

EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT IN HOUSTON – UNDERSTANDING THE UNIQUE NEEDS OF LARGE URBAN AREAS IN A CRISIS

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Abstract

As emergency management professionalizes, begins to develop and instill standards, captures best practices, and creates a culture within likeminded agencies, the knee-jerk reaction to develop blanket policies and systems can have a detrimental impact on the effectiveness of crisis management agencies. Understanding the unique needs of a community promotes a more holistic approach to managing emergencies in all four phases; preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation. The basic needs of the people in Casper, Wyoming and New York City may be the same, but there exist stark differences in geography, population density, built environment, threat, and social vulnerability to risks. These considerations must be folded into the programs and processes that local emergency management and response agencies.

One of the emerging trends within Emergency Management is the inclusion Public Works and Utilities in the development of plans, and the response to disasters. From traffic management to electric and water utilities, storm water management and building inspections, Public Works departments play a vital role in all phases of the process. In the past few years, the City of Houston Department of Public Works and Engineering (PWE) has become an instrumental part in the way America's fourth-largest city manages crises. These lessons include ensuring PWE personnel are properly trained in incident command systems and procedures, and that PWE is a key player both in the development of plans, and a key stakeholder in the response and recovery.

The level and scope of coordination between emergency management and public works is unique to Houston, however, lessons from how the Bayou City functions can be translated to a variety of situations. From coordinated response to storms that affect the city to events like Super Bowl LI that draw worldwide attention to Houston, the Office of Emergency Management and the Department of Public Works and Engineering work together to ensure the safety, security and stability of the City.