



**Statement of Russell Decker, First Vice President**

**International Association of Emergency Managers**

**Before the**

**Ad Hoc Subcommittee on State, Local and Private Sector Preparedness and**

**Integration**

**Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs**

**U.S. Senate**

**On**

**It Takes a Village: Community Preparedness.**

**June 5, 2008**

Chairman Pryor, Ranking Member Sununu, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for allowing me this opportunity to provide testimony on this critically important topic.

I am Russ Decker, the Director of Emergency Management and Homeland Security for Allen County, Ohio. Allen County is a mid-size rural county in northwest Ohio with a population of just over 100,000. I currently serve as President-Elect / First Vice President of the International Association of Emergency Managers (IAEM) and I am testifying today on their behalf. I have 18 years of emergency management experience, with the last ten as a local director. I have also served as President of the Emergency Management Association of Ohio.

IAEM has more than 4,300 members including emergency management professionals at the federal state and local government levels; tribal nations; the military; colleges and universities; and, private business and the non-profit sector in the United States and around the globe. Most of our members are U. S. county and municipal emergency managers who face this issue of community preparedness head-on every day.

And in as much as all disasters begin and end at the local level, I believe our perspective is unique.

I would like to begin by addressing some fundamental issues regarding community preparedness, then I'd like to share a small and informal sampling of community preparedness efforts across our nation, beginning with my own county, and finally I would offer closing comments.

## **Fundamental Issues of Community Preparedness**

The issue of community preparedness is neither novel nor new. Civil Defense, Emergency Preparedness, and Emergency Management officials have been involved in this role for decades. These officials, over time, have been tasked with identifying the risks which our communities face – whether natural, technological, or homeland security; addressing those risks that are “fixable”; and, preparing communities to deal with what can not be fixed.

The preparedness of communities is based on the preparedness of individuals. This is, perhaps, the weakest link in our preparedness effort. We believe, in most cases, the majority of people can take care of themselves and their families for the first 72 hours or three days after a disaster – if they plan. That planning is what allows those with the statutory responsibility for coordinating local mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery efforts – emergency managers – to focus on those who have greater needs or are not able to provide for themselves when their support networks are disrupted during a disaster.

Because local emergency managers are charged with the responsibility for coordination in all the phases of comprehensive emergency management, it is vitally important that community and individual preparedness efforts must be integrated with and coordinated through the local emergency management agency. Failure to do so may lead to well intentioned, but off target preparedness efforts based on an incomplete understanding of the risks and hazards facing a community. This same line of reasoning should be applicable to state governments and the Federal government, as well. That is why we insist that community preparedness efforts – all preparedness efforts, for that matter – need to be integrated with and coordinated through FEMA at the Federal level. As an example of a well meaning but ill targeted concern (based on the lack of an “all hazards” perspective), I was asked one time by a member of the media to provide a copy of the hurricane evacuation plan for my county – which is located in Ohio.

The Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) concept for providing basic emergency training to citizens originated in 1985 in Los Angeles, California. Since the program was made available nationally by FEMA in 1993, communities in 28 states and Puerto Rico have conducted CERT training. In my home state of Ohio, more than 8,000 citizens have taken the basic CERT training. New and recent programs have been created to provide additional ways to prepare individuals and our communities – like Citizen Corps Councils. And brand new ideas have grown from them. In Ohio's Knox

County, for example, Council members in conjunction with The Ohio State University College of Veterinary Medicine have created a new initiative called Animal and Livestock Emergency Response Training (A-LERT). In its first year, nearly fifty livestock producers have taken the 12-hours of training; and as a result are better prepared to protect their own farm operations, as well as their neighbors. While these new programs have good connotations, we also find several issues that cause us concern. I believe it is important to realize that these programs do not appear to be attracting large numbers of *new* volunteers. Instead, our experience is that those who have always made up the dedicated core of our volunteers – those we count on in time of disaster – are the same folks participating in these new programs, because they already have an interest. This leads us to note the potential for role conflict in disasters – potentially forcing citizen volunteers to select which call for help they will answer. We may be creating a false sense of increased volunteer assets that don't actually exist.

Our basic position in the International Association of Emergency Managers (IAEM) is that preparedness belongs in FEMA – all the elements of preparedness. Failure to integrate and incorporate these efforts within FEMA increases the potential that they will be marginalized and diluted. Likewise, I am concerned that at the local government level in Ohio only 48% of Citizen Corps Councils are integrated with and coordinated through local emergency management programs.

It is also vital that all levels of government provide information to citizens to allow them to understand what actions are reasonable to expect from their authorities in a disaster. In the absence of reasonable information, unreasonable expectations are formed and post-disaster frustrations rise.

### **Community Preparedness in Allen County, Ohio**

Allen County serves as a regional center to the nine or ten surrounding counties, with two medical centers with Level II Trauma Units and Five Universities (University of Northwestern Ohio, Rhodes State College, Ohio State University at Lima, Bluffton University, and Ohio Northern University). In addition, we provide a wide selection of retail outlets, industrial jobs, and shopping for counties in the region.

Community preparedness is an important issue in Allen County. The keystone of community preparedness is personal preparedness – which, in my opinion appears to be the weakest link in our preparedness efforts. To bolster that link in our chain of preparedness efforts, we are undertaking the following programs:

- My staff and I provide presentations at local schools, neighborhood associations, church groups and basically any other place we can find an audience for our programs. This personal contact is important, because it allows people to connect names and faces with personal and community preparedness. It allows for the creation and maintenance of professional relationships, which are one of the basic keys to preparedness.

- We provide educational programs on tornado safety, ice storms, flooding, and hazardous materials – the most likely hazards to happen in our area.
- We maintain a current information flow to our residents via our website, providing a 24 hour source for emergency preparedness information and guidance. ([www.allen-ema.com](http://www.allen-ema.com))
- We meet regularly with those who have emergency planning responsibilities in the local universities and within the local hospital community. Our emergency management agency has successfully been able to provide a platform for the necessary interactions to take place between university, hospital and community officials to help build a “culture of preparedness” in our community. We also conduct exercises annually with each of our medical centers. Our medical centers have representatives sitting on the Local Emergency Planning Committee (LEPC) and have representation in the Emergency Operations Center (EOC).
- We participate annually with a strong and popular educational display in the Allen County Fair, an event which attracts 200,000 attendees.
- We have developed and maintained an extremely strong and supportive relationship with the Chamber of Commerce in the community. They sit as a member of our LEPC, and even have representation in our EOC when activated.

### **Partnerships are Key**

As a more detailed example of the level of partnership and support we have with the private community, I would like to call attention to a number of our good corporate citizens who have provided special assistance to prepare our community. These key partners include Ford Motor Company, Proctor & Gamble, Husky Energy, Valero Refining, and BP Oil. Approximately 15 years ago, a decision was made that Allen County needed to institute a system of outdoor warning devices (sirens). Our private sector partners provided the funding to install the first five of our current 48 devices. Essentially, those private sector partners have provided nearly 35% of the total cost of the project, and have provided an additional way to prepare the people who live, work and raise their families in Allen County to respond when a disaster threatens.

One of our newest projects is to make warning available on a wider basis within the county is also result of a partnership with private enterprise. Oil refineries and chemical companies are partnering with us to provide NOAA / National Weather Service All Hazards Radios to those who can't afford to buy them. Our office installs them and demonstrates their use. In addition, our emergency management agency with the support of the Allen County Board of County Commissioners has provided these radios to every publicly owned building. This latest program now allows us, in cooperation with private enterprise, to make sure that there is the widest distribution possible of these devices to help provide warning in time of disaster.

We have also worked to increase our ability to provide assistance to the special needs community during times of disaster. We have divided our county into 12 sectors, and created a database identifying those with special needs in each sector of the county. The data for the database was provided by a combination of self-registration and

information provided by service providers. This allows our dispatch center to make sure that the special needs community is informed when a disaster strikes or is threatening.

### **Community preparedness in Maine and Kansas**

York County, Maine is the home of about 220,000 folks – and, during the summer, the population swells to nearly 400,000 – primarily due to tourism and vacationers. This community has been actively embracing preparedness for several decades now. The origins of this preparedness effort extend back to the days of Civil Defense. York County Emergency Management has been involved with the local school system for more than 15 years – with activities ranging from preparedness presentations at school assemblies to the distribution of FEMA coloring books to those in primary school. York County has formed 10 Citizen Emergency Response Teams (CERT) – seven of them operational, and three made up of the more active members of assisted living communities for seniors. York County has experienced 17 declared disasters in the last 15 years. Bob Bohlmann, York County’s Director of Emergency Management, and his office also presents more than 60 courses annually on various topics related to preparedness at the community level.

Sedgwick County, Kansas is the second largest county within the state – with a population of just under 500,000. The county seat, Wichita, is the state’s largest city with more than 350,000. It is also a nationally-recognized center for the aviation industry. There, the emergency management program has had an active outreach into the community for decades – first, as Civil Defense, then Civil Preparedness, and now as Emergency Management. In the 1960’s and 1970’s this program provided volunteer cadres to perform search and rescue work for the county, including a certified diving team. The current version of Sedgwick County’s volunteer program includes Radio Amateur Civil Emergency Service (RACES), the Emergency Service Unit (ESU), the Wichita / Sedgwick County Fire Reserve, and Sedgwick County Canine Search and Rescue. More recently, Sedgwick County has provided Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) training to county residents. Many of the volunteers in the CERT program were already volunteers in some other capacity with Emergency Management. While the composition of these volunteer teams has changed over time, the concept of individual and community preparedness remains an essential element of the program.

Floods and tornadoes are basic facts of life on the high plains – and Sedgwick County is no exception. Randall C. Duncan, Director of Emergency Management, and his staff provide severe weather training to thousands of county residents annually – and they have done so for nearly two decades. In the immediate aftermath of September 11, 2001, the Board of County Commissioners of Sedgwick County directed their Emergency Management Agency to develop and implement a training program to answer numerous citizen inquiries about what to do in case of an emergency or disaster. That program – initially called “Ready to Respond” – was provided to literally hundreds within weeks. It is still available to be presented to citizens, along with other preparedness programs, upon request.

## **“Gaps” in existing programs**

I believe that one of the largest gaps in existing programs is the failure to provide adequate tools to State and local governments to help carry out their preparedness responsibilities. In the past, FEMA was able to provide large numbers of public education materials to State and local governments to use as a part of the educational outreach programs. Earlier, I mentioned that our EMA participates in a strong and popular display at the Allen County Fair, which attracts around 200,000 folks. Being limited to requesting only 25 copies of a FEMA publication doesn't go very far in terms of providing adequate educational materials to the folks at the County Fair. Essentially, what I am suggesting is that local governments have the audience and the opportunity to provide materials, but frequently not the budget to pay for them. This is an area where FEMA could be of great assistance.

Another area where FEMA could assist State and local governments in community preparedness efforts is to provide educational materials in multiple languages. That way, the local EMA director, with local knowledge of the demographics of his or her jurisdiction could request pamphlets in the languages appropriate for the community and audience. Similarly, if FEMA were to continue or expand their efforts in the development of Public Service Announcements (PSA), State and local emergency management programs could benefit. The State and local programs could interact with local media to get the PSAs aired and tagged with local information. Modernizing the formats could also lead to savings on production – for example, distribution in electronic formats for audio-based PSAs would save the cost of materials.

What we really need from FEMA are the tools to help us in our community preparedness programs. And, that implies that FEMA needs the funding to provide us as State and local government emergency managers with the tools.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, we would like to leave you with the following:

- State and local government have the lead (by Statute) in community preparedness.
- Community and individual preparedness, in order to be effective, has to be integrated with and coordinated through emergency management – at the local, State and Federal levels.
- All elements of preparedness at the Federal level must be integrated with and coordinated through FEMA.
- FEMA can provide support to State and local governments and their community preparedness programs by providing the tools necessary to conduct those programs

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss this important topic with you today, and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

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