preserve, maintain and/or reconstitute its ability to function (following a disaster that significantly disrupts services and operations) through an understanding of precursor events, prior indicators, missed signals and dismissed alerts that were observed but largely ignored for the potential threat that they posed, but in hindsight seemed so conspicuous that it's hard to

understand why they weren't acted on at that time.

- **Maintaining the proper balance between preparedness for a natural vis-a-vis manmade disaster.** This included an increased familiarity with the types of natural disasters most prevalent in the Northeast, including floods, severe winter storms, fire, chemical or nuclear emergencies, power outages and pandemics. It also included an increased familiarity with manmade disasters, including school shootings, bias crimes, domestic or international terrorism, kidnappings and a range of other types of emergencies.

- **How to address common vulnerabilities that affect most schools,** including: The need and composition of disaster supply kits; open access; vehicle inspections; control of vendor and contractor personnel; inspection of student articles; control of after-school events; unprotected utilities; privacy concerns; handling suspicious letters or packages that are delivered or arrive in the mail; and handling requests to film, photograph or record images or voices in schools or on school buses.

- **Rethinking procedures involving the manner in which students and staff are evacuated,** including those in need of special assistance; expanding anti-terror drills inside schools; enhanced liaison with local law enforcement (including providing them with blueprints and photos of interior rooms and hallways); terror awareness training for students; assembly locations that minimize potential exposure to danger; and identification of alternate building locations within walking distance as well as those requiring transportation.

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Religious Community

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■ **How to transition from the normal ICS structure to a Unified Command structure,** along with the role and activation of an EOC.

■ **Periodic school safety audits to study potential safety problems, practices and places that impact campus security,** including: The condition of school facilities; access control; monitoring and surveillance; communication and information security; environmental design to prevent crime and disruption; site as well as building interior/exterior safety and security; existing safety, emergency operations, crisis response and disaster mitigation plans; anti-terrorist measures; compliance of school policies with state and federal law; employee recruitment, supervision and training; the presence of hate-motivated behaviors and other forms of harassment; school/law enforcement partnerships; and emerging safety trends, issues and concerns.

■ **Enhanced bus security.** Since school buses by design are highly visible, transportation procedures routes are predictable, and security at bus stops is often non-existent, if someone wanted to commit a terrorist or criminal action against a school bus there is a high degree of certainty they will know exactly where a bus will be at any given time. When combined

with the fact that school buses are relatively unprotected, provide large numbers of potential casualties, represent an emotional target and provide perpetrators with a target of opportunity by enabling them to escape relatively easily, this community undertook an intensive review of its personnel and operational security by enhancing its drivers' security awareness through training and additional emergency drills involving buses.

■ **Discussion-based seminars, workshops and tabletop exercises were introduced to familiarize staff with the plans and procedures** to be followed in response to an actual or assumed situation. In addition, real-time, full-scale, operations-based simulations of actual disasters to enhance comprehensive preparedness by depicting "boots on the ground" situations were held to practice all aspects of the emergency operations plan and to build teamwork and communication between law enforcement, first responders and the community. Expanded fire and bus drills, participation in drills and exercises sponsored by local emergency responders, and an annual exercise schedule were also introduced.

■ **Following an extensive community-wide skills survey, a school safety team was established.** Its members (primary and back-up) were carefully selected then trained to perform specific

roles during an emergency, including: ICS; lockout; lockdown; sheltering-in-place; how to quickly determine which medical, mental health and other personnel are needed during and in the aftermath of a traumatic event; command, operations, planning, logistics and finance roles, as well as search, security, maintenance/utilities, fire suppression, medical/mental health, communications, parent notification, and transportation coordination roles. Training in the preparation of AARs was also provided on the seven DHS-recommended elements, namely: the executive summary, overview, goals and objectives, events synopsis, analysis of mission outcomes, critical task performance and conclusion. Subsequent to the written conclusion of each AAR, a plan of improvement was developed to identify specific actions to address the recommendations contained in the report.

■ **Lastly, specific recommendations were made to further deter those who might view the community as a vulnerable target.**

Conclusion

By committing itself to ongoing training and the implementation of a well-defined plan, this community chose to answer the Biblical question of when to build the ark by stating clearly and unequivocally: Before the rains came.