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Strategic Management of Disaster Preparedness

By Christine G. Springer

Improving disaster response capabilities within this country requires better coordination not only within the Department of Homeland Security, but also across the federal government as well as with state and local governments and the private and non-profit sectors. To do so, in my opinion, requires strategic management and the use of thematic goals and transition forums. There are at least four strategic national challenges that need to be addressed in the process of doing so including 1. the shifting of preparedness and protection efforts toward an overall concept of national resiliency, 2. finding the right balance between border security and openness, 3. building a framework that will support comprehensive and coherent preparedness and 4. ingraining sustainability into homeland security and emergency management endeavors.

National resiliency requires more than critical infrastructure protection. It recognizes the need to absorb the destruction and quickly bounce back from the consequences of a disaster, natural or manmade. By applying a nation-wide “resilience metric” such as the time it takes to reconstitute every day services and routines of life to preparedness planning builds on traditional, sector focused protection efforts and provides the means to objectively assess, triage and significantly mitigate the initial and cascading consequences of infrastructure service disruption, regardless of the cause. If resilience is to become a unifying goal of the nation, DHS policies and programs must empower, enable and leverage the experiences, vision and innovations that reside in the private and non-profit sectors as well as other federal agencies (e.g. DOT, DOD), state, community and regional governments. This may mean that instead of simply empowering FEMA Regional Offices as required by Post-Katrina (PKEMRA) legislation, stakeholder councils need to be created, empowered and actively used in the future so preparedness is truly integrated across the country.

Finding the right balance between secure borders and open doors to travelers, students and commerce requires the setting of a thematic goal shared by the entire leadership team for a specific period of time so that public managers are aligned across and up and down government and also so that there are tactical objectives to guide daily activities aligned with a vision that becomes more tangible. In order to do so, the thematic goal must identify a single outcome to be achieved in a given period of time. It must also be a general statement of the desired accomplishment which eventually becomes supported and clarified by metrics, numbers and target dates. It should be time-bound – usually between six months and two years – and it should apply across and up and down government so that managers take responsibility for accomplishing the goal of secure borders without closing doors. The thematic goal helps to break down silos which are among the barriers that surface between agencies causing people who are supposed to be on the same team to work against one another. In most cases, silos rise up not because of what agency heads are doing purposefully, but rather because of what they are failing to do: providing themselves, their partners and their administrators with a compelling context for working together.

Building a framework that will support comprehensive and coherent preparedness requires expanded and improved risk management and communication across agencies and levels of government. Ultimately, a good risk framework is only useful if political leaders at all levels of government as well as public managers are willing to make tough choices on security trade-offs and that there is a coherent communication with the American people and disaster preparedness partners that helps them understand how to respond to, recover from and mitigate potential threats as well as making sure that the two-way communication continues during unfolding crises. To manage risk effectively will require DHS to establish risk management as a thematic goal in allocating resources, making decisions, communicating threats, readiness and proactive actions. It will then require a consolidation of exiting risk management programs across and up and down government so as to insure consistency. Improved risk communication may require a reassessment of the color-coded homeland security advisory system as well as improvements to the old emergency alert and warning systems and the engaging of disaster preparedness partners during the initial phases of an event so as to provide adequate and immediate warnings with clear instructions and continual updates. In order for these communications to be truly effective, they need to refrain from using emotionally charged language and they need to pay attention to both the implicit and explicit messages that exist in every communication with attention to insuring that ten critical elements are addressed when communicating: 1. Clarity, 2. Authenticity 3. Accuracy 4. Efficiency 5. Completeness 6. Timeliness 7. Focus 8. Openness 9. Action Orientation 10. Depersonalization.

Ingraining long-term sustainability into homeland security and emergency management requires focus and financial commitment. Thematic goals assist with both. In this period of economic challenges, financing long-term disaster preparedness efforts will always have detractors and be criticized. Selling the need for continued and long-term investments to finance the national security enterprise for those low probability and high consequence events in the future will be challenging. Likewise, it will be difficult to keep the public engaged and focused on efforts to prepare for potential domestic or international threats whether they are of natural, technical or intentional creation. Maintaining the political will and public support to move forward with the necessary long-term commitment so as to be prepared for disasters requires that leaders and managers up and down and across government inspire a sense of urgency in the public and among stakeholders so that protection efforts are recognized as continuing to be necessary as well as valuable to the nation as a whole. This will require a national commitment involving federal, state, and local governments, private and non-nonprofit organizations, as well as professional communities of interest. It will also require the active and continual engagement of leaders academically, governmentally, and professionally so that emergency managers, firefighters, police officers, the military and homeland security professionals communicate with one another more often and forge a thematic consensus through some kind of a mechanism like transition forums. Such forums are used when a thematic change involves groups with different or even antagonistic viewpoints about how to execute the change. A neutral facilitator begins the proceedings by identifying common goals and establishing what each party considers to be non-negotiable. Then each party better understands the parameters and discusses viable solutions. These forums help to validate participants' positions and also helps them see alignments and common interests which then motivates them to seek compromise. The forum also helps keep everyone focused on achieving the common thematic goal. Participants tend to leave such

meetings more engaged and collaboration-minded with regard to their commitment to a national preparedness mission.

Improving disaster preparedness capabilities within this country is both challenging and important. To quote Matthew Bettenhausen, Director of the California Governor's Office of Homeland Security with whom I recently talked about the issue: "Providing resources to build capacity from the bottom up so as to be prepared for increasingly larger and nontraditional events like swine flu is an investment in national assets."