

Transit systems are not well-integrated into local emergency plans

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Millions of people each day rely on transit, yet few urban area emergency plans have focused on its role in an emergency evacuation, says a new report from the National Research Council's Transportation Research Board. Transit systems could play a significant role in transporting carless and special needs populations in times of emergency, but these groups are inadequately addressed in most local emergency plans and evacuating them could easily exceed limited transit resources.

"For transit systems to be successful partners in an evacuation, they need to be part of the emergency management planning process and command structure; have real-time communications capability with local emergency managers, other transit providers, and their customers; and participate in annual exercises and drills," said Richard White, executive vice president, DMJM Harris, and chair of the committee that wrote the report. "To the extent transit agencies are asked to take on a major role in an evacuation, they should be considered essential personnel and be eligible with other first responders for cost reimbursement."

After reviewing 38 urban areas' emergency response and evacuation plans, the committee found that transit has a role to play in each of the four major elements that make up an emergency response plan -- mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery. The committee then conducted in-depth case studies of Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, New York City/northern New Jersey, and Tampa, Fla. The five case studies illustrate the roles transit could play in an evacuation, including transporting those without a car to area shelters or outside the affected

area, bringing emergency responders and equipment to emergency incident sites, returning evacuees to their original destinations, and restoring service as expeditiously as possible.

Emergency managers should be realistic in their expectations for the use of transit during an emergency, the committee noted. Transit systems' capacity to assist depends on the nature of the incident and its location. Damage from an earthquake or other incident may prevent the use of affected transit systems. Transit operations could also be hampered by unavailability of drivers and lack of equipment, especially at off-peak times. During peak periods, congestion impedes travel in many urban areas even in normal conditions. Evacuating special needs populations by transit poses a major challenge that requires advance planning, working with nonprofits and social service agencies to identify groups that need assistance, and a targeted public information campaign and sheltering strategy. It may also require mutual-aid agreements with other transit providers to help meet surges in demand.

Local governments are required by law to develop emergency plans for evacuations and mass departure routes, and, since 2006, for populations with special needs, such as people with disabilities. Local governments also have the primary responsibility of responding to emergency incidents and ordering an evacuation, if necessary, and transportation and transit agencies play a supporting role. If an incident overwhelms local capability, state and federal assistance may be requested, which happens with some frequency. According to the Federal Emergency Management Agency, in recent years there have been between 45 and 75 presidentially declared disasters annually. Severe storms are the most prevalent disaster, some of which come with advance notice or recur with some regularity, such as hurricanes, while other events like earthquakes and terrorist attacks strike without warning.

"Few urban areas have planned for a major disaster that could involve

multiple jurisdictions or multiple states in a region and necessitate an evacuation of a large fraction of the population. Leadership is lacking because no one jurisdiction owns the problem," said White. No clear regional emergency management protocols are evident, and the feasibility of evacuating major portions of large, highly developed, congested urban areas is also questionable, the report finds.

To help fill the planning gap, the committee recommends that the U.S. Department of Homeland Security provide guidance and funds to state and local governments on regional evacuation planning that includes transit and other public transportation providers. States should take the lead to see that plans are implemented, coordinating with appropriate regional entities. Federal transportation funds also should be directed to evacuation-related, capacity-enhancement projects to add redundancy to critical transit and highway infrastructure and to Intelligent Transportation Systems projects, to further network resilience in an emergency.

The committee broadly defines transit as bus and rail systems, paratransit and demand responsive transit, commuter rail, and ferries. It does not cover privately owned operators, such as intercity bus companies, taxis, and shuttles, although it recognizes that they may also play an important role in emergency evacuations.

Source: The National Academies

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