

Are We Really More Prepared Eight Years After 9/11?

by: Jeffery W. Harvey

Where were you eight years ago today?

At 8:46 a.m., I was sitting behind my desk at my office. There was a television in the conference room to monitor current events, but it was not on. We received a call that a plane had just crashed into the World Trade Center and quickly turned on the television. At 9:03 a.m. and again at 9:37 a.m., we knew that it was no accident. We stood fixated at the news coverage until my supervisor allowed us to go home for the remainder of the morning.

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 are emblazoned in everyone's memory just as the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. We will always remember where we were and what we were doing.

I am often asked if we are more prepared today than we were eight years ago. In a word, the answer is "yes". We have stepped up our monitoring of terrorist networks. We have revised the way we share information with various levels of government and the public. Many of our response agencies have undertaken significant efforts aimed at interoperability with their emergency services partners.

In West Virginia, we have upgraded our local Emergency Operations Center (EOC) capabilities. We have strengthened our communications networks. We have undertaken a major project to develop a statewide interoperable radio communications system. All of our counties have developed and/or revised response plans. Most importantly, everyone responsible for emergency preparedness has begun to communicate and collaborate.

But, to be frank: we still have a long way to go.

First, we should focus our spending and planning efforts. Often, our agencies can only undertake planning projects with grant funding and with that funding comes many strings, the most notable of which are restrictions on the types of plans being developed. For instance, many of our local governments are receiving funding to plan for an urban to rural evacuation, which is great. But why stop with urban to rural evacuations? Are we not also strengthening our ability to evacuate five families from a floodplain by collaborating on how to move several thousand people through our counties? We must meet the goals of the grant funding we are awarded and support the efforts of our leaders to pursue that funding, but let's always remember to think broadly and maximize the use of the funds we receive.

Secondly, the increased coordination that we have enjoyed since 2001 has exposed a number of turf battles. It seems unnecessary to say that emergencies do not respect political boundaries, but it is a reminder that is needed. For example, many counties rely on resources in neighboring counties to supplement their response but do not include their neighbors in the planning process. In a widespread emergency, that county is likely to need all of their resources and will not be able to share them. Such a problem is simple to overcome if we think in terms of the "big picture" which so often goes beyond county borders.

Further, are we maximizing the use of our developing statewide communications system if we will not share information with partner agencies? The most powerful radio in the world will do no good if, for example, our law enforcement officers won't share information with firefighters, firefighters with public health officials, public health officials with hospitals, and so on.

Many of us think that the concept of "emergency preparedness" was born the day after September 11th when, in fact, the practice of preparing has existed for years. We prepared following the Spanish Flu pandemic outbreak in 1918. We prepared following Three Mile Island in 1979 and following the first World Trade Center bombing in 1993. The magnitude of September 11th was simply the catalyst we needed to significantly step up our efforts.

We in West Virginia are not immune to the large-scale emergency and should, thus, not be complacent in our preparedness efforts. We all remember the Silver Bridge collapse (1967), the Farmington mine disaster (1968), the Marshall University plane crash (1970), the Buffalo Creek impoundment failure (1972) as well as the 1985 flood and 1993 blizzard. We recently experienced the Sago Mine Disaster (2006) and Aracoma Mine Fire (2006).

Let's not wait for a catalyst. The time to renew our efforts and re-commit ourselves to preparing the Mountain State for emergencies is now.