

Good practice in Emergency Management

Community education and awareness is slowly climbing up the priority task list for emergency management organisations.

It's a slow climb because there are some real obstacles in the way.

These include the scarcity of resources (both people and money) available to implement education and awareness programs; and more importantly some significant scepticism on the part of senior managers on the contribution of awareness and education programs to the 'core business' of managing emergencies.

Australia's emergency management organisations are all moving towards adopting a risk management model where the community has a responsibility to share in limiting the risk of a disaster—to be aware and to be prepared. In this model, the community helps itself, rather than relying completely on emergency services. Equally, the organization has a responsibility to inform, prepare and educate the community about disasters.

So on the progress chart, most are making significant headway, but headway that is limited by the two factors of resources and management scepticism.

It is against this backdrop that EMA has produced *The Good Practice Guide*—Community Awareness and Education in Emergency Management.

It tackles both the problem of resources (as how to win and justify them) and scepticism (as how to measure the benefits of the communication and education program).

The Good Practice Guide is aimed at a large audience—all those people and organisations in Australia that take responsibility for community awareness and education in emergency management.

They include State Emergency Services, fire authorities, local government bodies and the many community groups such as Rotary International, the Country Women's Association, school parents' organisations and residents' groups who also share a concern for the well being of the community in the context of natural and technological hazards.

All of them share either a responsibility, or a commitment, to reduce the loss of life, property damage and the social and economic disruption caused by disasters. All these organisations recognise that a well-aware and well-prepared community can reduce the impact of the disaster.

While the community can be effectively involved across the entire prevention, preparedness, responsive and recovery spectrum, *The Guide*

focuses on the pre-event activities in the context of awareness and education.

The Good Practice Guide is aimed at helping those people and organisations do their job better. It comprises practical advice on planning and implementing community communication campaigns. It includes advice on media relations, sponsors and partners and it has a collection of good communication ideas.

This is not intended as a complete and detailed 'how to' manual that can be applied and followed anywhere in Australia. Rather, it sets out principles, directions, plans and ideas which people and organisations can then modify and apply in their local communities.

One of the important messages in *The Good Practice Guide* is that, in a communication sense, one solution does not fit every situation. Each communication act, whether it is a media release, a neighbourhood door knock, a community meeting or a brochure, must be tailored to the needs and expectations of the groups and audiences that make up the community.

Director General of EMA, Alan Hodges, has made it clear that *The Good Practice Guide* is aimed at helping emergency management organisations improve their communication, and also push awareness and education up the priority list.

EMA has already recognised that in disaster management organisations there is still some residual scepticism about the effectiveness of community awareness campaigns, particularly in terms of their ability to influence behaviour.

The resolution of this issue is tied to the fact that little evaluation has been done on the effectiveness of campaigns. Where evaluation has been done on specific and targeted local campaigns, the evaluation results have shown that the campaigns did influence behaviour.

The research showed that many campaigns and education programs (particularly those implemented by State fire authorities) improved the community's knowledge of the risk and also influenced behaviour in the emergency.

But unless more attention is paid to evaluation at a local level (i.e. on particular campaigns, addressing particular hazards seeking particular behavioural outcomes) then agencies will be consigned to never knowing whether or not their campaigns achieved anything at all.

Perhaps the most useful and influential part of *The Good Practice Guide*—particularly in a management sense—is a practical and low cost evaluation methodology that can be applied at a local level.

It is this problem of measurement of effect that dogs the awareness work of Australia's emergency

management community. In the resource-strapped, rationalised organisations, it is imperative that the effect of awareness and education campaigns can be measured.

The penalty for not measuring effectiveness is to be consigned to the 'ineffective' basket in the organization.

But solving these problems have to be seen against a historical background where the notions of awareness and education as a legitimate part of organization's risk management framework are still fairly new.

Two observations by two members of emergency management organisations who I talked to as part of the research project capture the conflict between needs and resources.

One emergency service officer involved in community awareness observed:

'I do get tired of carrying the begging bowl for everything that I do. It's a hard slog. It makes it difficult. You do as well as you can, but it is always less than the community deserves.'

A State-based manager had a variation on that same view:

'It may be that we are not having much effect. I find it difficult to believe that much of what we have done in Australian emergency management in general has had the sort of effect in terms of bending people's minds towards appropriate mitigation behaviour. Part of the reason of course is that community awareness has never been given resources to do anything. No money is no money, so it gets a small bit of attention. We do simple brainless things like handing out cards that people don't want.'

So there are some important responsibilities here that need to be taken up. The first is a responsibility on managers to resource the community awareness and education function so that it can contribute to the overall objectives of the organization. The second is a responsibility on both managers and staff to devise evaluation methods that answer the questions about effectiveness.

The Good Practice Guide starts those two responsibility balls rolling.

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