

Study shows first responders will report to duty, but need assistance with family matters

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A study by UD researchers shows first responders will report to duty, but need assistance with family matters. Credit: Courtesy: Joe Trainor

Headlines screamed in the days following Hurricane Katrina: Police Quitting, Overwhelmed by Chaos. Pundits squawked about the flight of the "notoriously corrupt" New Orleans police force. City and emergency planners outside the devastated areas envisioned disasters happening in their own cities and widespread desertion by their first responders.

But that's not a very realistic fear, according to UD's Joe Trainor, who recently conducted research on the subject.

"Fire companies and police stations and hospitals should stop being concerned about whether individuals will report or not and start being

concerned about what their organizations can do to help individuals report to duty," Trainor, an assistant professor of sociology, said.

Trainor, a member of UD's Disaster Research Center core faculty, analyzed whether or not emergency responders would be willing to report for duty in the case of a catastrophic disaster. He conducted the work as part of a regional catastrophic preparedness program that involved the Washington, D.C., metro area and surrounding states of Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Delaware and West Virginia.

[Emergency planners](#) within the region worried that firefighters, police officers, paramedics and other [first responders](#) would be absent from work if a disaster affected the region, including the responders' homes and families.

To determine the validity of this concern, Trainor, collaborator Lauren Barsky, a UD doctoral student at the time, and several research assistants from UD's Disaster Science and Management Program collected papers, reports and analyses on disasters. After reviewing 180 documents, they determined that even though role strain and role conflict are common during disasters, role abandonment is unlikely if first response organizations were proactive in protecting their employees.

While role abandonment worries were overhyped, they found too little emphasis is placed on easing first responders' conflict between dedication to their jobs and devotion to their families.

Trainor said organizers should ponder certain questions: "Are we asking people to do reasonable things? And, are we doing everything that we can do to facilitate their saying yes?"

He suggests first responders' employers reach out to families, get them thinking about preparedness and organize support and resources for

spouses.

Role strain, a responders' concern that the job is asking too much, could also be lessened, according to Trainor, through thoughtful preparation.

"It might just be simple education," he said. "Let the employees understand what the nature of these threats are."

For instance, fire companies could educate their members on the details and dangers of bioterrorism and how responders can protect themselves.

That protection also extends to equipment. Trainor believes employees' role strain decreases when they have personal protective equipment like specialized suits and are trained to use them.

He hopes these findings, requested by communities themselves, will be enacted. Cities and towns could alter their way of "doing business" to reduce first responders' personal worries so they can help stressed community members in an emergency.

Provided by University of Delaware

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