
Evacuation Experts: Expect the Unexpected

Common sense says an evacuation plan takes more than a red arrow indicating an exit, yet for some organizations and businesses that's all they have. For Matthew Mertens, the fire inspector for North Shore (Wis.) Fire Department, that's not acceptable and he's trying to change that mentality with education.

Mertens and his colleague Jill Glanz, the public education specialist for North Shore, were guest presenters at the annual National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) conference and expo on Monday in Boston. The title of their presentation was "Evacuation Planning Awareness."

Glanz and Mertens stressed that cooperation between the responding agencies and those who need the help is paramount in any good evacuation plan. The information has to be reliable and as solid as the one who is giving it, Mertens said.

The pair spoke to more than 50 people who attended the afternoon classroom session. "We hope to give you some ideas on how to get started so you can create your own plan," Glanz said.

The pair from the North Shore had a diverse audience comprised of business owners and managers looking for information on how to get their employees safely out of their plants in the event of an emergency, as well as firefighters looking for tips on how to move a whole community out of harm's way, in cases like the current Arizona wildfires.

A unifying theme was the need to plan for any eventuality and then practice the plan with mock drills. Whether it's an industrial complex where the building has to be emptied, or a school with an active shooter, or a town in the path of a hurricane or storm, the logistics of evacuation are similar.

Plan Buy-in

Mertens said plans are successful only if all affected parties are included in the process.

"You have to have buy-in from the chief, from the CEO or the boss," Mertens said. "If you don't have that, it's not going to work."

Once there's approval for plan development, Mertens said it's important to identify the risks and the resources that will be available when "the proverbial stuff hits the fan."

Risk Level

There are essentially two types of situations; those that don't happen very often but have huge exposure for risk, and those that happen all the time, but have lower or manageable risks. For example, many departments go on countless medical calls annually -- high frequency -- but the risk can be managed with standard operating guidelines and protocols.

SOGs can go a long way toward making sure evacuation plans of any kind go smoothly and that exposure to risks is minimized, Mertens said.

Details

"The devil is in the detail," he said. "... You can have a plan to evacuate a school and dump all the kids

into the fire lane. Plans are like building blocks. If you've got a couple that are skewed, the whole thing falls apart."

The same can hold true for larger disasters like train wrecks that block roads and cut off access to entire communities, he said, noting that's the value of planning.

Glanz said it's important to include many people in the planning process because each individual may have different information that will help strengthen an overall plan. However, one person should be in charge whether it is the health and safety officer at a business, or the incident commander for a municipal response.

"When the fire department comes, they don't want to be overwhelmed with lots of people giving them information," she said. "They want to deal with just one person."

Accountability

Mertens also said that person should have ways of verifying and being accountable, especially of people.

"If you say everyone is out of the building, it's been evacuated, and I ask are they accounted for, and you say, 'uhhhh,' we're going to do a primary search if the building is still tenable." He added that there's a difference between saying the building is empty and knowing it with an accountability system.

"Do you know if that delivery person who was just inside for a minute made it out," Mertens asked rhetorically.

Practice

Both Glanz and Mertens spoke on the value of mock incidents to test plans and to refine them.

"You should make it as real as possible," Glanz said, noting that in North Shore, they use moulage to simulate wounds. "Get the police involved and everybody who would have role in a real incident."

Mertens said time and time again he finds the weak link in virtually any plan is communication.

"It just seems to take twice as long to get something done as you think it should," Mertens said. "And that's often because of communications."

As flaws are found, he recommends the plan be modified and the adjustments tested to make sure they'll work.

"Planning is all about expecting the unexpected," he said.

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