

# BIG GAPS REMAIN IN CITIZEN PREPARATION

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Friday, 28 August 2009

## ***Study identifies lack of household and workplace preparedness knowledge and plans.***

Improving citizen emergency preparedness and enhancing the role of the public as the true "first line" of disaster response, has frequently been declared a top priority by FEMA director Craig Fugate.

A new study titled Personal Preparedness in America, conducted by Citizen Corps for the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA's) Community Preparedness Division, documents just how far the nation has to go to fully realize that vision.

The study, based on 2009 Citizen Corps National Survey measuring the public's knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors relative to preparing for a range of hazards.

While slightly over one-half of individuals surveyed (56%) reported having "supplies set aside in their home to be used only in the case of a disaster", only about one-third of individuals (35%) said they had supplies set aside in their car, while 46 percent of individuals indicated they had set aside supplies in their workplace.

Preparedness varied greatly by age, income level and race.

Individuals between the ages of 18 to 34 (50%) and ages 35 to 54 (46%) were significantly more likely to have disaster supplies set aside in their workplace than individuals aged 55 years and older (37%). Households making more than \$49,000 (73%) were significantly more likely than households earning less to have a supply of bottled water in their home (60%). Households earning \$50,000 - \$75,000 (81%) were significantly more likely to have a supply of packaged food in their home than households making less than \$25,000 (67%).

White individuals, for instance, (35%) were significantly more likely than Black individuals (25%) to have a disaster supplies set aside in their car.

Another disturbing finding of the report was that less than half of individuals (44%) reported having a household emergency plan "that included instructions for household members about where to go and what to do in the event of a disaster."

The survey showed further that public outreach and education campaigns had not greatly expanded awareness over the past two years.

When it asked about familiarity with community disaster preparedness plans and protocols the survey found that figures remained roughly identical with 2007 survey results. 50% of respondents reported familiarity with alerts and warning systems and 38% were familiar with official sources of public safety information. Six in ten of individuals who said they had a child attending a school outside of their home, including day care or part-time kindergarten, said they were aware of the details of the emergency or evacuation plan of their children's school, including where the school planned to evacuate and how to get information about the child in the event of a disaster. Also similar to the 2007 survey results, 58% of respondents reported being least familiar with community evacuation routes and 54% with shelter locations.

Questions new to the survey in 2009 showed that almost half of the respondents (47%) were familiar with how to get information regarding a public health emergency such as the H1N1 virus or swine flu, while only 33 percent of respondents were familiar with information regarding local hazards in their area.

The study provides several recommendations.

First it recommends that public emergency managers stress that preparedness is a shared responsibility. "Results from the national survey indicate that 30 percent of Americans have not prepared because they think that emergency responders will help them and that over 60 percent expect to rely on emergency responders in the first 72 hours following a disaster," the study says. "While government will execute its functions, communications to the public should convey a more realistic understanding of emergency response capacity and emphasize the importance of self-reliance. Messaging should speak to a shared responsibility and stress that everyone has a role to play in preparedness and response."

The study also urges that emergency managers provide more specificity on preparedness actions and highlight additional preparedness needs for people with disabilities. "Fourteen percent of respondents reported having a physical or other disability that would affect their capacity to respond to an emergency situation," the report notes. "Alarming, however, few individuals with disabilities had taken specific actions to help them respond safely in the event of an emergency. Only 27 percent had taken a CPR or first aid training and less than half (47%) had a household plan. Another 14 percent of survey participants indicated they lived with and/or cared for someone with a physical or other disability. Of these individuals less than 40 percent reported taking a CPR or first aid training (36% and 39% respectively) and 53 had supplies set aside in their home."

Another thing emergency authorities can do to improve preparedness, according to the report, is to emphasize the importance of drills and exercises. "Practicing response protocols is critical for effective execution," the report says. "This is true for emergency responders and true for the public."

Fewer than half the surveyed individuals (41%), the report finds, had practiced a workplace evacuation drill, only 14 percent had participated in a home evacuation drill, and of those in school and/or with children in school, only 23 percent had participated in a school evacuation drill.

In addition the report recommends that managers offer specialized information on the survivability of manmade disasters.

"Results indicate", concluded the report, " that individuals' perceived utility of preparing and their confidence in their ability to respond varies significantly by disaster type. Only 7 percent of individuals felt that nothing they did would help them handle a natural disaster, whereas 35 percent felt nothing they did would help them in an act of terrorism, such as a biological, chemical, radiological, or explosive attack. All-hazards terminology may mask important nuances relative to conveying personal preparedness guidance for specific hazards. It is important to emphasize the survivability of manmade disasters and the relevant protective measures for these hazards."

A final recommendation is that public education efforts couple a national voice with local specificity. "National leaders must be strong advocates for personal preparedness," the report says, " but it is clear that messages specific to individual preparedness must include critical local information, such as information on local hazards, local alerts and warnings, and local community response protocols." The report adds that local social networks must also be used to support outreach and education on personal preparedness, such as neighborhoods, the workplace, schools, and faith communities, while the concepts of mutual support at the local, neighborhood level should be emphasized.