Editorial

What should emergency managers be doing to help control the millennium bug?

With January 1st 2000 approaching fast, we are hearing much more about the Year 2000 date problem and its potential effects. At first, we were led to believe that the Year 2000 date problem, or the millennium bug as it is often called, was something that only occurred in computers. So, if we didn't own or use a computer we probably took little interest because it was unlikely to affect us. However, now that the millennium bug has been identified as a broad electronic problem, it appears unlikely that anyone will be spared from this phenomenon which threatens to attack community lifelines and place our personal safety and that of the community at risk.

How did we get into this situation? Well, it seems that when computers were in their infancy and had limited memory, computer programmers abbreviated data to save space. In particular, dates were often shortened to only two digits instead of four. For example, 1946 was stored as 46. Electronic systems that use the last two digits of a year would therefore assume dates which will always be in the 19 hundreds. So, when the year changes from 1999 to 2000, some systems may recognise 00 as 1900, or as no date at all.

But this date problem is not confined to computers. Microchips embedded in machinery and electronic devices we use every day may also be affected. This type of technology is used in traffic control devices, building management systems, fire and security alarms, water purification and life support systems, communications equipment and even home appliances.

The Year 2000 problem has potential implications for public safety agencies in two major areas. Firstly, it can impact on internal systems that use a date function. Radios, mobile phones, computer-aided dispatch, emergency management information systems, early warning systems and alarms readily come to mind. Secondly, it may cause dislocation of community lifelines that rely on any form of embedded technology. As previously mentioned, medical systems, public utilities such as power, water and sewerage, ventilation systems, lifts and emergency systems in buildings, traffic control devices fall into this category. Their failure or malfunction will have a serious impact on public safety and could lead to an unprecedented demand on emergency services.

Advice from State and Territory emergency management committees indicates that internal problems are being addressed by public safety agencies with triage being undertaken to render systems 'Year 2000 compliant'. But there appears to be little activity in regard to the identification of external events which could occur due to the inability of private and public sector organisations to identify and fix possible causes of failure or malfunction and to plan to deal with their consequences.

Time is running out. But it is still not too late for emergency managers to seize the initiative and influence the outcome of the Year 2000 date problem. Public and private sector organisations, particularly those which provide community lifelines, all have a role to play in controlling the millennium bug. They must be brought together to think holistically about the hazard and the risks it poses. The consequences of failure or malfunctioning of community lifelines will be demands for emergency services which, if not met satisfactorily, will place emergency service organisations under public scrutiny.

Emergency managers cannot allow this to happen. They can help to prevent the millennium bug from creating havoc on public safety by ascertaining the Year 2000 status in their jurisdiction, by assisting to continue to create an awareness of the problem and, where necessary, working with the community to identify where the 'bug' might be lurking, the harm it could cause to the community and by developing plans to control it.

Now is the time to take control of the bug before it takes control of us!

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