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## EMS Product News

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### In the Danger Zone

By Chelle Cordero

In March 1896, a fire destroyed the fire company headquarters in Ridley Park just outside of Philadelphia. At that time, the \$300 insurance payment was sufficient to replace equipment lost in the blaze. The building, which also housed the town hall, was valued at and insured for \$2,000. Maps, plans and stationery were lost in the fire. The community pulled together, and the remaining apparatus was stored in a nearby church and school. Church bells sounded fire alarms. Seven months later, a new firehouse was completed, and the company moved into its new quarters. The "new" firehouse is now home to Borough Hall, while the Ridley Park Fire Company continues to serve the area in a nearby station.

In today's world, with thousands of dollars' worth of equipment, vehicles costing hundreds of thousands of dollars, mandatory records and many times more expensive construction, a fire or other disaster can be devastating to an agency. The Ilwaco Volunteer Fire Department in Washington learned this firsthand in November 2006, when a suspected electrical malfunction sparked a blaze that destroyed the service's building and most of its contents. One fire truck and a brush truck were saved, but an ambulance, two fire engines, a historic antique truck and a robot used for fire-safety demonstrations were lost, in addition to all the fire gear, breathing apparatus and medical equipment.

Washington state has helped Ilwaco by returning copies of some records that had been filed with them, but training records, run sheets, historical documents and EMS call sheets are all gone. Their own members, local residents and businesses helped Ilwaco get back to the business of serving their community from other city properties and equipment loans, and fund-raising efforts helped to replace some gear while the fire company negotiated insurance payments. They are still missing some necessary firefighting gear, a fire truck and their ambulance. While a new building has been designed, rebuilding has been stymied while they try to negotiate a settlement with the city's insurance provider. The original loss and the seemingly never-ending delays to rebuild have had an effect on the morale of Ilwaco's dedicated volunteers.

"The fire department members continue to train and respond to emergencies, but discouragement on the building progress is certainly evident," says Fire Chief Thomas R. Williams.

#### Coping With Disaster

Schools, homeowners and businesses often have plans in place to survive indigenous semi-catastrophic events, but the fury unleashed by these events is often beyond expectation. Ambulance squads and firehouse personnel who suffer through a catastrophe can't afford to take time to lick their wounds when they are busy answering calls for help from the community-calls that seem magnified in both number and distress because of the damage to emergency vehicles, buildings and equipment. The same people the community depends on to help the injured may have been injured themselves, or they are frantic with worry about their own families and homes. Resources are taxed because of the number of casualties or because equipment was destroyed in the disaster, and first responders have to make do with makeshift tools. Depending on the extent of devastation and the area that was impacted, the concept of mutual aid may be mere fantasy.

In 1994, the epicenter of the 6.7-magnitude Northridge earthquake was located in the center of the Los Angeles Fire Department Battalion 15's coverage area. Every paramedic station and firehouse sustained some structural damage. Gas lines were broken, debris fell and chasms opened in garage floors. A total blackout disabled automatic garage door openers, houses had to be exited through back and side doors, and superhuman efforts were needed to get equipment on the road. Radio communications were poor and filled with static. Because of L.A. County's earthquake preparedness procedures, however, specific actions occurred immediately. Emergency responders arrived at disaster scenes knowing what steps to take. Rescuers' personal safety and rehab were stressed because of the long hours they had to work. Perhaps it was the investment in preplanning and disaster preparedness that saved countless lives and property.

Areas and hazards were assessed and difficult decisions to forfeit structures were sometimes necessary in order to save lives. Known hazards, such as the integrity of dams, were checked immediately so quick decisions could be made if evacuation was deemed necessary. Agencies that had prepared together now worked together to free trapped victims, control raging fires and get help to areas where it was needed. Hours into the emergency, as mutual aid arrived, thoroughly practiced Incident Command Systems helped to coordinate efforts and keep operations smooth. In the end, 57 people lost their lives in the quake, thousands were injured, and tens of thousands were left homeless. The financial costs were estimated at nearly \$42 billion. But everyone agreed it could have been worse.

More than two years after Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast, communities are still trying to pull themselves back together. While the area is no stranger to hurricanes and tornadoes, Katrina's impact was far beyond what anyone had expected. In a tale of two emergency service organizations, loss and recovery varies.

Acadian Ambulance Service is part of a larger corporate picture with main offices in Lafayette, LA. The Acadian New Orleans office suffered significant damage, and two stations in St. Bernard Parish were destroyed. One SPRINT (Single Paramedic Rapid Intervention NonTransport) unit was lost in the flood waters. All other vehicles had been moved before the storm hit, according to the disaster plan they had in place. Since all personnel records are stored in the main office in Lafayette, and the New Orleans Gretna station backed up all of its operating records to the main corporate computer, no records were lost. The Gretna station was large enough to accommodate operations even while repairs were being made. Temporary quarters were set up, including showers, beds and three hot meals a day for crews.

New disaster plans now include hour-by-hour guidelines starting before the storm and in force through the recovery phase. Today, damaged furniture has been replaced and the New Orleans station is fully operational. Call volume is down, especially in St. Bernard Parish, because many residents have not returned.

"We remain steadfast in protecting our No. 1 asset-our employees. Increased mobility through partnering with other agencies improves our response capabilities when normal ground ambulance travel is compromised. We do this with responder safety as the first step in evaluating a deployment," says Steve Kuiper, vice president of operations for Acadian.

West Hancock Fire Rescue in Pearlinton, MS, was at "Ground Zero" for Katrina's landfall. The town lost all of its buildings, including two fire stations. All of WHFR's members are local volunteers, and all lost their own homes during the storm. All of the equipment, vehicles and records supposedly safely housed in the building were destroyed. In addition to all of the material losses, the loss of homes and jobs has reduced EMS and firefighter membership by more than 60%. This emergency agency has been operating out of a double-wide FEMA trailer with limited equipment and overwhelmed personnel since Katrina struck in 2005. Since the surrounding areas were also impacted by the hurricane, the possibility of receiving mutual aid help is nonexistent. EMTs, paramedics and firefighters from other states have volunteered time to help out. Other than that, there are no contingency plans- just struggles.

Since there is usually warning of hurricanes, well-thought-out disaster plans may help to mitigate damage and loss of equipment and personnel. That isn't the case with tornadoes. In May 2007, a massive F-5 tornado swept through Greensburg, KS, leveling a path almost two miles wide. The Greensburg Fire Department was reduced to rubble, and the engines and equipment inside were severely damaged and destroyed. The many personnel who lost their homes or suffered injury have reduced the volunteer staff, and neighboring communities send their departments in to assist. Neighboring fire departments have also donated vehicles and equipment to help Greensburg get back on its feet. The Greensburg Fire Department recently received a grant that will help them hire a limited number of firefighters to provide relief for the overworked crews.

### **Preparation Is Key**

When a disaster strikes, local recovery is dependent upon the preparedness and available resources of an area.

No matter how charitable your mission, running an effective emergency services agency is a business, whether it is paid or volunteer. It's a cold, cruel fact, but money has to be managed to buy supplies, personnel records are needed to help provide insurance coverage for rescuers who are hurt on the job, and an equipment inventory is necessary to begin replacing losses due to the disaster. Contact numbers for contractors, insurance agents, suppliers and local officials will be accessed as the basic core of operating is put back together. Experts in the field of business recovery agree that the time to prepare for a disaster is before it occurs.

The first step to preparing your disaster plan is to thoroughly understand whatever hazards your agency and community may face. Even if your community does not typically experience high winds, tornadoes or earthquakes, don't rule them out as possibilities, no matter how remote. It pays to be just a touch paranoid when assessing all potential vulnerabilities. Brainstorm hypothetical situations and critique responses to previous emergency situations. Fires and floods can happen to anyone, anywhere. Even a burst pipe in a building can destroy an office filled with personnel records or a closet filled with supplies. Power failures can temporarily disable garage door openers, emergency scanners and traffic lights. Ice storms and blizzards can prevent easy egress when the tones go out. Area-wide devastation may reduce available manpower to answer calls.

Back up your records and store them *off* premises. Today's computer technology makes it easy to scan documents or copy personnel files, SOPs and important contact phone numbers and save them to a disk. Even when some documents need to be originals or certified (such as vehicle titles), having a copy will help with proper identification numbers and spelling, or just serve as a reminder of what needs to be replaced. While original historical documents and photos may have sentimental value, keeping digital copies can help soften the blow if they are lost. Make sure there is also an off-premises copy of your insurance policy so you have the necessary information when it comes to rebuilding. Keep an up-to-date inventory with your records and include not only your disposable supplies, but also your computers, electronic equipment and furnishings. Take digital pictures of your furniture, equipment and vehicles for proof of condition before and after the emergency and store them on a duplicate CD off-site.

Agree on an alternate means of communicating with members during an emergency, since local phones and radios may be out of commission. Consider making an off-site phone number available where members can leave and receive messages if appropriate. Discuss the possibility of running your operations from another local site, such as a town hall, police station or school building with the appropriate people. Give some thought to where you can store equipment and vehicles, at least temporarily. Volunteer agencies often include multiple members of one family, and an entire leadership can be out of reach if one of those families is affected by a local emergency. During an emergency or unusual event, it is important to establish a clear chain of command that goes beyond two or three lead people. Incorporate positions such as safety officers, engineers and training officers into this tree.

Last, and certainly not least, familiarize your members and other local emergency responders with your disaster plans. Drill, practice and drill some more; invite other emergency agencies to participate. After each drill, assess, critique and modify all of your responses. Make sure your disaster plan is posted and available for constant review. Preplanning and practice now can help save lives and reduce your losses. A well-thought-out plan can help prevent a total disaster.

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