



INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF EMERGENCY MANAGERS

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Your Mission: In just 14 days, deliver relief services to 125,000 homebound survivors at their doorways while searching out and resolving the unmet special needs of vulnerable survivors.

As an emergency manager, how are you going to complete this task? The answer: the Pathfinders Task Force. There exists today a huge gap following a major disaster in providing relief services to homebound survivors, especially the elderly and disabled.

Following disasters, pre-listed special needs populations receive attention, but thousands of vulnerable people who are not on those lists often are trapped in their homes for a variety of reasons. In addition, disaster welfare requests from loved ones inundate EOCs and unnecessarily drain emergency resources as response personnel are diverted to track down and resolve hundreds of such requests. An experienced, Type III Incident Management Team (IMT) out of Florida addresses this gap.

What is a Pathfinders Task Force?

The Pathfinders Task Force concept achieved the mission outlined above by serving more than 125,000 homebound Katrina survivors, while identifying and working to resolve the unmet special needs found in that door-to-door search in a 550 sq. mile area – in just 14 days. The model used there and detailed below can be replicated for future use around the country.

Frequently in disasters, various agencies struggling to meet the needs of the survivors end up at odds with other responding governmental and non-governmental agencies. This is particularly true when there is a convergence of overlapping operations that can be further confounded by self-deploying assets, including unaffiliated volunteers. Good intentions end up frustrating emergency managers, who are doing their best to coordinate hundreds and thousands of responders at a time when normal infrastructure – such as street lights, signage, electricity and cell phone towers – is not available. While a big focus has been on survivors who make it to points of distribution (PODs) and/ or those who make it to disaster recovery centers, it is the homebound who are the focus of the Pathfinders Task Force.

After a state of emergency is issued, an Advanced (“A”) Team of a Task Force Leader (TFL) and Operations & Planning Section Chiefs work to assist a local EOC as a deputy to either Emergency Support Function (ESF) 15 (Volunteers) or ESF 6 (Mass Care) in the local EOC. The IT and logistics section of the A Team load mapping and tracking software into mobile handheld devices (cell phones, Blackberries or the like) for the target area, along with enough equipment and supplies for the IMT to be totally self-supporting for the first 72 hours in the impact area.

Task Force Procedures

After the disaster and rapid reentry into the stricken area, personnel are paired up into five operational strike teams of seven crews each. Each crew has five to seven people, for a total of 35 crews split among the five strike teams. Based on predetermined grid search patterns, crews proceed down both sides of a street, knocking on every door.

A short disaster welfare check interview is conducted and logged into mobile devices, which not only geocode the location but also time and date-stamp the information. That welfare information can be uploaded to Web-based servers so that loved ones in other parts of the country can find out about their relatives' well being. Additionally, local survivors are recruited to volunteer during these door-to-door operations and are then rapidly

background-checked and trained by the IMT.

These Pathfinder crews really are working on the primary objective – seeking out and identifying the unmet special needs of homebound survivors. Other PTF crews with medical personnel follow up with any immediate unmet needs. The information gathered from these visits then is shared through the local EOC with a host of agencies focused on long-term recovery needs.

User Friendly Technology Adds to Efficiency of Operations

The technology component of this model was not available when the team was deployed to Katrina, and its unique features make it user friendly and fully functional in an environment where all wireless, cellular and Internet infrastructures have been destroyed. Any local EOC can customize the questions in a matter of minutes and all data is in Excel sortable spreadsheets. The military specified, affordable cell phones are available at a GSA-approved daily rate that can be reimbursable. The documentation will serve in mitigating future disasters, as a host of agencies are able to analyze and manipulate the data collected from a large response population and impact zone.

Three full-scale field exercises, with hundreds of volunteers aged 13-85, have tested the simple mobile unit. Every test has resulted in more than 1,000 survivor contacts per hour, validating what the IMT did in Katrina – a capacity never before achieved in such a short time period.

By working with the Pathfinders Task Force, emergency managers can efficiently use the thousands of volunteers who respond to major disasters in their area and combine them with local, state, federal and military responders in a NIMS-compliant structure, just as happened in PTF Katrina. The force multiplier effect is phenomenal. This IMT will increase accountability in the aftermath of a major disaster, while enabling volunteers to make a larger impact on the community they want to help.

FEMA has issued a national NIMS Alert on this resource while it considers typing the IMT for replication as a volunteer-focused unit. Also, a major university is designing a pilot project focused on this same concept, and a train-the-trainer program is being developed. Currently, the A Team of this Florida task force IMT stands ready to deploy with six hours notice to any major disaster anywhere in the world.

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