Guidance Position Statement

Public Works Professionals as Emergency Responders

Statement of Purpose:
The American Public Works Association (APWA) and its members seek to increase awareness and acknowledgment of the role of public works entities in North America that perform with distinction during emergencies and disasters of all types and sizes. It is critical to the safety of all citizens and the sustainability of all communities that the public, government agencies, and other professional and technical organizations recognize and support the contributions of the nation’s public works employees in emergency planning and operations.

Statement of Position
As professionals, we must do more to inform and educate the public and our political leaders on the crucial role that public works employees fill every day in responding to and recovering from minor local disasters and emergencies, and high profile events such as earthquakes, tornadoes, floods or terror attacks. It should also be noted that public works are often the only public employees qualified and capable of providing services and labor during disaster recovery efforts. First responders are police, fire, emergency medical services and public works. Therefore it is imperative that public works be active participants in emergency planning, response, recovery and rebuilding.

While we have had some successes over the years, we must continue to strongly urge the media to fully recognize the efforts of the public works personnel involved in response to and recovery from major disasters. We further urge the media to seek out and promote public works activities in the day-to-day local emergencies that occur in virtually every community across the nation.

APWA urges all government officials to take the following actions to increase awareness of the role and specialized capabilities public works employees provide in emergency and disaster response operations.

• Routinely recognize, acknowledge, and include references to “public works” as a “first responder” in planning, speeches, reports, and comments to the media relative to emergency and disaster response.
• Increase and earmark funding in budgets to improve public works disaster capabilities and to develop new and emerging technologies that will aid public works in its mission-critical disaster and emergency response role.

• Request the involvement of public works professionals when discussing emergencies and/or disasters at legislative or congressional hearings and briefings.

• Use the resources of APWA to identify qualified and experienced individuals and groups to discuss emergency management issues.

• Support legislation to improve and enhance public works communications capabilities, especially as it relates to interoperability and first responders.

• Support opportunities for increased funding in all hazards, but specifically those often overlooked such as terrorism, pandemic event, debris management, mutual aid agreements, grant writing and public assistance programs. Importantly, continuity of operations funding is vital to public works—as emergency planning and mitigation efforts must be in place for response and recovery operations to be effective.

APWA also urges media outlets to develop content, such as special programs and articles specifically focused on the role of public works in disaster and emergency response, specifically:

• Producing television segments and print articles focused on the public works role in emergency and disaster response;
• Inclusion of “public works” when referencing emergency and disaster response efforts;
• Interviewing public works professionals as experts when discussing local, regional, or national emergencies and
• Highlighting public works professionals as members of primary response teams involved in emergency or disaster response.

Background and Rationale
It has always been a difficult challenge to focus attention on the important role that public works fulfills until a significant disaster, hazard or terrorism event occurs. This challenge has been especially true since the attacks in September of 2001. The fact remains that the recovery efforts at the World Trade Center were directed by and carried out by City of New York construction engineering, and sanitation personnel, and numerous private public works contractors.

Following the 2001 terrorist attacks, the President, Congress and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) recognized the crucial first response role in the Homeland
Security Act of 2002 and Homeland Security Presidential Directive 8. The President and DHS acknowledged that to combat emerging threats all disciplines must work together during prevention, preparedness, response and recovery operations.

Regardless of public works recognition as first responders at the federal level, it has been an uphill battle at the state, tribal and local levels.

For example, when Hurricane Katrina broke in August of 2005 and caused catastrophic flooding throughout New Orleans, Louisiana, public works labored around the clock to clear debris, mend broken levees, and reactivate pumping and drainage systems. Despite their tireless efforts, public works was not openly identified as key first responders. Similarly, little was known about the response and recovery operations of public works amidst the wildfires plaguing California in October of 2007 until APWA reminded the State government of these efforts. Very often public works are virtually overlooked by media coverage which focuses on police, fire and emergency medical activities.

The ongoing task is to continue integrating the public works team into emergency response operations. Interagency coordination, communication and collaboration are vital to achieve the most effective, efficient response possible. Disasters of any type and size can significantly affect the nation, its citizens, and communities. Disruption of public services, property and job loss, and death and injury are often the devastating outcomes. Emergencies are dynamic, and every disaster brings forth new challenges and provides valuable lessons that, if implemented, can greatly improve community preparedness and response capabilities.

Sponsor
Emergency Management Committee
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