

Empowering the “True” First Responders”

By Terry Bruns

When the media talk of the First Responder, images of brave Firefighters packing charged hose lines and axes, racing into burning buildings, or Police Officers racing to a motor vehicle accident, most often come to mind. These brave men and women, with their countless hours of training backed up with proven and advanced technology, put them into harms way routinely, to protect people and help during times of crisis. With their training and experience, they are able to quickly assess the situation, make decisions and with the resources provided to them by the communities that they serve, can in most cases deal with an incident resulting in a favorable outcome.

Rarely, however, are these First Responders on the scene of an incident when it first presents itself. In fact most of the time the First Responders are three to five minutes away in the best of circumstances and in the worst case scenario, it could be long as three to five days. *The “True First Responders” are those civilians who are in close proximity to the event when it occurs and in a position to assist. In a building or facility, these are the building engineers, property managers, security officers, janitors, tenant floor wardens and ordinary occupants that wish to assist.*



The policies and procedures that the *True First Responders* initiate prior to the arrival of the authorities can dramatically influence the outcome of the event either positively or negatively. The odds of having a positive outcome are directly proportional to the quality of the emergency action plans, training programs and tools provided to the *True First Responders*.

It is important though that the building owner and managers realize that a comprehensive emergency management program is for the benefit of the *True First Responders*. They must be given procedures, training and support to be able to manage an emergency event until such time as the Community First Responders arrive and are in a position to assume the responsibility for the management of the event. Again, in small events this internal response duration may only be for a few minutes, whereas in a large event or regional disaster this may be up to several days.

The foundation of the programs should consist of a comprehensive emergency action plan and a series of documents that provide detailed descriptions of the roles/responsibilities and how-to instruction for each member of the emergency management team involved in an emergency event. In addition to the response procedures, information supporting the execution of those procedures should also be documented.

At the building or facility level of the program, the response procedures must be site-specific, multi-hazard and multiple-hazard. For the general occupant level, the procedures can be more generic, providing they do not conflict with the facility plans and are multi-hazard as well. At the corporate level they should be role-specific with the ability to scale to the severity of the event and also reflect inter-connective support and coordination to their facilities, dependants, suppliers, tenants and the community. For inter-connectivity to be successfully realized, the corporate facilities and managed buildings must have plan continuity, using the same system, capability, and nomenclature. This fact was recognized by jurisdictions across North America, which has adopted the Incident Command System (ICS) as a cornerstone to their emergency management policies. This integrated system establishes a uniform set of processes, protocols, and procedures that all emergency responders, at every level can use to conduct emergency response actions. They will have the same preparation, the same goals and expectations and most importantly they will be speaking the same language. At the building or facility and corporate level, having everyone executing from the same play book is essential to a successful outcome.

Once the emergency action plan (*the "foundation"*) is built, implementation (*the "walls"*) of the program will be vital to the effectiveness of the program. The training, exercising and testing of the plan and the *True First Responders* on a continual basis is imperative or IT WILL FAIL. Training can be relatively generic for general occupants, but needs to be role and site-specific at the building or facility level. Corporate level training will also need to be role-specific to be effective and exercises can be both internal and external in cooperation with the buildings/facilities that they manage. Also contained within the implementation cycle are the development of processes and technologies that will allow for the communication of impact and the coordination of resources, both within and outside of the organization.

Once the “*foundation*” and the “*walls*” of the program have been built, the final phase is to apply the “*roof*” of the program which represents a methodology or process to keep the program current and constantly evolving as best practices and lessons learned are applied. By incorporating ICS as the foundation of a comprehensive Emergency Management Program and by embracing processes to support, implement, and keep current the program, the end result will be a reduction in life loss, injury, property damage, reputation damage, liability, downtime, and confusion in dealing with an emergency.

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