

How Prepared Are You for When Disaster Strikes?

By Kathryn McKee, SPHR

How prepared is the public sector for when the disaster strikes? What role do HR professionals play in helping their organization prepare for and recover from a disaster? Is there a double-edged sword hanging over the heads of disaster preparedness and recovery planners, who may concentrate on the roles of first responders at the expense of not fully considering the HR function or employees who are in support roles?

It is important to ask these questions because unplanned events requiring emergency response occur every day in residences, businesses, hamlets, villages, townships, cities, counties, parishes, tribal nations, states and countries. Plans for dealing with these incidents can be externally or internally directed, and this article illustrates how three jurisdictions—Santa Barbara County, the City of Santa Barbara and the City of Beverly Hills—developed such plans. Each jurisdiction has its own unique issues and can serve as frames of reference for those who have not begun their planning or who are in the process of updating their plans.

Making Use of Federal and State Resources

Before getting into specifics, allow me first to provide some reassuring background. On February 28, 2003, President George W. Bush issued Homeland Security Presidential Directive 5, *Management of Domestic Incidents and Preparedness*, which directed the secretary of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security to develop and administer a National Incident Management System, or NIMS. Homeland Security launched the system in 2004, providing a consistent nationwide template that enables all government, private sector and non-governmental organizations to work together during incidents of national significance. The full text of the directive is available online at www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/02/20030228-9.html. It is the overarching mandate states and other jurisdictions follow in developing their plans for natural, technological manmade and national security emergencies. Under the NIMS, federal, state, tribal and local jurisdictions must have disaster response plans. Formal plan protocols are used, so if a national emergency were to happen, all people in-



involved will use the same terminology and defined roles and responsibilities. More detailed information about NIMS can be found at http://www.fema.gov/emergency/nims/nims_compliance.shtm.

The first step, then, in assessing where your agency or jurisdiction is in its disaster preparedness and response planning efforts is to find out how or if NIMS is being used. The second step is to find out what your state has done. Is there a state emergency services office, for instance, and does it have a system for coordinating disaster response?

California created the Standard Emergency Management System in 1994, and it became law in 1996. SEMS provides a template to allow for statewide management of large-scale disasters. What is critical in SEMS is the ability to manage large scale emergencies such as the outbreak of more than a dozen wildfires that began on October 20, 2007, and quickly seemed to engulf the state. Cities, counties and state and federal agencies such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the U.S. Forest Service all worked together using NIMS and SEMS to seek and allocate resources for fighting fires burning from San Diego County up to Santa Barbara County and Orange, Los Angeles, Riverside, San Bernardino and Ventura Counties—in effect, the entire southern half of the state. Since SEMS is a state law all cities and counties in California must use SEMS to develop preparedness plans. The SEMS structure can be found at <http://www.oes.ca.gov/Operational/OESHome.nsf/Content/B49435352108954488256C2A0071E038?OpenDocument>.

Santa Barbara County and the Zaca Fire

Santa Barbara County stretches about 100 miles from its southernmost edge abutting Ventura County to San Luis Obispo County on the north. It encompasses beachfront, foothills, rugged canyons, creeks, streams and rivers, valleys and mountain wildernesses.

The county's Office of Emergency Services is led by Chief of Emergency Operations Michael Harris, who reports to the county CEO. Harris has a staff of five, who spend their time planning for and responding to emergencies throughout the county, such as oil spills, wildfires, landslides, mudslides, earthquakes, hazardous chemical spills, power outages and flash floods. In the valley, the rivers are known to run high and fast in rainy weather and can overflow their banks, seriously inundating the city of Santa Maria, Lompoc or other towns in the northern part of Santa Barbara County.

If a city or an unincorporated area experiences an emergency that quickly depletes its resources, it will contact the County Operational Area for assistance, and the Operational Area will contact the California Office of Emergency Services to request. There can be several incidents occurring at one time, and it is up to the county to prioritize its resources and response depending on whether life, property or the environment, in that order, is being threatened.

Depending on the magnitude of the emergency, the County Operational Area may open its Emergency Operations Center, or EOC, to allow it to broaden its area of command and ensure adequate coverage of all aspects of the event. During 2007, the 240,000-acre Zaca fire burned for two months, and the County Operational Area staffed its EOC near the city of Santa Barbara. The County EOC served as a management decision-making and coordinating point for actions and information flowing to and from the two incident command posts that were close to the perimeters of the fire. Other city, state and federal agencies such as the U.S. Forest Service and the National Weather Service were also involved in fighting the fire. Providing information was crucial to local citizens, and communiqués were posted daily in several physical locations throughout the county, as well as on Web sites and local access cable television stations. When the fire was finally defeated, large tracts of 100-year-old forest had been destroyed, but no lives had been lost, and only one structure had burned.

The HR director for the county was one of several key county CEO Office staff members assigned to manage the EOC. She also participates as a partner in the development and execution of the county's emergency planning and response plans.

City of Santa Barbara: Threatened on All Sides

The City of Santa Barbara, with its population of roughly 92,000, covers 19 square miles. It is truly a spectacular place, and it has become a destination resort for people living in California and around the globe. The city boasts sun-kissed beaches, a small harbor and marina, and beautiful mountains that traverse east to west and rim the city. Its homes are nestled among oak and sycamore trees in canyons

just 10 minutes from downtown, and a series of creeks run down the mountains and through the neighborhoods on their way to the sea. Across the mountains, the Santa Ynez Valley, with its rivers and world class vineyards, lies just below rugged wilderness country. Highway 101, which runs from the Los Angeles area up to the Oregon border, is the only direct highway from the southern California area to Santa Barbara and then up the coast to San Francisco and beyond.

"What does this geography lesson have to do with disaster preparedness?" you may well be wondering. Below the sparkling blue ocean waters lie earthquake faults that can slip at any time. As a matter of fact, in the last six months, there have been two earthquakes that have sent very sharp jolts throughout the city. Luckily, they were low on the Richter scale. A large magnitude earthquake near shore can cause underwater landslides that can generate a tsunami such as the one that devastated parts of Indonesia, India, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Thailand in late 2004. Santa Barbara proper is only 50 feet above sea level.

On the "front country" side of the mountains, i.e. those that face the city, is the thus-far quiescent Santa Ynez Fault. The creek beds are dry most of time, but they run fast with whitewater when it rains and flooding in parts of the city is not uncommon. Those lovely canyons full of trees, brush, horses, houses and people are in an area defined as a wildland-urban interface, where forests are known to catch fire when Santa Ana or Sundowner winds blow. These fires can run quickly through the foothills and down into the city.

Finally, due to landslides or overturned trucks or wildfires, Highway 101 can be blocked in one or both directions, effectively cutting off Santa Barbara from its employees, shippers, purveyors and other daily suppliers of goods and services.

With all of this real and potential misery, how prepared is Santa Barbara for any of these events? And, what roles do HR professionals play in the development, implementation and testing of disaster preparation, mitigation, response, recovery and continuity plans?

About 1,800 employees work for the city, including 116 firefighters and 213 police officers and staff members. Yolanda McGlinchey, manager of the city's Office of Emergency Services, is responsible for the very detailed planning process prescribed by SEMS that, according to the city's Emergency Operations Plan (online at www.santabarbaraca.gov/Resident/OES/Emergency_Plans), is "designed to enhance the capability of the city of Santa Barbara to respond to emergencies by establishing logistics protocols in managing personnel and equipment of non-fire and non-law enforcement mutual aid materials." The priorities of responses, according to that plan, are to:

- Protect life, property and the environment.
- Provide operational and logistical support for emergency response personnel and optimize the utilization of resources.
- Provide support to the other sections of the city's emergency response team. Support the restoration of essential services and systems.

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There are two thrusts to McGlinchey's planning, however, and here is where the double-edged sword is avoided. The city has built caring for its employees into its planning. "They are prepared for potential new roles and responsibilities during response and recovery, and special training as they become Disaster Service Workers. The plan includes stress debriefings and aids in personal preparedness at home through Disaster Service Worker Training," says McGlinchey.

Depending on the scope of the event, all employees classified as Government Code 3100-3109 are designated as disaster service workers. McGlinchey and staff have developed special disaster service worker training sessions for employees so they know that it is not necessarily business as usual when an emergency occurs and that they will be able to work and perform the tasks assigned to them during the incident and during the recovery.

HR staff has very specific tasks that will be discussed later.

Community-Directed Planning

McGlinchey has developed a 395-page plan that lays out detailed provisions for fire, police, public works, streets and transportation, airport and waterfront and other departments that are responsible for the city's infrastructure. Fire and police personnel, by their very nature and charter, are first responders to emergencies on a daily basis and undergo extensive training in their academies and in special meetings and conferences on responding to the myriad emergency situations that have occurred in Santa Barbara and elsewhere in the past few years, such as bombings and other terrorist acts, hazardous chemical and oil spills, violence and murders in the workplace.

Each city department also has its own emergency plan in the form of extensive standard operating procedures that detail what is to be done, who will do it, where they will do it, and incident command roles.

Further, plans are in place for use of the city's Emergency Operations Center (EOC). According to the *City of Santa Barbara EOC Activation Plan*, "When a major emergency or disaster strikes, centralized emergency management is necessary. The EOC provides this needed centralized management. When activated, representatives from city departments will report to the EOC to coordinate city decision making, simultaneously coordinate department activities, and liaison with different levels of government as well as with private entities. The EOC provides a centralized focus of authority and information and allows for face-to-face coordination among personnel who must set priorities for use of resources and evaluate the need to request mutual aid."

Internally Directed Planning

Within the *Emergency Operations Plan* are very specific references to finance, logistics, management, operations and planning—again with detailed planning steps for each section and unit with the EOC. The logistics section of the EOP lists the responsibilities of HR professionals, and these include providing requested personnel resources to support the EOC, Department Operations Center(s) and field operations—except all non-fire and non-law enforcement mutual aid re-



sources—identifying, recruiting and registering volunteers as required; developing an EOC organizational chart and supervising the personnel unit.

When the EOC is set up, the HR unit will operate both as part of the Logistics Department Operating Center, (DOC) and out of their offices for ease of preparing all necessary. The general duties assigned to Santa Barbara's HR professionals in times of emergency are listed below. As one can see, some of these duties are unique to responding to an emergency situation.

- Coordinate all personnel support requests received at or within the EOC, including any category of personnel support requested from the EOC functional elements or from city response elements in the field. Barbara Barker, human resources manager for the city, said the staff is at the ready and can respond quickly to put out a call through public information officers for specific skills such as scuba divers if there were a need for underwater operations.
- Identify sources and maintain an inventory of personnel support and volunteer resources. Request personnel resources from agencies as needed. Barker indicated that the HR department provides a quarterly printed report of all employee names, addresses and phone numbers to managers so that if there is a power outage, managers have access to this critical information. In the age of electronic notification systems, e-mail, the Internet and 24/7 use of cell phones, if there is no power, having access to old-fashioned paper directories can be crucial.
- Ensure that all disaster service workers and volunteers are registered and integrated into the emergency response system.
- Assign personnel within the EOC as needs are identified.
- Coordinate emergency management mutual aid through the Santa Barbara County Operational Area. The SBOA will contact the State Regional EOC Center via the Internet-based Response

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Information Management System (RIMS); if RIMS is not available, then all requests and reports are to be sent via OASIS.

How prepared is Santa Barbara's HR staff to deal with an emergency? Barker participated in a recent tabletop exercise based on a tsunami event caused by an earthquake off the coast of Alaska. Along with all city departments who are assigned to the Logistics Section, and other agencies such as the California Highway Patrol, the California Department of Transportation and the Red Cross, Barker practiced decision making and actions to be taken.

City of Beverly Hills and Commuting Employees

The 5.6-square mile city of Beverly Hills is a jewel surrounded by the communities of Culver City, West Los Angeles, Westwood and Los Angeles. It has roughly 35,000 residents, but it hosts an average of about 100,000 people within its environs on a daily basis, as tourists and shoppers travel into the city. As with all municipalities in Southern California, the risks of wildfire in the hilly areas and earthquakes are ever present for Beverly Hills.

The city's preparedness plans are based on SEMS and follow the same outline as the city of Santa Barbara, but there is a major difference in planning between the two jurisdictions. In Beverly Hills, most employees live outside the city and have to travel long distances, spending an hour or longer commuting to work. As a result, the Beverly Hills has a large contingent of residents who have volunteered to report to work for the city in case of emergency and fill in as needed until employees are able to reach their workplaces.

"HR is represented in the Emergency Operations Center," said Sandra Olivencia-Curtis, assistant director of administrative services – human resources. "We make arrangement for food and shelter for employees who may not be able to get home. The city has a gym, and we can set that up as sleeping quarters as necessary." Arrangements have also been made for child and elder care in Beverly Hills' Recreation and Parks Department or library facilities, and pets can be cared for in a special area that can be set up on the roof of one of the city's parking lots. In addition, all employees are supplied with a backpack containing food and water that they take with them if they are redeployed to another area.

Both Santa Barbara and Beverly Hills have their HR professionals involved in logistics during emergencies, and HR staff are well versed in their duties. HR is a full partner under SEMS.

Leadership Is Key

During all stages of emergency planning, response and recovery, it is necessary to inspire and lead others. Two types of leadership are particularly important while emergency situations are occurring. First, true command and control approach must be exercised throughout the incident command system. Leaders must ensure that people are fulfilling their defined roles, implementing their training and making the appropriate decisions at the appropriate times.

This is a time for mutual trust and respect. Most staff members who will be assigned to the EOC or serve as coordinators will have taken part in simulations or tabletop exercises such as the one described by Barker and should, therefore, know their tasks and be able to be trusted to carry them out.

With respect to leadership, Harris said, "You need to be assertive, forceful and directive, thoughtful, responsible and decisive. You seek ideas and may use a consensus style, but, ultimately, it's up to the EOC director to make the ultimate decision." Pointing to the second kind of leadership required, Harris went on to say that leaders also need to be compassionate, kind and thoughtful when situations dictate such behaviors.

Experts in leadership competency modeling have said there are several essential behaviors that help get and keep people on track. In *Leading People Through Disasters*, Liz Guthridge and I identified these behaviors as a strong self of sense, self-awareness, self-control and self-confidence; the ability to think and act quickly; and remaining empathetic and dispassionate, as these traits will help you calm others and instill in them a sense of confidence and hope. Also, your calm, cool and collected behavior will reassure people who are looking for leadership.

Lessons Learned

What can HR leaders take away from this article? If you and your staff are already involved in preparedness planning, there may be an idea or two you have not thought of about how your employees should be involved, and whether you have planned for the use of volunteers fill in for missing employees or Santa Barbara's example in practicing disaster scenarios.

If you are not currently involved in planning for emergencies, it is time to insert yourself into the process. Assess where your organization is in the preparedness planning process. In California HR professionals are integral members of the logistics section, as delineated in SEMS. If you are in another state, is time to learn how the National Incident Management System is being utilized where you work. If it is not, take the opportunity to facilitate the development of a plan in your agency.

There are online training programs available through the FEMA Web site, www.fema.gov. The Web sites mentioned above can also serve as starting points to learn more about the National Incident Management System and SEMS. Now is the time for action. It is not a question of if disaster will strike; it is only a question of when.

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