

Globe Talk: Tech no panacea to preparedness

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Be prepared for the next big one to strike.

That's been the rallying cry of the government ever since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, and yet public confidence in the public sector to deliver on those calls has been badly shaken since Hurricane Katrina.

So high has public criticism been of the government in handling the natural disaster last autumn that the position of heading the Federal Emergency Management Agency is regarded very much as drawing the short straw -- a post anyone with political ambitions would not care to pursue.

For businesses, though, fears about another large-scale crisis shaking the nation -- be it in the form of terrorism or a natural disaster -- is an opportunity to win big public-sector contracts, too.

Certainly, there were plenty of bureaucrats from federal agencies that attended a half-day conference on emergency preparedness this week sponsored by mobile group Sprint Nextel. Still, the Washington hotel ballroom was packed not just with federal government officials, but also with firefighters, emergency medical providers and other first-responders from the nearby communities as well as representatives from non-profits involved with providing disaster relief on the ground, all who were eager to hear about what they could and should do in the event of a worst-case scenario.

But while Sprint was eager to promote its various products and networks, much of the actual presentations by public-sector officials and

academics focused less on technology and more about trying to improve coordination among agencies and various groups that were all working for a common objective and yet often finding themselves in each others' ways when disaster struck.

"Technology is important, but it's not the core" of what emergency responders need, Undersecretary for the Preparedness Directorate at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security George Foresman told the audience. "The core is governance," he argued, pointing out that communications networks to ensure that all parties involved already exist. Yet a clear action plan on how to talk to which group and when was not let clearly defined, that would ultimately lead to confusion and even panic in the event of a disaster.

Indeed, the former coordinator for the fire department that handled the Columbine High School shootout in 1999 detailed in his speech how fire department officials were at one end of the school while the police force were on the other, and they were unable to talk to each other to coordinate activities initially as both groups used different frequencies.

Meanwhile, using cell phones to communicate was not an option as "too many people were trying to talk at the same time ... and they were all clogging up the lines," said William Pessemier, formerly of the Colorado Fire Department and incident commander at Columbine High School Littleton, who is now executive communications systems adviser for the International Association of Fire Chiefs.

Pessemier pointed out that the worst-case scenario actually did happen at Columbine, as the police and fire officials got in each others' way as "interoperability broke down," and the police actually mistook one fire official for someone siding with the students wrecking havoc within the school.

Of course, that's not to say emergency relief workers and governments on the local, state and federal level should settle for ancient technology and networks. In fact, the need for secure and fail-proof communications networks with mobile broadband and encrypted e-mail systems are prerequisites to preparing the nation for a large-scale emergency situation.

Yet simply investing in those state-of-the-art technologies is not enough. Presenters at the conference all agreed that organizations must not only come with plans for internal action, but they must also communicate more among themselves at all levels to ensure that they do not replicate efforts, or worse, prevent each other from doing their respective jobs. When it comes to preparing in advance, though, there is only so much that can be learned from past mistakes, cautioned Leonard Marcus, co-director of the National Preparedness Leadership Initiative at Harvard University.

"The past is not a reliable predictor of what might occur, especially if it is unprecedented," Marcus said. Rather, it was more important for leaders to conquer their fear of the unknown and fear of personal failure so that they will not hesitate to take decisive steps under a situation when time is of the essence.

Whether or not that is the case, one thing is clear: Public awareness of the need for emergency preparedness is higher than ever before, and expectations for the government to handle the next disaster, be it man-made or natural, are high as well.

"We need to capture this moment in time" to meet those expectations "or we will lose it," Foresman said.

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