

The Knowledge Now series features practical research on timely topics from the Colorado Municipal League.

DISASTER RESPONSE: WHAT IS YOUR ROLE AS AN ELECTED OFFICIAL?

By Sam Mamet, CML executive director, and Meghan Storrie, CML legislative & policy advocate

WHEN A DISASTER UPSETS THE social fabric of a city or town, local leadership is needed more than ever. As a municipal leader, you have community connections, knowledge, and partners; you are the first person many people look to during a recovery.

So how do you promote community well-being after a disaster has impacted your community? It is a fine line — and a long road — to walk between setting reasonable, achievable expectations and fueling people's hope.

Research on disaster recovery informs us that when we promote feelings of safety, calm, connectedness, and hope, and a sense of self, a community and its citizens will show its resilience.

As a local leader, your greatest actions are what you say and what you personally do.

Safety

The recovery phase of a disaster largely means that the immediate threat to human life has subsided. But consequences of disasters can cause upsetting changes and stress in a person's day-to-day life. Even seemingly positive changes can create stress because they force a person into unfamiliar situations.

A person impacted by an emergency, who has never before had thousands of dollars readily available, might receive a Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) grant for his/her losses. Will he/she know how to manage the money received and plan for the long-term? Also, there are many other resources that might become available during or after an emergency that

creates change in a person's life. Recognize the changes that your citizens are undergoing and provide them with support.

Another way to promote a sense of safety is to under promise and over deliver. It can be tempting to promise that everything will be back to normal, if not better, but recovery time lines are full of hiccups and setbacks. If people are thinking too far down the line, the time between the promise of recovery and actually getting there will be discouraging. Reasonable expectations are cultivated by naming the interim recovery steps along the way. It is like painting a masterpiece. After one day, you do not have the whole landscape finished, but you can see that the barn in the corner is beautiful and done. Try to avoid backtracking on your promises. Instead, set time lines and expectations with lots of milestones to celebrate.

Calm

The stress of long-term recovery can stir up strong feelings. As the local public official, it can be hard to have those feelings directed at you. Do your best not to shy away. Normalize people's reactions to these abnormal events. Many will feel better once they feel heard and will appreciate the reassurance that their experience is to be expected. When people are worried and afraid — the worst thing you can do is pretend they are not or tell them they should not be. So, acknowledge and honor how they are feeling first, and then include the good news you have as follow up. People will not care about the good news you have until they know that you care.

Once you have validated their feelings, people will be more ready to listen. Give people simple instructions and information. Following disasters, a lot of different groups ask community members to remember many different things. Do your best to keep it simple.

When there are questions you do not have the answer to, do not feel rushed to respond. Tell them when you will have more information, and get answers to the questions for which you do not have the information available. Not only is it good policy not to make up what you do not know, but promising information and then delivering demonstrates that you follow through. People will generalize that trust in your leadership to other areas of recovery.

Connectedness

Nobody exposed to a disaster is unaffected, including you. You do not have to be Wonder Woman or Superman; it is probably best not to be. Instead, treat your constituents as partners in recovery. Help them get connected, not just to you, but to each other.

Be involved — do not hover above the recovery. Stay close to your community. Provide forums for them to be heard, to feel supported, and to sense shared community experiences. Recognize what they think is important and spend time with their "what ifs". If you do not have these conversations, then someone else with less investment in your community's well-being will fill the void.

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WHAT CAN A CITY OR TOWN DO SPECIFICALLY TO ORGANIZE AROUND A DISASTER?

Organization

For any large-scale emergency or disaster, it is the local government that has the responsibility to mitigate the risk and provide for the safety of the citizens and community. Colorado State Statute (C.R.S. 24-33.5-707) states that each county shall establish and maintain a disaster agency. This commonly involves designating an emergency manager for the jurisdiction (through resolution and job description), with specific roles and responsibilities for the purpose of protecting the public during emergencies and disasters. The emergency manager coordinates and provides responder training, emergency planning, mitigation alternatives and actions, and recovery considerations. The emergency manager is the link between the Incident Commander (IC) and local officials. In the absence of an emergency manager, an elected official holds this responsibility. It is imperative that the local elected officials understand the emergency management process and understand their role during an emergency.

Decisions

When an incident occurs in your municipality, emergency first responders and incident managers take action and begin to mitigate the problem. They do this at the operational level every day and are trained in the tactical decisions that are necessary for adequate response. The Incident Commander is in charge of all on-scene tactical operations.

Elected officials should be available to your key staff (i.e., city manager, town administrator) to help make strategic decisions when that emergency or disaster begins to stress the community.

At the strategic level, you must understand and focus on the effects of the incident on your city or town:

- How is the community responding to the incident?
- What are your priorities?
- What can you do as an elected official to keep the public calm and informed, while also allowing the incident managers to operate efficiently?

Follow the lead of your first responders, emergency manager, and other key staff.

When making decisions for the community, start with a few basic questions:

- What do you already know?
- What do you need to know?
- Who has the answers you need?
- What key tasks need to be accomplished?
- What are your priorities?

Initial Actions

Initial actions need to include the following:

- Determine the meeting location considering the incident and the location of elected officials and agency executives.
- Determine the key and elected officials relevant to the incident and communicate the location and time of the Policy Group meetings.
- Establish contact with your emergency manager.
- Is your city or town in contact with the Regional Field Manager or Duty Officer for the Colorado Office of Emergency Management (OEM)? 303-279-8855
- Has state assistance been requested? If so, what assistance has been requested?
- Obtain contact information for the:
 - Incident Command Post (ICP)
 - Emergency Operations Center (EOC)
 - Public Information Officer (PIO)
- Obtain briefing:
 - Geographic location and size of incident (i.e. acres/blocks)
 - Injuries and deaths
 - Evacuation status
 - Shelter status
 - Property damage
 - Resource shortfalls (we need something we cannot obtain)
 - Incident prognosis (growing, stabilizing, unknown)
- Establish contact with other elected/appointed officials as necessary.
- Coordinate with the Public Information Officers to ensure messages to the public instill confidence and a sense of calm.
- Temper expectations of what the government can do to aid in response and recovery.
- Provide input to the objectives of the Incident Action Plan (IAP) or any other Incident support documents.
- Make yourself available to address policy level issues and participate in Command or EOC meetings and briefings when invited by your key staff.
- Determine, with the help of your key staff, if a declaration of emergency or disaster should be made.

To read the complete version of *An Elected Official's Policy Guide for Disasters and Emergencies* visit the Colorado Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management website (www.dhsem.state.co.us). Download the publication at www.dhsem.state.co.us/sites/default/files/Policy%20Guide%20Handout%20FINAL%2012.12.pdf.

This is not the time for politics, but governing. People want their leaders aligned and working together, not bickering. The community will doubt the whole recovery process if leaders are perceived as not getting along.

Communication is key. So communicate endlessly, even about the unknown and the less-than-good. Panic and anger grow when people do not receive information and when there is conflicting information. Never underestimate the power of your municipality's own social media.

Individual and Community Efficacy

One of the cardinal rules of disaster behavioral health is never do for someone what they can do for themselves. Disasters upset people's sense of control in their own lives, so wherever we can, it is important to return that control to them. Leaders walk with their communities, accompanying and cheering their recovery, but individuals and community groups are the ones who get back to their feet.

Promote the resources that are there for survivors. Foster a team atmosphere — everyone in the community working together for the common good. As a member of your community, stay connected to it and walk the walk in setting reasonable expectations and taking care of yourself.

Do not shy away from talking about mental health and well-being. As a trusted community member and leader, you can do great good in reducing the stigma around mental health by simply mentioning the organizations and resources that are there to support survivors. Get to know your local community mental health center and their disaster behavioral health teams.

Most of all, keep all information flowing. Give people a menu of meaningful things to do that will allow them to make good decisions for their families.

Hope

You are the head cheerleader. Think New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani following Sept. 11. Whatever your politics, we can recognize the benefit of his presence to New Yorkers as they recovered. As

the local leader, you encourage your community through tough times and highlight accomplishment where it happens. How is this done by elected officials?

- Show them what recovery markers your city or town meets.
- Identify the next achievement you are working toward.
- Help them set reasonable expectations by describing the recovery road map.
- Help them see their own accomplishments and resilience.

In 2013, at the CML annual conference, we hosted a riveting "Meeting Of The Minds" lunch session with Colorado Springs Councilmember Jan Martin and Aurora Mayor Steve Hogan on how municipal elected officials help their cities and towns heal after serious traumatic events: the Colorado Springs Waldo Canyon Fire and the Aurora Theatre killings.

In 2014, at the CML annual conference, we hosted another lunch session on yet another disaster: the September 2013 historic and horrific floods. Jamestown Mayor Tara Schoedinger and Lyons Town Administrator Victoria Simonsen discussed the rebuilding of their communities and the challenges they faced during and after the disaster.

Again, during that session numerous municipal leaders paused to reflect on the power of municipal leadership during a time of disaster and the best practices which were followed and reflected in the ideas mentioned here.

Additional Resources

For sample ordinances that may be useful in an emergency, visit www.cml.org, under Issues > Public Safety > Emergency Management.

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Colorado Municipal League
1144 Sherman Street
Denver, CO 80203-2207

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