

King County Office of Emergency Management Podcasts

Disasters: Are you ready?

Windstorm Reflections

I thought I'd share a few of my reflections and ruminations on the most recent windstorm that we experienced here in the Central Puget Sound just this last December.

First of all, just how bad was it? And, could it have been worse? First of all it was a catastrophe for Puget Sound Energy (PSE) in the size and scope of what they faced. For them it is one of those events that you hope you only face once in a lifetime. While the Inaugural Day Windstorm of 1993 was bad, it was not close to what they experience in 2006. In 1993 they had 500,000 electrical customers without power. And, when I say customers, these are not individuals, but electric meters. Last December they had 700,000 out of a potential one million customers without power. Easily there were in excess of two million people without power in the region when you combine the other electric utilities in the mix. In the 10-12 days it took them to get power restored to everyone they used a year's supply of wire and poles. Their repair crews expanded eight times, from around 60 crews to over 500. Just managing this expanded work force had to be a significant challenge. Could a local government have met this same challenge?

We experienced running short of shelters in the November Floods, and again in the windstorms of December. People don't realize what a limited capacity the American Red Cross has in being able to operate shelters. In November all the state-wide resources were tapped out. Prior to this winter season the Red Cross had worked with communities to do some shelter manager training for their city staffs and for volunteers. These resources were brought into play quickly and provided much needed assistance. But, what if we had to shelter 50,000 people? National resources will be brought to bear, but cannot get here immediately. So more local capacity is needed. If you hear of anyone complaining about not enough shelters, ask them to volunteer to get Red Cross training and become part of the solution!

I've already written an Op-ed on how three days is the minimum number that people should be prepared to be on their own for following a disaster. A copy of that Seattle Post Intelligencer Op-ed is located on Eric's Corner. Seven days is really the minimum we need for any catastrophic disaster, and this last event was not even in that category.

The carbon monoxide poisonings that led to hundreds becoming ill and seven deaths was something new. We have not had that experience in scale previously. I personally think it is a reflection of our increasing diversity in cultures that we are experiencing in coastal communities. What is the next "surprise" that we might have in future disasters? How can we better connect with these new populations before the disaster, in order to better protect them? One item that we are looking at is developing messages in a picto-graphic manner. One that is not language dependent. Intuitive by nature and single messages. Watch for more information on that topic and an initial effort in the coming weeks.

Lastly, our Regional Public Information Network, RPIN which you can find at www.rpin.org was used extensively during the storm to message to the media and the public. Over 100 postings of news releases and information were made. Technology is not the answer for every situation, but in our modern age we need to take advantage of everything it has to offer. As emergency managers we need to be early and not late adopters of technology.

Listen in next week for my Podcast will be on technology and all it has to offer.