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LESSON LEARNED

Crisis Communications: Releasing Public Information in a Timely Manner

SUMMARY

Emergency managers should make certain that critical public information is approved and released in a timely manner. This can help ensure that the public receives vital information in time to make critical decisions.

DESCRIPTION

In June 2006, representatives of federal, state, and local government agencies, as well as non-governmental organizations, participated in the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Regions I and II Hurricane Preparedness Tabletop Exercise. The scenario projected the effects of Category 4 "Hurricane Omni," which made landfall on New Jersey's coast and decimated critical infrastructure throughout the Northeast. New Jersey, New York City, Long Island, and Connecticut experienced the most damage. The goal of the exercise was to refine response and decision-making processes and to improve coordination among emergency responders, public safety agencies, and the private sector. One exercise objective for federal, state, and local officials was to assess their approval and release procedures for public information.

During the exercise, participants discussed the challenges of disseminating critical safety information to the public in a timely manner. Participants noted that federal and state agencies often require that public messages undergo a time-consuming approval process before they are released to the media. However, members of the public may begin to make critical decisions regarding how they will respond to the disaster while these messages are under review. This delay in the release of critical information can put members of the public at greater risk by impairing their decision process. Without adequate information, disaster victims may decide to evacuate when they should shelter-in-place or fail to learn of an evacuation order in time to leave safely. FEMA's after-action report recommended that emergency managers consider using pre-approved messages and enforcing time limits for the review of additional messages.

Emergency managers should make certain that critical public information is approved and released in a timely manner. This can help ensure that the public receives vital information in time to make critical decisions.

CITATION

Department of Homeland Security, FEMA Regions I and II. *Region I/II Hurricane Preparedness After-Action Report*. 21 Jun 2006, p. 38.

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