

# Charleston Gazette-Mail

A Pulitzer Prize-Winning Newspaper

Jeffery Harvey: W.Va. needs recipe of communication, practice, preparedness

By Jeffery Harvey

October 11, 2015

West Virginia's mountains offer breathtaking beauty, incredible recreational opportunities and access to some of the most pristine wilderness regions east of the Mississippi River. We have scenic rivers, wonderful resorts and an abundance of ultra-cool small towns. We are fortunate people.

Of all the attractions we offer, however, it is the mountains that define us.

And while we derive enormous benefits from our surroundings, the mountains also require life adjustments from us. Heavy rains often create flooded valleys. Excessive snowfall cripples transportation. Wildfires can be difficult to reach and contain. And power outages can create life-threatening circumstances.

But, once again, we are fortunate in West Virginia, because we have professional people in our state who are prepared to deal with both natural and man-made emergencies. "Emergency preparedness" is a phrase that describes the systematic process of developing plans of action that can be implemented should any emergency occur.

Emergency planning involves assessing risks and identifying capabilities, equipment and other needs. It also involves practicing the response to an emergency. We are fortunate to live in a state that offers sophisticated and well-trained response teams on the federal, state and local levels. They plan and they practice.

Our emergency response teams have recently effectively dealt with emergency events from the hostage situation at Philip-Barbour High School to the CSX train derailment which led to a severe fire in Kanawha County. Our history also includes mine disasters, water contamination crises and crippling heat waves. All instances called for trained, prepared, quick-thinking emergency response personnel to secure situations and protect lives. Whether a hostage situation, a workplace disaster, a fire or a natural disaster, it is critical to have the emergency plans in place and to be able to effectively execute those plans. These plans should include knowing the appropriate individuals and groups with whom to collaborate.

September is National Preparedness Month. This year's national theme is: Make a Plan. Making a plan requires communicating with various groups of people and making sure that everyone involved is informed about protective measures.

The reason the word "preparedness" should be stressed is that when an actual crisis takes place, it is too late to formulate a quality plan of action. Danger and adversity can force emotions to run high and instinct to take over. This can create unpredictable and disordered results. But a well-

thought-out and well-rehearsed plan, formed between two or more stakeholder parties, can bring a stressful emergency into a well-handled, controlled solution.

Building relationships with officials in EMS squads, police and fire departments and other emergency response units is a worthy use of time. Groups need to get to know one another, understand each others' qualifications, and work together to plan for solutions to emergency situations. But the need doesn't stop there. Coordination with local health departments, non-profit organizations and social services agencies is important. Private businesses have a role to play too. If these relationships can be built, communication will be open, and dangerous, unforeseen obstacles can be avoided.

Collaborations are only as strong, however, as the relationships between leaders heading up a response. Responders need to identify the key players and what roles they will play. Responders also need to pre-assess possible risks, create operating plans, and train for various situations.

Ways to develop emergency response relationships include holding meetings with the various groups that would be involved in emergency situations, developing best safety procedures, and creating plans in case of an emergency. Sometimes stopping by a potential partner's office to strike up a conversation helps. By communicating on multiple levels, businesses, organizations, emergency personnel, municipalities and more can become confident in their preparedness. Each group that reaches out to another has something significant to offer. Some groups might have resources, some might have knowledge, and others might have creative problem-solving abilities.

We challenge businesses, organizations and individuals to get to know their emergency response players and to begin to have conversations about developing emergency plans. Preparedness is the key.

Jeffery Harvey, owner of JH Consulting in Buckhannon, holds a master's degree in strategic leadership and is certified through the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. His expertise includes crisis leadership, risk assessment, operations planning and mock disaster training.