

Dialogue on Crisis:
Emergency and Anti-terrorism Planning: A balancing act

Ron Kuban, Ph.D.
President, Pegasus Emergency Management Consortium Corp.

The intent of this column is to generate discussion on emergency preparedness, crisis management and recovery topics. Readers are encouraged to send their feedback to the author whose address is at the end of this column.

For many emergency responders and planners around the world the events of September 11, 2001 heralded a new era. Focused primarily on terrorism, with perhaps a bio-terrorism flavor, the 'new reality' brings with it many opportunities, challenges and limitations. The need to balance these within the context of emergency planning is obvious. This task requires conscious and careful action by planners and responders alike.

A number of questions beg an answer. Is there a link between the emergency planning and anti-terrorism activities? If 'yes' what is it or what should it be? How would the two activities fit within the agenda of emergency planners? And, what potential impact would that newly-created reality have on traditional emergency responders?

Context

You may well be forgiven if you are fatigued from the onslaught of references to and analyses of the September 11 events. It seems that no emergency-related discussion, regardless of topic, can now be completed without some reference to "9-11" or its consequences. Tiring as it may be, reality is that the horrific events of that day (and their aftermath) are very much a part of a new reality for us all.

Our understanding of 'life' and especially our world view has changed in a fundamental way since early September 11th. That is an obvious understatement! Collectively, we are more cognizant about the potential of terrorism right in our back yard and its implication on 'life' within our community. We are reminded frequently about the world-wide effort to root out terrorism and the difficulties of eliminating its risks. Our so-called normal activities (e.g., travel, transportation of goods, and access to information) have become more challenging and costly because of the need for greater protection or security. Simply stated, every aspect of our community and its operation appears to be more vulnerable.

There is valid and significant basis for that sense of vulnerability. Much of it is based on increased awareness, which was brought about by the cataclysmic events of September 11. These events were so visually and psychologically powerful that they jarred even the most preoccupied minds (and hearts) into alertness.

However, 'terrorism' is not a new phenomenon, even within North America. Over the last thirty plus years we have been affected by various acts (or threats) of terror. Of course, none could match the events of September 11 for their intensity, broad based impact, or the ease with which we could relate to them. The strong sense that 'it could have been us' gives this event a unique gut-level meaning, which gives terrorism an *apparent* new meaning. As always, perception is

reality, both for the public and the various key stakeholders in this field of practice. So, how do emergency responders and planners deal with this new environment?

The impact in the trenches

With a few notable exceptions, emergency responders are not likely to give 'terrorism' a high priority in their day-to-day response effort. The reasons are obvious and natural. Essentially, the odds of the average responder encountering a terrorist-instigated event are still very low by comparison to other likely and more common emergencies. Moreover, at this point the focus of anti-terrorism activity is still primarily under the often-exclusive auspices of police, security, intelligence or military services. As well, the knowledge about likely terrorist threats or their consequences is still not widely established or understood.

On the other hand, emergency planners and public officials are increasingly more cognizant of the potential risks. They often know (though not always admit) that the odds of an occurrence are relatively low, but the likely consequences could be severe. These risks could be further aggravated by first responders that are not well schooled in the actual risks or the means to respond to them.

The divergence of perspectives between emergency planners and responders creates a number of challenges, which need to be overcome sooner rather than later. To start with, the whole notion of "terrorism", its realistically-defined threat, and its consequences need to be more clearly defined for both planners and responders. The gap in knowledge or understanding is still far too wide for meaningful planning or response. Without that knowledge as a basis, any dialogue, setting of operational expectations, training, or the procurement of response-focus resources would be less than effective.

The lack of knowledge (i.e., about the terrorism's realistic targets, agents, or impact) is further exasperated by uncertain jurisdictional boundaries (i.e., who will actually respond to the agents of bio-terrorism), the need to secure information, and uncertainty about the actual risks.

Time is of the essence. The longer the delay in sorting out the dynamics between emergency planning and anti-terrorism planning, the more likely it is for the two to be entrenched as if separate entities and the greater the risk that they would erroneously end as conflicting priorities. The million-dollar question is "how do we integrate or coordinate the two under one umbrella?"

Making the link

Some would argue that the two activities - emergency planning and antiterrorism planning, should be kept separate. These folks often relate as their reason the uniqueness of each of these fields of practice, the need to protect related information (i.e., secrecy, confidentiality), or the jurisdictional lines that already exist with responsibility for each activity or element. All these are valid reasons for caution and thoughtful integration. However, they are not a basis to avoid what must be the inevitable: the establishment of a multi-hazard approach to emergency planning that would include bio-terrorism and bio-emergencies as it currently includes natural and technological emergencies.

In fact, the validity of multi-hazard planning, versus agent specific planning, is well documented, recognized and accepted in the emergency management profession. It makes sense, therefore, to

include another category under the large umbrella of disaster agents, which considers likely acts of terrorism as applicable to the jurisdiction in question (i.e., municipality).

The 'link' is the same as it is (by necessity) for all other emergency planning activities: A multi-jurisdictional team effort! But, how does one achieve this link?

Requirements for success

On the one hand, it is encouraging to see the additional resources now being committed to ensure better preparedness and protection from acts of terrorism or bio-emergencies. On the other, the situation raises two concerns. One relates to the possibility that fighting terrorism may be a short-lived 'flavor of the month', and would lose its appeal when nothing happens or expenses exceed their political appeal. The other concern relates to the understandable limitation of public budgets. With the apparent all-out effort to ensure better security for events that have low probability but high consequence, we could undermine preparedness for the more likely threats of natural and technological emergencies. Obviously, the two activities need to be balanced and should not be viewed as one being more important than the other.

Another requirement for success relates to the process of planning. Successful emergency planning is often achieved through recognition of the need and therefore value of multi-jurisdictional cooperation. It is based on the reality that disaster response requires resources, effort and jurisdictional commitment beyond the capacity of any single response agency. Experience often confirms that emergency planning is best implemented through the integration of diverse resources and expectations into a cohesive framework - the emergency plan.

Planning for terror-based or bio-emergencies could be conducted within a select group of agencies - typically the police, intelligence, health or scientific community. Left to themselves, these organizations could do wonders to identify likely targets or agents, suggest preventative actions (e.g., security or protective measures), or recommend response activities and remedies. But then, the arduous task of response always rests squarely on the shoulders of front line (i.e., street level) responders. These are the EMTs, fire officers, police constables, utility personnel and so on.

Unless these first responders are part of the information loop in the anti-terrorism planning process, they are likely to get hit with a double whammy: uncertainty about the consequence of the 'event' (i.e., its damage) *plus* the added uncertainty about the agent and its potentially continuing threat. This is bound to complicate an already chaotic and demanding task. Naturally, the time to get some answers and establish response procedures is not in the midst of the event.

Given the nature of emergencies, especially those generated by terrorism or biological agents, there is a need to effectively address a number of key questions. Not surprisingly, these are similar to the questions raised during the planning process for the more common emergencies (i.e., natural, technological).

- What are the likely and realistic risks (i.e., terrorism or biological-related) for the municipality or entity in question?
- How would the municipality respond to such occurrences?

- What are the related roles and responsibilities for each stakeholder in the process? (Could they actually deliver on these roles?)
- What types of information could be provided to practitioners? What are the sources, and could this information be available? How?
- What specialized resources are needed, and from where are they available? How could they be accessed, and by whom?
- How could first responders be protected from the unique agents of an act of terrorism or a biological emergency?
- What tools are needed, and which are in place, to facilitate timely and meaningful emergency public information?

The bottom line

Life as we knew it has been significantly altered by the events of September 11, 2001. As a minimum, we are now more aware of the other threats to our community, some through acts of terror others through biological agents that are 'natural' but deadly. The good news is that bio-medical and terrorism-based emergencies are receiving broader attention. The 'bad news' is that this attention may fragment emergency planning into two teams: the natural and technological-agent team on the one hand, and the terrorism and bio-medical-agent team on the other. Should this trend continue unchecked, it may well reduce the capacity of emergency response practitioners to perform their tasks at grass-root level. That is unacceptable and must be remedied through a collaborative effort to integrate the two planning processes.

Ron Kuban, Ph.D. is the CEO of **Pegasus Emergency Management Consortium Corp.** specializing in emergency preparedness, crisis management and business recovery. Please mail your comments to 3116 - 36B Avenue, Edmonton, AB, Canada, T6T 1H4; phone (780) 463-5252; fax (780) 468-4224; Email (rkuban@compusmart.ab.ca). **Check out our Bulletin Board at: www.PegasusEMC.com**

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