



Spreading the Word Saves Lives

American Samoa — One week before the tsunami came crashing down on dozens of villages in American Samoa on September 29, 2009, many teachers from the town of Tula noticed that whales and dolphins had been surfacing in areas where they hadn't been seen before, and took their classes to see them. In retrospect, some now wonder if unusual activity in the sea life might have been a sign of things to come.

It was a good thing that the students had been taking a number of field trips that week. Weeks prior to the earthquake, tsunami, and flooding, the American Samoan Department of Homeland Security (ASDHS) and Department of Education had led a comprehensive preparedness outreach program, emphasizing evacuation readiness to schools throughout the island. This helped tremendously when the tsunami struck. Moreover, in keeping with September being declared National Preparedness Month by President Obama, American Samoa focused on tsunami evacuation procedures.

“Spreading the word through education in the schools, villages, and the workforce saved many lives,” says Governor Togiola Tulafono. “Sirens and early alert systems and interoperable communications are critical, but it was the people on the ground that made the biggest difference.”

An evacuation drill at the beginning of the year proved to be a wake-up call for the island. “It did not go well,” says Sima Malele Talo, the principal of Tula’s school. “We had children wandering in the middle of the road, not knowing where to go. We knew we had a lot of work to do and we did it.”

Talo and many other principals and teachers set about improving their plans and putting them to the test. “We looked into finding a faster route,” says Talo, whose school sits just a few feet from the ocean. “The fastest path involved having to enter someone’s private property, so we got their permission.”

At first, 200 students, wearing sports shoes, went all the way up to the top of the nearby mountain in 10 minutes. But when educators thought about what would happen in a real disaster, they realized that many of the children might be barefoot (some don't wear shoes to school, plus the water could wash them away). “We decided to do a drill with the children barefoot,” says Talo. They were able to reach the safe area, near a hill, within five minutes. Other improvements to the plan: an adult was assigned to check the bathrooms to make sure everyone was accounted for and a rope was provided for the children to hold onto and stick together.

On the day of the tsunami, some of the teachers wanted to ring the evacuation bell at the first sign of the earthquake. But others weren't so sure – they wanted to wait for official word from the head office. “That earthquake felt really strong and when I saw the ocean bubbling – which I had learned in biology class was a sign of a possible tsunami – I was, like, RING THAT BELL!” says teacher Nina Faitalia.

It just so happens that on the morning of September 29th, ASDHS had scheduled a practice evacuation. ADHS's outreach coordinator Lisa Togiai had just arrived when she realized their planned drill was turning into the real thing.