The Future of Emergency Management

Emergency management is a constantly evolving field. Each disaster presents an opportunity for us to learn and adapt our policies in order to be better prepared for the “next time”. With the recent terrorist attacks and the war in Iraq, the government’s focus has shifted more towards terrorism and less on natural disasters. As discussed throughout this semester, Hurricane Katrina was an atypical event; however, it opened the eyes of practitioners and policy makers that the United States has an obligation to maintain an effective emergency management system that works.

Haddow and Bullock present three models of an emergency management system that should be considered when determining how to handle emergency management in the future. The first model suggests removing FEMA from DHS and making it an independent agency, as it was in the 1990’s. In this role, FEMA would function much like a manager or coordinating agency, to assist federal departments and agencies with funding and resources for disaster response. FEMA would also be more of a partner and advocate for state and local governments to congress for funding and other resources for disaster response, recovery, preparedness, and mitigation. Further, “tinkering with the model to expand the partnership to include NGOs and the private sector as full partners certainly is possible, likely necessary, and clearly has significant potential” (pg.389). The second model focuses on the role of nonprofits in emergency management. This model suggests federal, state, and local emergency management organizations should foster more partnerships with nongovernmental organizations and enlarge their role in disaster response, recovery, mitigation, and preparedness. The problem with this model is that NGOs are not obligated to assist and they are supported by fundraising, which is not very reliable and can be fickle. The final model proposes to start over and create a new emergency management system due to the long time disagreements over the cycle of preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation. Disaster preparedness and mitigation would remain at the federal, state, and local levels. FEMA would serve as the coordinating agency, use the NRP to focus its mission, and encourage partnerships with NGOs and the private sector. Haddow and Bullock believe the radical part of this approach is making mitigation and long-term recovery the responsibility of a different “quasi-governmental structure”, which involves engaging the private sector more. The reasoning behind this is the private sector owns more of the built environment, has more political influence with land-use and building codes, and drives the insurance industry. Communities cannot fully recover until the business/commercial industry is revived. This model suggests a conglomeration of NGOs, public, private, and financial sectors to create a new entity for emergency management. This approach is certainly the most radical and possibly the most difficult to make successful, because it requires a new system to built from the ground up that involves many organizations and changes everything about the way emergency management has been traditionally handled.

Ward and Wamsley echo the changing environment of emergency management by discussing the constant reorganization and policy changes that are made by the diverse stakeholders, which they characterize as a “punctuated equilibrium”. Having a stable, effective and efficient emergency management system has historically been complex and confusing, with failures resulting in a blame game. Thus, there is a constant cycle of misguided focus, system failure, and partially resolved problems. “Locating the point at which the equilibrium of the emergency management
system has been punctuated is a logical place to begin to break this cycle” (Ward and Wamsley, pg. 223). With the recent events of 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, the U.S. has an opportunity to revamp the emergency management system. Leaders- elected officials, politicians, researchers- have to take ownership of the problem and recognize disasters are events that can be dealt with in a proactive manner. Being proactive should not only take place at the federal level, but state and local governments need to be proactive and establish disaster mitigation programs. For example, by establishing tighter zoning and building ordinances in disaster-prone areas (i.e., flood plain), the risk of a disaster will lessen and potentially reduce the need for assistance from the federal government or network. To have an effective emergency management system, Ward and Wamsley suggest reestablishing FEMA as an independent agency and a network approach across public, nonprofit, and private sectors versus a hierarchical approach with the president at the top. This approach would be effective because all agencies would act as independents while sharing the same focus. Each would be able to work together and pool resources during disasters. The only problem with networks that Ward and Wamsley present is accountability; if something goes wrong, because all organizations are cooperating during the emergency.

Robert Agranoff and Michael McGuire (2001) explore the management of networks in their article, “Big Questions in Public Network Management Research”. They agree that forming network could be successful, but recognize that it would take a lot of work. Before the network is created, the manager or leading organization of the network (such as FEMA) would have to ensure that they are attracting organizations into the network with adequate capacities to get the job done. In addition, it is important for these cooperating agencies to share the same understanding of their role and the context of the disaster in order to begin working together. Agranoff and McGuire (2001) suggest that the manager “must find a way to blend the various participants—each with conflicting goals or different perceptions or dissimilar values—to fulfill the strategic purpose of the network” (pg.300). This is perhaps one of the biggest challenges of making the network successful. The most important tool for networks is information. Sharing information among the circle will enhance the network’s ability to be effective in emergency management, open the door for flexibility, communication and collaboration. Communication will make agencies better equipped to negotiate and decide on the best approach. Further, the collaboration of networks requires a large amount to trust due to the lack of a legal obligation to participate and falling under the principle of “soft guidance”. It is necessary for the network’s manager/coordinator to establish that trust.

Even though Ward and Wamsley believe accountability in networks is a problem, Agranoff and McGuire (2001) believe it is not an issue. In order for accountability to be a problem, there has to be a principle-agent relationship; which is lacking in a network. Because everyone in the network is working together, everyone is fairly responsible. In order to maintain the flexibility of networks and ensure accountability, Agranoff and McGuire (2001) provide several suggestions: collaboration should be a supplement to the formal, traditional decision-making process; decisions should be reviewed by independent third-party sources; decisions should only be made that are related to policy objectives; stakeholders should be informed of decisions; and outcomes of the decisions should be tracked and monitored to provide a more accurate picture of their effect.

Even though there is evidence that a network approach may be effective in the field of emergency management, there still remain several questions that need to be answered. If FEMA
takes the role as the “manager” of the network, will more time be spent on oversight than actual emergency management? Who decides what organizations should be a part of the network? Will there be a set of guidelines or rules to govern the network? If so, who will put these guidelines together? In addition, because disasters are not uniform, will each state have a set of guidelines unique to their region or will there be a general set of guidelines? What is the best way to engage state and local level governments to be proactive in emergency management? How can the government ensure that the NGOs and private sector agencies maintain their commitment to the network?

Outside Reference: