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15 years later: Are we better prepared?

September 11, 2016

By Jeffrey Harvey - owner and managing partner of JH Consulting LLC

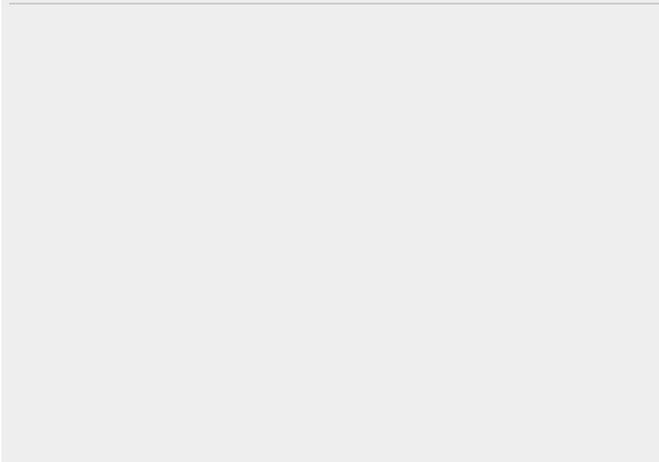
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Fifteen years ago, America was targeted with the worst terrorist attacks in our history. This event pointed out vulnerabilities that were not well discussed publicly and changes that needed to be made to our operations. However, we responded admirably to these devastating attacks and have since moved forward to make changes. Because of this, our people are safer and we would be better prepared should anything of that nature ever occur again.

But how prepared are we really? If a terrorist attack was to be attempted, we are much better equipped to respond. However, these responses have to be an all-hazards approach. Otherwise, what happens if a natural disaster or other emergency occurs? The floods, which occurred this summer across West Virginia and Louisiana, are an example of Mother Nature's fury happening in the blink of an eye with little time to react. The devastation left in its wake took lives and left thousands without homes and possession. Communities and families affected were left asking "what do we do now?"

The line of questions then becomes, how does our planning for an attack translate to planning for other events? How are we prepared for a disaster like flooding or train derailment and fire or water being contaminated by a chemical leak? How are cities, counties, and regions prepared for mass evacuations? Do hospitals have beds for all that are injured? What if the hospital is affected? Where do those on college campuses go? What happens to our loved ones in nursing homes? Is there a place for those that are left without homes and who have lost all their possessions?

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The list of questions continues on. Being prepared helps answer them.

A natural disaster or emergency is never anything that one expects to occur, but we have to plan and be prepared for these events. By assessing risks and vulnerabilities, fully understanding operations, having an emergency action plan in place, and practicing these plans and ensuring they are understood organization-wide, we become better prepared. Preparing for just one type of emergency severely weakens the impact of an overall preparedness plan. Just putting these pieces on paper, though, is not enough. Our communities, organizations, and even households need leaders to put these plans into action.

With the recent flooding in West Virginia, we witnessed the devastation of weakened safety and preparedness plans. Though emergency crews and people and communities from across the state, and even out of state, responded commendably and answered the call, we saw how destructive it can be if a plan is not instinctual. We were told that West Virginia had flood plans developed in 2004, but the plans were never implemented. Never practiced. Never put to the test. It is impossible to review a plan during the time that response is necessary. We must learn from this.

As we move into September, we recognize that it is National Preparedness Month. This year's theme is "Don't wait, communicate. Make your emergency plan today." This messaging resonates so clearly, especially given recent events. The goal this year is to expand to youth, older adults, and individuals with disabilities or access or functional needs. With the massive flooding that West Virginia has faced this year, the flooding Texas encountered earlier in the year, and the flooding from which Louisiana is working to recover, this tone rings clearer now more than ever. We cannot rely on the plans alone, we must be prepared to take action. And everyone must be prepared. By being prepared, we can be safer. By being safer, we can be better prepared.

This September also marks the 15-year anniversary of the tragic events of 9/11. What have we learned in 15 years? Are we better prepared? Are our preparations instinctual? Have we taken an all-hazards approach? Let's take the steps to make sure that we are.

Jeffery Harvey is the owner and managing partner of JH Consulting LLC in Buckhannon. He has his master's degree in strategic leadership and is certified through the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Advanced Professional Series. His expertise includes crises leadership capacity building, risk assessments and operations planning, and mock disaster training scenarios. He can be reached at jharvey@jhcemergencypreparedness.com.

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