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PRACTICE NOTE

Community Preparedness: Thurston County, Washington, Emergency Management's Faith Communities Disaster Preparedness Workshops

PRACTICE

Thurston County, Washington, Emergency Management hosts quarterly emergency preparedness workshops that provide faith communities with information on emergency planning and preparedness and help faith communities create disaster preparedness plans for their neighborhoods. Representatives from the Fire Chaplains of Thurston County, the American Red Cross, the Olympia Fire Department, and Volunteer Services facilitate the workshops by providing speakers and resources.

DESCRIPTION

Hurricanes Katrina and Rita devastated the Gulf Coast in 2005, damaging critical infrastructure and prompting large-scale evacuations in Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas. Many evacuated residents went to neighborhood churches, synagogues, and temples seeking shelter, assistance, critical information, basic services, and supplies such as food and water. This incident showed how much residents rely on local faith-based organizations and communities in an emergency.

This prompted Thurston County, Washington, Emergency Management to consider that residents might react similarly in a local emergency. Thurston County Emergency Management decided to involve faith communities directly in emergency preparedness and planning. Emergency Management worked with the Fire Chaplains of Thurston County, the American Red Cross (ARC), the Olympia Fire Department (OFD), and Volunteer Services in September 2006 to create a series of workshops that enhance the faith community's ability to provide residents with assistance before, during, and after an emergency. These partners organize the workshops, elicit participation from faith-based communities, provide resources, and serve as instructors.



Thurston County includes the state capital, Olympia.

The workshops provide representatives from faith-based organizations with emergency response information and offer them an opportunity to create an emergency plan to support their neighborhoods. Each workshop has three components: instruction, discussion sessions, and speeches from responders. Representatives from the Fire Chaplains, the ARC, the OFD, and Volunteer Services teach participants about:

- What they can expect from government agencies;
- How they can prepare disaster plans for themselves, their families, and their corporate organizations (church, synagogue, parish, etc.);

- How they can focus recovery efforts on services that are critical for the community; and
- How they can inform Emergency Management about what their organizations will do to serve their respective neighborhoods following the initial event.

The workshops also include break-out sessions on relevant topics and speeches from local responders. Session topics have covered how to assemble personal and family kits, discussions on corporate planning, and how to interact with Emergency Management before and during an event.

Representatives from partner organizations often speak at the workshops and provide participants with resources such as sample emergency plans and kits. For example, an OFD chaplain shared his experiences from volunteering on the Gulf Coast during the Hurricane Katrina recovery and discussed how faith communities there were an integral part of the distribution of supplies and services. An ARC volunteer helped faith communities to understand some of the services that were provided in Texas following Hurricane Rita. The ARC has provided a wealth of information, in printed form and in discussions, on preparedness and training needed to become a Red Cross Shelter.

CITATIONS

Eason, Vivian. Emergency Management Coordinator, Thurston County Emergency Management. Correspondence with *Lessons Learned Information Sharing*, Aug 2007.

Terhune, Bill. "Faith Communities Plan Disaster Response." *The Olympian Online*. 28 Jul 2007.

<http://www.theolympian.com/living/story/175130.html>.

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