

The Lessons of Hurricane Irene

All Emergencies Start and End Locally



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After hurricane Irene crossed New Jersey the immediate impact was loss of power for close to a million New Jersey residents. Even as emergency managers dealt with the effects of the storm on the coastline, local officials began to brace for the even larger event of cresting rivers in their communities. Rivers and streams witnessed flooding elevations which, in some cases, exceeded historic levels. Communities such as Paterson, Manville, Pompton Plains, Cranford, Mt. Holly and many other communities within the Passaic, Ramapo and Raritan basins were devastated. Adding historic flooding to the absence of power exponentially added to the impact of Irene. Without power, residents' sump pumps were unable to remove the rising water from basements across the state. This brought flood damage to areas beyond the usual flood zones. Many of our homes and businesses did not have insurance to cover the losses sustained by the unprecedented rains.

Due to the historic nature of the flooding, large scale evacuations and sheltering beyond that to which municipalities in the flood plain had become accustomed taxed resources. Community officials also needed to address debris removal from streets and streams; emergency repairs to roadways and other municipal facilities. In addition, there was the need for close coordination of their recovery with assistance from county, state and federal agencies.

In light of Irene's devastation, it is important to note that Irene did not strike New Jersey with the full ferocity forecasted. Had Irene been a full-blown Category 1 or 2 Hurricane, with wind gusts far exceeding 75 mph, along with significantly more flooding from coastal surge; the damage would have been far worse and much more enduring. Power restoration to major areas may have taken weeks instead of days and the amount of debris may have been tenfold greater. Even more significant would have been the major damage to structures. We would have needed to pro-



The better we plan and prepare for true catastrophes, the safer and more protected our citizens will be.

vide interim housing for hundreds of thousands of people. Business would have come to a standstill in the affected areas for weeks or even months.

Understanding this potential, the question to be asked is what can your community do to prepare for hurricanes, floods and other disasters that will undoubtedly strike in the future? The short answer is more than you would think. All emergencies start

you would transport individuals who do not have their own vehicles to shelters. Understand how you would transport and shelter individuals with special needs. Since many people are reluctant to leave their homes if they have pets, identify how you will deal with animal evacuations. Importantly, identify gaps that you can't address and work with your county to determine alternative solutions.

- Keep in mind that your community's biggest emergency planning challenge may not be flooding. In discussions with your Fire, Police and Emergency Management leadership you may determine that the consequences from an industrial accident at a local facility may be far worse. In any case, plan effectively for those events with high consequence and some likelihood of occurring.
- Require a biannual status briefing at a scheduled community working meeting with all agencies and elected officials. Have all departments identify planning areas that require updates; agree on a yearly tabletop exercise to identify areas of weakness and corrective actions that need to be taken; provide a listing of training sessions or online opportunities for all public officials; and, importantly maintain awareness of the need to maintain an operational planning effort.
- Communications are the foundation of any response to a catastrophic event. However, communications can quickly become overwhelmed or damaged in a major event. Thus, it is important to ensure alternate means of communications in the event that traditional communications are temporarily lost. For instance, in very high winds telephone poles snap, cell towers can be damaged and initial communications can be very limited.

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locally and end locally. As the ranking public official, it is your responsibility to ensure that plans are developed that will ensure the use of every available resource to protect the life and property of your citizens. While the possibility of county, state and federal assistance is always there, such aid is supplementary and not always immediately available. Thus, in the immediate aftermath of a major event, you should plan to sustain your community without assistance from other entities.

With this in mind and based on our experience with Hurricane Irene, some possible steps you can take include:

- Review existing emergency plans with your department heads to understand what risks exist in your community. For example, communities with designated floodplains should estimate the number of homes that would be impacted in a worst-case flood to determine the number of people you may have to evacuate and shelter. Once determined, work to identify shelters, the people who will staff them and the agreements needed to insure their availability. Identify how

- Develop listings of your citizens with special needs and address their requirements for transportation, sheltering and healthcare in your plans.

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- Make sure that your key personnel develop their own family plans. Otherwise, they may not have the comfort level to do their jobs during an emergency. Too often, people we rely on during a major event are busy ensuring the safety of their own families and are therefore unavailable to us. The better prepared their families are, the more available they will be to you when you need them.
- The more prepared your citizens are to deal with a major event, the less assistance they will require. This will free your personnel to address major problems. Too many of our citizens are not sufficiently prepared and therefore tax the system when events occur. Thus, spend time now to stress the importance of family preparedness plans to your citizens. Develop and use specific messaging for potential events which may require evacuation, sheltering and other protective actions. Provide preparedness training for your communities. Seek assistance from the Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness for appropriate training materials.
- Work with citizen groups and volunteer agencies in the development of your plans for emergencies. If you have not established a Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) do so with the assistance of your county and the New Jersey Office of Emergency Management. A CERT program will recruit and train volunteer citizens to serve in a support capacity to your public agencies, freeing up your key employees to complete the most critical tasks in an emergency. CERT members may also serve in key positions to support the opening and management of emergency shelters and other critical activities. Training is provided by the state at no cost for CERT recruits and members.
- Identify contractual resources needed to support community response efforts ranging from debris clearance to supporting local assessments. Work with your county emergency management office to determine what countywide efforts may be useful in this regard.
- Encourage those living in low lying areas to purchase flood insurance from the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP). As long as a commu-



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- Understand how existing mutual aid agreements work and investigate other opportunities for partnering with your neighboring communities, county and state.
- The above represents a partial selection of activities any community may consider in improving their level of preparedness. It is important to keep in mind you are not planning in a vacuum. Each county maintains a plan that is more regional in nature and should be able to assist you as you work to improve local preparedness. County Offices of Emergency Management are staffed with experienced professionals who are able to assist communities in planning for all sorts of contingencies. In cooperation with your county, the State Office of Emergency Management (NJOEM) and the Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness (OHSP) are also providing training, technical assistance and other resources that may be helpful in developing plans that are
- Community is in the NFIP all home owners are eligible for this insurance even if a particular structure is not in a designated floodplain.
 - Develop partnerships with businesses in your community, from food stores to major corporations. Having plans that identify community actions that will allow local providers a means to get back to business quickly can address the feeding needs of your citizens; can allow a local big box store to open and provide building supply materials; and, in each case can provide an opportunity to get citizens back at work helping your economy recover.
 - Have your plan prioritize where and how you will respond in specific events. This can include identifying critical facilities; supporting power and other utilities; and identifying opportunities for investments to mitigate against future damage from hurricanes and other events.

