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LESSON LEARNED

Mass Care Response: Developing Regional Family Reunification Plans before Large Special Events

SUMMARY

The National Capital Region's (NCR) experiences during the 2009 Presidential Inauguration revealed that the many response and emergency management agencies involved in the event were not operating under a common regional family reunification plan. This lack of a regional plan resulted in disjointed family reunification efforts and a lack of situational awareness of family reunification activities across the NCR. Responders recommended the development of both an NCR-wide regional family reunification plan and a searchable family reunification database.¹

DESCRIPTION

The 2009 Presidential Inauguration included the swearing-in of Barack H. Obama, the first African-American elected president. This inauguration constituted the largest event in the history of the nation's capital. Events took place over five days, from January 17-21, presenting response and emergency management stakeholders from Virginia, Maryland, the District of Columbia, and the federal government with the unique challenge of balancing strict security and mass care preparedness requirements with the desire to make the event as open and accessible as possible. The large number of expected attendees required planners to prepare for the potential mass care services required of any large event. The scale of this event required mass care services that would be needed to respond to worst-case scenarios due to additional natural or man-made hazards, such as inclement weather or a mass casualty incident.² These factors required that NCR partners coordinate planning, support, and response efforts.



One of the many "entry points" to viewing areas near the Capitol on Inauguration Day. An estimated, 1.8 million people gathered on the Mall in the District. Source: FEMA Multimedia Library

This Lesson Learned document focuses on the importance of developing a regional family reunification plan for large special events that require the involvement of multiple entities across multiple jurisdictions. The 2009 Presidential Inauguration Regional After Action Report (AAR) indicates that the lack of a plan and the subsequent lack of situational awareness of family reunification processes in place at the regional level led to poorly

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coordinated and disjointed family reunification efforts. Recommendations in the AAR include developing a regional family reunification plan and an easily searchable regional database of family reunification information.³

ESTABLISHING REGIONAL FAMILY REUNIFICATION PLANNING

Large special events, particularly those in metropolitan regions at the border of two or more states, require the coordination of response and emergency management entities from multiple jurisdictions and from multiple disciplines. Unified planning across these jurisdictions is key to maintaining coordination and situational awareness of mass care activities, including family reunification, during these events.

During the 2009 Presidential Inauguration, the absence of an NCR-wide family reunification plan left many stakeholders in the region unaware of protocols and local plans already in place across the region. Managing an event of this magnitude required both troubleshooting and coordinating activities across multiple jurisdictions and organizations. NCR partners had difficulty both adapting to changing situations and coordinating family reunification actions.

The NCR did not develop region-wide family reunification plans and protocols and did not communicate regional family reunification processes to NCR partners until January 19th, one day before the swearing-in ceremony. This lack of regional planning and information sharing led to disjointed family reunification efforts during the inauguration. For example, the United States Park Police (USPP) initially planned to take individuals in need of family reunification to first aid tents but changed that plan when the need for medical services overwhelmed the first aid tents and instead took those individuals to Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) stations. Due to the absence of any unified regional plan, the USPP's change of plans was not communicated widely to other NCR partners active during the Inauguration.⁴

In other cases, this lack of regional planning and coordination among NCR partners also led to a lack of shared situational awareness and coordination during reunification when individuals had been transported to hospital emergency rooms for medical treatment. Without a unifying plan, individual NCR partners often did not plan for transportation to secondary family reunification locations after these individuals were discharged from the hospital. Not planning for subsequent transportation resulted in multiple interventions and queries by responders to effectively reunite these individuals with their families. The AAR notes that the relatively low number of individuals needing family reunification assistances after being discharged kept family reunification issues due to this issue at a minimum. However, the AAR also acknowledges that if more incidents occurred requiring reunification after hospitalizations, these could have posed serious family reunification issues in the NCR.⁵

RECOMMENDATIONS

NCR partners developed two recommendations for regional mass care partners to address these issues. First, these partners should develop a coordinated and integrated regional family reunification plan or approach specifically for special events and other large-scale emergencies. Second, regional mass care partners should develop either a single database of regional family reunification planning or a means to easily search existing NCR partner databases to improve situational awareness of family reunification activities.⁶

REFERENCES

¹Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments. *2009 Presidential Inauguration Regional After-Action Report (AAR) Summary*. August 31, 2009.

<http://www.mwcog.org/uploads/pub-documents/zVZYXQ20091023164715.pdf>

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

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