

Identifying the Players

When disaster strikes, whether the source is natural or manmade, immediate action by First Responders can make a life-or-death difference. In the midst of the flashing lights and sirens, citizens expect to see the uniformed service providers—fire, police, and medical services. However, another essential member of the team is public works, whose chief responsibilities include designing, building, operating, maintaining and protecting our nation's vast public infrastructure and facilities. When the infrastructure is threatened, public works is prepared to take a comprehensive and collaborative role with other First Responders in emergency management—prepared and equipped to safeguard lives and reduce or repair damaged critical infrastructure.

The President, Congress, and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) have recognized this crucial first response role in the Homeland Security Act of 2002 (6 U.S.C. 101) and Homeland Security Presidential Directives 5 and 8 (HSPD-5 and HSPD-8). The President and DHS recognize that to combat the threat of terrorism all disciplines must work together during prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery operations. First responders are responsible for the protection and preservation of life, property, evidence, and the environment. Public works personnel provide immediate services during prevention, response, and recovery operations. This vital role has been recognized in the National Response Framework (NRF), the National Incident Management System (NIMS), and the Critical Infrastructure Protection Plan (CIPP).

Understanding the Scope of Emergency Management Activities and Agency Interaction

The public's general perception is that emergency management is the body of activity that happens immediately after an event. In truth, emergency management involves all of the agencies mentioned above AND takes place for an extended period of time BEFORE and AFTER the event. Most often, public works has long-term participation in all phases of emergency management.

Interagency coordination, support and cooperation are vital to the success of any emergency management operation. Although one part of the team may be more visible than another during emergency response operations, no single discipline functions totally independent of the others. For instance:

- Fire departments suppress fires, but public works provides the water, often maintains their vehicles and communications and obtains many of their supplies.
- Public works also may supply technical expertise and special heavy equipment.

The Essential Role of Public Works in Emergency Management



- In turn, public works often relies on other agencies and the private sector to assist in training its personnel for emergency duties.
- Each component-agency has a role in the preparation and implementation of the community emergency management plan.

There are four stages of emergency management, which reach far beyond the actual event: Mitigation, Preparedness, Response and Recovery.

- Mitigation (sustained actions to reduce or eliminate long-term impacts and risks)—in which public works bears a majority of the effort.
- Preparedness (planning, training, and exercising)—Public works is vital to ensure plans are comprehensive and exercises test the full response to an event.
- Response (including but not limited to assisting law enforcement with barricades, debris removal, traffic control, access control, etc.)—in which public works primarily provides support functions.
- Recovery—Public works plays a predominant role assessing damage, clearing debris, and rebuilding and restoring lifelines in the community.

Public works has an essential role in all phases of emergency management and provides a considerable share of the combined effort in them. Staffing during an emergency event is situational, with participation of various persons and agencies shifting according to specific needs. For instance, in natural events (floods, blizzards, earthquakes, etc.), involvement tends to increase for public works, particularly in the areas of response and recovery. In fact, in some events law enforcement, fire and medical services may have very little involvement, particularly in the case of an infrastructure breach. At other times, the emergency manager will be from one of the other disciplines, and public works will play a support role. In still other communities, the public works agency is also the emergency management agency and will be the incident commander.

Identifying Public Works Activities in Emergency Management

As First Responders, public works professionals are responsible for many aspects of disaster response, including assessing damage to buildings and infrastructure; clearing, removing and disposing of debris; restoring lifeline services to their communities; managing traffic and transportation for responders, victims and the public; managing and coordinating municipal vehicles, equipment and manpower; and restoring the infrastructure well after the initial event. Public works is also integral in emergency planning, hardening and security of critical facilities, and ensuring a safe public water supply.

Public works participation in emergency management may be difficult to identify at times because it usually is spread over several departments and/or the private sector. In fact, the degree of public works involvement has remained transparent because much of its normal activity is emergency-based without being billed or recognized as such, even by many

public works leaders responsible for providing the services. Local officials are the first line in dealing with emergencies, but if they require assistance, they request it from neighboring agencies through mutual aid agreements. For larger events which require assistance outside the state, assistance can be requested of other member states quickly and efficiently through the Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC), resolving two key issues upfront: liability and reimbursement.

Although it is possible for response to move from the local to the national level in just a few minutes, disaster mitigation can significantly reduce the need to respond. In the event of a disaster, mitigation and preparedness activities can facilitate emergency response and recovery activities. Public works has a central role in mitigation by providing much of the required engineering and technical expertise. Public works also plans, constructs and operates most of the community's protective and lifeline facilities—facilities on which all community activity and health depend:

- Transportation—streets, highways, bridges, airports, terminals, harbors
- Utility systems—water, sewer, electric, gas, etc.
- Drainage and flood control systems
- Communication facilities—telephone, cable television, etc. Whether public or privately owned, these all are most often located on public rights-of-way or on public property, and public works must concern itself about the condition and continued operation of such critical facilities regardless of ownership.
- Public Facilities – courthouses, town halls, parks, playgrounds and other public infrastructure are built, managed and maintained by public works. On a continuing basis, public works also administers building and safety codes

Public works officials are committed to working within their communities to make residents better prepared and to minimize the loss of life and property. Some facets of public works focus on infrastructure, while others focus on services, and still others focus on both. Some give internal support to operations, but most involve direct service to the community. Whatever its daily focus, as the steward of critical public infrastructure, public works has a significant place on the emergency management team to lessen the potentially devastating and long-lasting impact disruptions or destruction of public services can inflict on a community.

The American Public Works Association (APWA), with roots more than 100 years deep, is the umbrella organization representing all facets of the public works industry. The Association's 29,000 members throughout North America are counted among the leaders and decision makers in the field. For more information visit our web site at www.apwa.net or call 800-848-2792 to speak with the Emergency Management Committee Staff Liaison. Inquiries can also be sent to the American Public Works Association, 2345 Grand Blvd., Ste. 700, Kansas City, MO 64108-2625.