Speaking as one: The joint provision of public information in emergencies

Anne Leadbeater, of the Office of the Emergency Services Commissioner in Victoria, highlights the critical importance of emergency services speaking with one voice when providing public information in emergencies.

At 8.50am on July 7, 2005, a bomb explodes on a train travelling in the London Underground between Liverpool and Aldgate stations. One minute later, another explosion occurs on the train travelling from Edgware Road to Paddington. At 8.53am, a third blast is detonated on a train travelling on the Piccadilly Line. For the next 45 minutes, emergency agencies scramble to respond to what are thought initially to be a series of isolated events, variously anticipated as 'power surges', 'collisions', 'a derailment', and a 'tunnel fire'.

Despite media outlets fielding calls within minutes of the first explosion, followed, within half an hour, by reports from eye-witnesses of 'bodies on the line at Aldgate', the official report of 'possible power surges' persists for almost an hour. At 9.46am, it is 'finally discredited' with a fourth explosion on board a bus at Tavistock Square, after which 'the official "line" was changed to reflect what had actually happened' (London Assembly 2006, p. 137), from the Report of the July 7 Review Committee into the London Bombings.

ABSTRACT

Access to information that is timely, accurate and consistent is a critical element in any disaster or major incident. That it is also, almost invariably, one of the first 'casualties' is possibly the most challenging aspect of emergency management today. The importance of effective communication cannot be overstated; as Bullock et al observe:

> Reaching the widest possible audience with the most up-to-date, credible information can save lives and property, reduce public fears and anxiety, and maintain the public's trust in the integrity of government officials.
> (2004, p. 3)

However, the challenges for first responders gathering data during the initial stages of an emergency, combined with the capacity and interoperability of emergency systems and protocols and the need to verify and approve the release of information can significantly constrain the flow of knowledge in an emergency. According to Richard Falkenrath, Visiting Fellow of the Brookings Institute, 'a bit of experience managing complex national incidents teaches three iron rules':

1. First reports are usually inaccurate;

2. Accurate reports are typically embedded within significant uncertainty; and

3. The public, the media and the government's communications specialists will demand information much faster than "the interagency" is prepared to provide it.
(2005, p. 133)

In an effort to address the critical issues

of providing emergency information to communities and sharing intelligence and data between response agencies, many governments and emergency managers world-wide are implementing protocols to facilitate information-sharing between the responding agencies; those at risk or directly affected by an emergency; the broader community and the media. Known variously as 'joint information systems' (JISs), 'joint public information committees' (JPICs), or 'public information and warning partnerships (PIWPs), these entities are established with the common aim of facilitating effective multi-agency responses to, and mitigating the consequences of emergencies through the efficient collection, analysis and dissemination of information.

The formation of joint information systems to develop and deliver key messages in emergencies has primarily evolved from the lessons learned during and after the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York. As part of the National Information Management System, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has developed a comprehensive protocol for the establishment and operation of a joint information system staffed by public information officers (PIOs) representing government, emergency response and other stakeholder agencies. FEMA describe this model as 'the systems used to deliver the right information to the right people at the right time, in order that they may make the right decisions' (2008). FEMA's public information systems operate on three basic principles:

1. The role of the Public Information Officer (PIO) is to support Incident Command;

2. Public information functions must be coordinated and integrated across jurisdictions and functional agencies; among Federal, State, local, and tribal partners; and with private-sector entities and nongovernmental organisations; and

3. Organisations participating in incident management retain their independence (ibid).

In considering the efficacy of joint public information systems, this paper will reflect on FEMA's pre-emptive model of information management and will examine the small but growing body of research that evaluates specific examples of the 'joint public information committee' model in relation to particular emergency situations. It will seek to identify the key challenges inherent in the successful establishment and operation of a joint public information committee and will draw on the available literature to explore those challenges.

A new world view

Technological advances have, over the last decade or so, facilitated a proliferation of new and increasingly portable means of communication and an extraordinary level of access to and use of the internet. This same period has seen an escalation in 'connectivity' including 24 hour news broadcasts, text messaging, geographic information systems, cable television, satellite transmissions, webcasts, blogging, and more. Not only has this emerging technology 'radically altered the way we collect, process, analyse, utilise, and disseminate information' (Rodriguez et al. 2007, p.483), it has fuelled an unprecedented level of public expectation concerning information availability and the capacity for emergency managers to provide timely, consistent, coordinated and trustworthy responses.

Prior to this profusion of technology, emergency managers could rely on having at least a small window of time in which to assess and evaluate a situation and to then 'manage' emergency information through the development and release of a media statement to their choice of sources. The current reality sees a population that can be 'virtually' and instantly connected and where anyone with a mobile phone has the capacity to become a 'breaking news' reporter. As an example of the speed with which news can travel in the contemporary environment, journalist and author Margaret Simons cites Gary Linnell, Director of News and Current Affairs for Channel Nine, Melbourne. Linnell recalls that his teenage son in Melbourne learned of the 2005 London Bombings from a friend in London via an internet chat room before Linnell, himself did and prior to any television coverage on either Sky News, BBC World or any local networks (2007, p.299).

The increasing demand for information and knowledge is occurring in a social and political environment that is experiencing rising levels of public participation in policy development and governance (OESC 2008, p. 43). Importantly, the right of all Victorians to participate in public life is now protected under Section 18 of the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities.

Section 18 of the Charter, 'Taking Part in Public Life' not only establishes the right to participate, but requires that citizens be afforded the 'opportunity' to participate '...in all levels of public governance and policy making' including 'matters that have international, regional and local impacts' (VEOHRC 2008, p.21). Handmer and Dovers note that efforts to encourage 'broad-based ownership of emergency management policy' are resulting in 'an expanding involvement away from a select group of specialists towards engagement with many stakeholders' (2007, p. 80).

The benefits of improved communication and collaboration in emergency management are well documented, (See Drabek 2007, p.230; US Department of Homeland Security 2008; Haddow and Bullock 2006; London Assembly 2006; OESC 2008; Pike 2006; Rodriquez et al. 2007; Handmer and Dovers 2007) and form the cornerstone of reviews and recommendations for future improvement (London Assembly 2006; Home Office UK 2006; Jefferson 2006; McEntire 2007; OESC 2008). However, a growing range of participants, 'each with their own agendas and priorities' adds, inexorably, to the complexity and multiplicity of demands faced by emergency managers (Handmer and Dovers 2007, p. 80). The model of the joint information committee provides a valuable framework to assist in dealing with these complexities, but in order to succeed it requires that the critical issue of 'relationships' is acknowledged and understood.

Relationships and trust

In emergency communications, relationships can generally be categorised as existing between 'agencies, with each other', 'agencies and the community', 'agencies and the media', and 'the media and communities'. In terms of the relationship between agencies, the successful operation of a joint information committee relies heavily on the capacity for agencies to participate effectively, to work cooperatively and to understand and value each others roles, responsibilities and capabilities. The negotiation and management of conflicting priorities, policies and organisational values is also a key element for joint information committees. In discussing international emergencies, Haddow and Bullock describe coordination and cooperation as vital considerations, which, when achieved can result in 'great success and many lives saved', whereas 'infighting, turf battles, and non-participation can lead to confusion and even cause a second disaster (2006, p. 221).

Caption: Kinglake residents gather to hear CFA, DSE, Police and local government advice about an impending fire – January 2006

Courtesy: Paul Hendrie

One of the key elements of all relationships concerning the joint provision of information is that of 'trust' – and this is particularly true of the relationship between agencies and the community. In 'Preparing for Natural Hazards: the role of community trust', Douglas Paton states that it is not the content of emergency information that determines action but rather, how that information is interpreted in the context of individual and community 'experiences, expectations and beliefs'. He further contends that the relationship between the community and the source of the information has a great bearing on its interpretation (2007, p. 370-371).

Mike Granatt, Visiting Professor, University of Westminster and former Head of the UK Government Information and Communication Service, states that the key role of 'public information and warning partnerships' in the UK 'is to create and sustain trust, particularly between official bodies, including central and local government, and the news media' (2004, p. 355). He recommends using 'authoritative sources to deliver the same messages' given that, when 'faced with unexpected advice, people will seek a second source before acting'. Granatt warns that 'conflicting advice destroys trust' and 'that a particular fright factor is conflicting messages from voices of authority' (ibid, p. 358). He observes:

> 'The paramount need for consistency and confirmation puts a very high premium on cooperation and coordination between all those involved in issuing or handling public warnings and information during an emergency including experts, public services and reputable broadcasters' (ibid, p. 359).

An effective example of the relationship between consistency and trust is provided within the *Report of the July 7 Review Committee into the London Bombings.* The report is critical of the fact that it was not until 11.15am, almost two and a half hours after the initial explosion that the first message of advice was communicated to the general public via a news conference, and that it simply comprised the generic message to 'go in, stay in, tune in'. Presented by Police Commissioner, Sir Ian Blair, the news footage was replayed throughout the day, even after the message to 'go in, stay in, tune in' was no longer relevant. As it was not 'time-limited', the message conflicted with an announcement at 3pm that the bus service was being reinstated, causing further confusion and delays for people seeking to return home from central London. 'Because Sir Ian Blair gave the first news conference himself at 11.15am, subsequent interviews with less senior officers were not seen to supersede that news conference' (London Assembly 2006, p. 88).

Working with the media

Relationships between emergency services and the media are particularly complex and crucial. They can be affected by competing priorities, media deadlines, access to and verification of information, and the past experiences of journalists and emergency management agencies. In the event of any disaster, 'the media learn about it, report what they hear, try to obtain more information, use their files to add background to their

stories, and dispatch news crews' (Scanlon 2007b, p. 414). In 'Partnerships: The Path to Improving Crisis Communication' Fitzpatrick observes:

> 'Minutes after an incident occurs, media inquiries will overwhelm the local police chief and fire chief at an emergency scene or via pager or cellular telephone. What they say to the media and the language they use sets the tone for whether the public remains calm or reacts in fear' (2007, p. 19).

Depending on the nature of the emergency, media interest can manifest on a vast scale. For example, as far back as 1988 several thousand media made their way to the small, border town of Lockerbie, Scotland in the first 48 hours after the crash of Pan Am 103, (Scanlon 2007b, p. 415). Significant tensions were experienced in New York in the days following the attack on the World Trade Centre when the media presence 'swelled to 5000 journalists and technical personnel' (Granatt 2004, p. 364). This phenomenon, identified in 1957 by Fritz and Mathewson as 'convergence' can also extend to volunteers and off-duty emergency personnel who 'self-dispatch' to emergencies in response to media reports (Scanlon 2007a, p.83)

An on-going cause of tension in relationships with the media is the dissemination of misinformation and/or rumour. Formal and informal cooperation between journalists and media outlets, together with the copying of rival reports, can mean that one report (true or false) may be repeated many times and via different media methods. Media reports can tend to perpetuate myths of panic, confusion and looting in the wake of emergencies, and, in some instances, may encourage altered behaviour, such as panic buying, so that the 'visuals will match the myths' (Scanlon 2007b, p. 417). In seeking to establish and maintain positive working relationships with the media, proactive efforts are required to 'prevent the information vacuum'—as 'in the absence of information, speculation will take over' (Pike 2006, p. 11).

In spite of these challenges, the role of the media in emergencies is imperative. Fitzpatrick urges emergency managers to make use of the media's capacity to influence public behaviour and to disseminate protective behaviour information:

'The need for first responders and the broadcast news media to work cooperatively in a crisis cannot be overstated. The loss of more than 1,500 people in Hurricane Katrina is a sobering reminder of the consequences of a failure on the part of public officials and broadcast media to deliver consistent safety messages' (2007, p. 1).

In his paper 'On Trust: Using public information and warning partnerships to support the community response to an emergency', Granatt examines and compares the levels of credibility and public trust afforded to various emergency management stakeholders and observes:

> 'It is widely agreed there is no practical substitute for using the media to broadcast detailed information, and indeed some obvious advantages, given their reach and credibility with the public' (2004, p. 357).

Haddow and Bullock reflect on the challenge of disseminating accurate risk information to the public amidst many other competing and potentially conflicting information sources, stating:

> 'The government has no control over what unofficial sources say because it can't regulate talking heads, so-called experts, and Web sites. Partnering with the media to provide a steady stream of consistent and accurate information from responsible authorities is the best way to overcome this obstacle' (2006, p. 206).

To establish and support working relationships with the media, FEMA has developed a comprehensive on-line training program for public information officers together with a series of checklists to ensure that the priorities and constraints faced by the media will be considered in the management of emergency information (2008). In 9/11: Implications for Communications, the UK Media Emergency Forum sets out a draft protocol for crisis communication that encompasses participants, timing, background, content, accreditation, media access, access to victims, safety issues, establishment of a media centre, media pooling arrangements, role of the Media Emergency Forum Standing Committee of Editors and the status of media organisations as priority users of essential services such as fuel and power (Media Emergency Forum 2002).

There is agreement between emergency managers and the media that positive, cooperative relationships can deliver optimum outcomes both in the response and recovery phase of an emergency. During the protracted rescue operation following the 2006 collapse of Tasmania's Beaconsfield Mine Joint Venture, a comprehensive, multi-agency plan was established to manage the national and international media interest in the rescue of the two trapped miners. There were thirteen identified stakeholder groups including Mine management and staff, Tasmania Police and Emergency Services, the Chief Inspector of Mines, the Australian Workers Union, Launceston General Hospital, the West Tamar Council, and the Tasmanian Minerals Council. According to Constable Phil Pike, media specialist with Tasmania Police, all stakeholders 'had to be included in the communications processes to varying degrees' (Pike 2006, p. 6). One of the key outcomes of the management process was the negotiation with media sources to share 'pool footage' of miners, Webb and Russell, emerging from the mine, filmed by one cameraman provided with a suitable vantage point and 'live linked' to all networks. This arrangement provided access to high quality footage for all visual media, whilst still protecting the rights of the miners and their families, mine operators and staff. Prior agreements and guaranteed access to footage also facilitated the unhindered passage of ambulances transferring Russell and Webb to hospital through the waiting crowd of media and community (ibid).

Resourcing

A fundamental relationship exists between any joint information system and the resources required to enact and operate it. The issue of resourcing is critical both in terms of physical resources such as suitable equipment, technology, infrastructure and location, as well as access to sufficient numbers of experienced staff and the financial resources to operate the system throughout the response and recovery phases of an emergency. Whilst there is ample evidence to support the value of pre-planned emergency communication strategies (See Handmer and Dovers 2007; Media Emergency Forum 2002; OESC 2008; US Department of Homeland Security 2008; Jackson 2008), as Bullock et al observe:

> 'The most well-written communication plan is not worth much without a strong commitment from elected officials and department managers to put the infrastructure in place to carry out the plan' (2004, p. 4).

The primary consideration is the development of protocols that determine and authorise the establishment of a joint information system. Clear, agreed guidelines are required that will identify and support the need for a joint information system and/or the establishment of a joint information centre in any given emergency. Failure to develop and adhere to these guidelines will likely result in experiences such as the aftermath of the terrorist attack on the Pentagon on September 11, 2001; The *Arlington County After-Action Report* states:

> 'The failure to establish a Joint Information Centre (JIC) proved to be an impediment to the presentation of coordinated, factual, and timely public information. There was not a central point of interface between the media and the agencies involved in the response. Each agency dealt separately with the media' (2002, p. 53).

By contrast, the *Report on the Southern California Firestorm 2003* observes:

> '...that establishing a multi-agency JIC had a significant positive effect on the timeliness and effectiveness of information management when compared to large incidents that did not use a JIC' (Mission-Centered Solutions 2003, p. 10).

Once the joint information system is established, one of the key resource challenges is the need for it to be 'scalable' in response to an escalation of the emergency. An incident that begins with one public information officer with a 'go kit' in the field may end up requiring a fully staffed Emergency Operations and Media Centre (FEMA 2008). Both the UK Media Emergency Forum Joint Working Party and FEMA recommend the prior development of protocols outlining 'the basic requirements of a media centre' as well as 'prior clarification of financial and staff resource support arrangements' before an emergency incident occurs (Media Emergency Forum 2002; FEMA 2008). Both agencies agree that the establishment of a JIC should

not be determined or delayed by financial considerations – however, the question of 'who pays' must be addressed (ibid).

Another significant challenge is the number of requests for information that a JIC may receive. In the aftermath of the London Bombings, the establishment of a Casualty Bureau, at first delayed by an incorrect telecommunications connection, was eventually operational at 4.00pm, seven hours after the first explosions. In its first hour of operation, there were 42,000 attempted calls to the Casualty Bureau. It is estimated that to handle the volume of calls received would have required 2,500 call-takers' (London Assembly 2006, p. 84). However, even this enormous volume of calls seems small when compared to the 400 million attempted calls on the day of the World Trade Centre attacks. Communications were further compromised by the fact that key internet servers were located within the World Trade Centre complex (Granatt 2004, p. 364). Issues with the capacity and interoperability of radio and telephone systems also feature extensively in post-disaster evaluations, such as the failure of mobile telephones to operate in the underground railway system after the London Bombings (London Assembly 2006).

Infrastructure and telecommunications resources are essential considerations when planning for emergency communications. Table top exercises undertaken by the UK Media Emergency Forum in 2002 involved a scenario of two linked chemical attacks in Northern England. According to 'mid-range calculations' such an emergency would see hundreds of media personnel and tens of satellite and other support vehicles on site within hours. 'After 24 hours, the estimate was 3,000 staff and 100 support vehicles'. Such an influx of media raises a number of issues including reinforcement and/or restriction of mobile telephone systems essential to outside broadcasting, siting of satellite trucks and frequency clearances, location of media centres and vantage points, accreditation of media personnel and pooling arrangements (Granatt 2004, p. 365).

The small Tasmanian community of Beaconsfield experienced its own media convergence following the mine collapse in 2005. Constable Phil Pike reports that the public park around the mine boundary became a camping ground for the media contingent, which included news, current affairs, and morning show presenters and crews from the major mainland networks as well as radio and newspaper journalists and an extensive number of photographers. According to Pike, 'the discovery of Webb and Russell saw an explosion in hired campervans, broadcast vans and media tents' (2006, p. 8).

The US Department of Homeland Security's 'Lessons Learned Information Sharing' website (LLIS 2008) includes a Best Practice guide to Crisis Communication Planning and the establishment of Joint Information Centres. This guide makes recommendations about JIC locations, including that they be 'easily accessible, with sufficient parking, power, phones and phone lines and

minimal background noise'. The location should be close to the incident and the emergency operations centre, but at a distance sufficient to ensure that JIC staff are safe and that the operations of the JIC do not conflict with the emergency response (ibid).

In pre-planning a joint information system or joint information centre, the issue of availability, experience and qualifications of staff is an essential factor. FEMA recommends that emergency managers identify 'the staffing capabilities needed to maintain public information operations for 24 hours per day for at least several days' as well as establishing agreements and authority to borrow, hire or call up temporary staff. Further recommendations concern staff training, suggesting that all staff that have been identified to assist JIC operations should be provided with training prior to an incident. A comprehensive resource to assist with staff training is available via FEMA. Comprising seven web-based lessons, the NIMS Public Information Systems course (IS-702) provides detailed information about the Joint Information Systems concept, pre-incident activities, public information systems during an incident, and post-incident activities. The on-line course, targeted at public information officers, is readily available from the FEMA website. As well as providing a thorough understanding of the philosophies and processes of the joint information system, the course also generates organisation-specific checklists and self-assessment guides based on the information provided by participants during the lessons (FEMA 2008).

Information

FEMA identifies that 'the best defence in any disaster is an informed public' (2008). Whilst the benefits of an integrated approach to emergency information are evident, the development and dissemination of public information is, by no means, a straightforward issue. The first consideration is access to accurate data about the size, scope and implications of an emergency. This data must then inform the development of key messages for the public about how to respond to the emergency in order to minimise loss of life, injury and loss of property. This information will vary in relation to the type, duration and scale of the incident, as well as the target audience. To be effective, it must anticipate social, geographical, technological, demographic and linguistic barriers; it must be consistent, up-to-date, concise, and relevant; and it must be delivered across a range of mediums by a trusted, authoritative source (ibid).

Adding to this complexity, the information provided must engage with physical and psychological reactions to stress and fear in order to motivate the actions required to mitigate the affects of the emergency. In The Unthinkable: who survives when disaster strikes – and why, journalist and researcher Amanda Ripley divides the reaction of individuals to a crisis into three phases. 'Denial'—the initial response period where individuals seek to normalise their situation, often by delaying any decisive action; 'Deliberation'—the process during which humans review their reserves of knowledge and previous experience in order to try to make sense of what is

happening to them; and the 'Decisive Moment'—when individuals react, either appropriately or inappropriately, or fail to react to the threat of disaster (2008). Thus, the most effective emergency communication will not only seek to provide the information needed to understand and respond to a disaster. It will also be developed and disseminated in such a way as to support individuals to cope with their instinctive responses and to elicit the required actions that will best protect them. The inherent challenges are well illustrated by Ripley who cites a survey conducted in 2006 by the Harvard School of Public Health. Less than one year after Hurricane Katrina, researchers interviewed 2,029 people living in high-risk hurricane zones. When asked what they would do if told by government officials that they had to evacuate before a major hurricane, and despite images of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina still featuring regularly in news broadcasts, 25 percent of respondents said they would not leave. A further nine percent responded that they were not sure what they would do, making a total of 34 percent of people who may not evacuate, despite official advice to do so (ibid. p. 39).

Courtesy: J Leadbeater

'What we know, what we don't know, what we are doing and what we need you to do' - Emergency services and relief agencies met with Kinglake residents every day after the Black Saturday fires in February 2009.

It is not difficult to imagine how such ambivalence could be magnified by information that is conflicting, out of date or construed as untrustworthy. By contrast, the operation of a joint information system established in response to Hurricane Gustav in 2008 delivered positive outcomes. Lead PIO with the Arkansas Department of Emergency Management, Tommy Jackson identified the constructive elements of such an integrated approach. With lead officers from a range of key agencies on hand to share in preparing press releases, together with email and cell phone contact with the Governor's Office, utilities and others, the Arkansas Department of Emergency Management was, according to Jackson, able to 'get closer to our goal of one voice for the citizens of Arkansas' (Jackson 2008).

'Knowledge is power', according to the old adage, and this is certainly true in emergencies. The more one knows and understands about a situation, the better one will perform and, ultimately, recover from the experience. From their book 'Deadly Force Encounters', Ripley cites police psychologist Alexis Artwohl and co-author Loren Christensen:

> The actual threat is not nearly as important as the level of preparation. The more prepared you are, the more in control you feel, and the less fear you will experience (2008, p. 70).

The implications of the relationship between knowledge and power in emergency management are significant. People who have pertinent information before an emergency are more likely to respond appropriately and effectively during the event. Adherence by the community to messages such as 'Leave Early or Stay and Defend' (CFA 2008) and 'Go In, Stay In, Stay Tuned' (UK Cabinet Office 2008) establish a connection or 'communication gateway' through which specific, expert information can be provided.

One way of valuing and integrating local knowledge is the monitoring of requests for information made to call centres during an emergency and using those questions to inform the development of key emergency messages (FEMA 2008; Scanlon 2007b). Another important strategy is to engage with and integrate emergency responders and local government representatives from affected communities into response and recovery planning processes (Caruson and MacManus 2006). As well as response information, the provision of preparedness and recovery information is greatly improved by multi-agency integration. Effectiveness is further enhanced through an understanding of local media and media audiences in the development of effective messages—such as the use of children's program Sesame Street to deliver information on hurricane preparedness (Scanlon 2007b, p. 418). Collaboration between agencies also facilitates the development of comprehensive, 'multi-faceted' messages that can best capitalise on the media's capacity for public education, warning and information dissemination (ibid).

Importantly, access to quality information before, during and after an event also has profound implications for resilience and recovery (Nicholls and Healy 2008). Information about recovery must, in some instances, be conveyed during the response phase of the emergency, engendering specific challenges for emergency managers who may be developing response and recovery strategies and messages simultaneously. The 7 July Review Committee observes:

> The most striking failing in the response to the 7 July attacks was the lack of planning to care for people who survived and were traumatised by the attacks. Hundreds of people were left to wander off from the scenes. An estimated 1,000 adults and 2,000 of their children are likely to have suffered from post-traumatic stress as a result of their experiences on 7 July. 3,000 others are estimated to have been directly affected by the explosions. The majority of them are still not known to the authorities, are not part of any

support network of survivors, and have been left to fend for themselves. Those who are known to the authorities in some cases received excellent care and support following 7 July. Others registered their details but received no follow-up contact, and no advice or information about the support that was available (London Assembly 2006, p. 121).

In some cases, recovery information will be needed for months, even years, after an event, with significant implications for resourcing. In the case of the attacks on the World Trade Centre, a program of crisis counselling and public education was established; called 'Project Liberty' the program expended $US137 million of federal funding from an allocated budget of US$155m. From September 2001 to December 2003, 'the program provided face-to-face counselling, education and outreach to an estimated 1.2 million individuals' (Nicholls and Healy, 2008 p.15).

Conclusion

The last decade has seen an increasing level of support for the value of joint information systems in managing emergencies. The importance of pre-planned, collaborative communication processes is well illustrated in the 7 July Review Committee's report into the London Bombings:

> The key to an effective response to a major or catastrophic incident is communication. This includes communication within and between the emergency, health, transport and other services. It also includes effective communication with the individuals caught up in the incident, and the public at large (London Assembly 2006, p. 12).

However, establishing and maintaining interagency communication and collaboration, whilst being vitally important, also poses some significant challenges. And, as Handmer and Dovers observe, '... the existence of interdepartmental committees does not, by itself, indicate that they achieve their aims' (2007, p. 137)

My personal interest in the provision of public information in emergencies began in 2006 as a member of a community under threat of bushfire. It developed, over the ensuing 12 months, as coordinator of bushfire recovery working with fire-affected communities in Murrindindi Shire. My experiences during that period provided many appreciable examples of the sense of empowerment and resilience derived by communities and individuals who felt they were included, respected and 'in the loop' in relation to emergency information. I was also able to witness, first-hand, the anger, frustration and sense of betrayal manifested by the provision of information that was perceived, or indeed proved to be conflicting, inaccurate, irrelevant or out-of-date.

The growing number of reports that evaluate 'lessons learned' in emergencies (See Arlington County 2002; FEMA 2008; Fitzpatrick 2007; Granatt 2004; Handmer and Dovers 2007; Home Office UK 2006; London Assembly 2006; Media Emergency Forum 2002; Mission-Centered Solutions 2003; OESC 2008; Rodriquez et al.

2007, etc.) suggest an increasing aptitude for self-reflection and a genuine commitment to accountability and continuous improvement amongst emergency services, world-wide. Part of this improvement is the nascent recognition that in all aspects of emergency preparedness, response and recovery, the community can and should be considered as active partners, rather than passive recipients—an evolving relationship that highlights communication as 'the lifeblood of participation' (Handmer and Dovers 2007, p. 76). The ability to anticipate, respond to and recover from emergencies is contingent on access to high-quality, consistent information, effectively disseminated by trustworthy sources. We know this is true of communities and individuals as well as governments, non-government agencies and emergency services. It is, hopefully, a 'lesson' that should not need to be learned more than once.

Courtesy: J Leadbeater

Fuel, water and roadblocks? – Emergency services and recovery agencies speaking with the Kinglake community in the immediate aftermath of Black Saturday.

Postscript

Whilst this paper predates the devastating bushfires in Victoria on 7 February 2009, the principles of multi-agency collaboration and joint communication were used during 'Black Saturday' and through the initial relief and recovery effort.

Victoria's Emergency Management Joint Public Information Committee (EMJPIC) was activated on 28 January 2009 in preparation for an impending heatwave and unprecedented fire conditions. EMJPIC, which is chaired by Victoria Police, comprises senior communications personnel from Victoria's emergency service agencies and other specialist organisations, and works to provide accurate, timely, and consistent emergency information.

In response to the heatwave and bushfires during January and February, the emergency management focus of EMJPIC broadened to encompass a whole-of-government approach with the dissemination of emergency and health warnings, weather alerts, information about power outages and road closures, advice for tourists and visitors to fire prone areas, information about fatalities and the impacts of the fires, provision of aerial images of the fire-affected areas, messages about school closures, details of Coroner's orders and the establishment of the Bushfire Royal Commission. Simultaneously, at the local level are examples of responding agencies meeting two to three times per day to prioritise key messages and to collaborate on a diverse range of recovery issues from the provision of water, fuel and emergency grants to the removal of dangerous trees and dead stock, access to emergency accommodation, fodder and fencing materials, counselling and business support.

The 7 February fires resulted in unprecedented media coverage for an event of its type generating over 122,000 separate media items from more than 1,250 journalists in the first month[1]. The events surrounding Black Saturday represent a unique opportunity to further evaluate the joint provision of public information in emergencies and to inform future research into the critical importance of emergency services 'speaking as one'.

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