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Practicum: Clark College Emergency Operations Plan 2017

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Practicum: Clark College
Emergency Operations Plan 2017

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INTRODUCTION

While no one likes to think or talk about anything that is high-risk, low-probability, emergency preparedness has become the new reality check. With the aftermath of disasters like Hurricane Katrina and the Joplin Tornado, it has become imperative that local governments, private companies, everyday citizens and even educational institutions; address these growing concerns. Moving forward, there must be a focus on creating and disseminating effective plans grounded in foundational emergency management techniques. Emergency management is a term sometimes described as a series of transitional phases such as mitigation, preparedness, response, and recover. These management phases were created to create strategies for mitigating hazards, prepare for and respond to disasters, and recover from incidents. Disasters occur in patterns, thus requiring specific management techniques can reduce negative outcomes. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (n.d.) states that emergency management originated in 1803. This was due to a Congressional Act in reaction to a fire that devastated a New Hampshire town. However, the beginning of its current form came in 1989 when President Carter decided to

consolidate the government support and focus around disasters, into one agency called the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). (FEMA, n.d.)

Today, this agency no longer focuses on just disaster recovery, but has an all-hazards approach.

Detailed by Witt (n.d.), the agency's mission involves protecting and reducing the loss of life and institutions from all hazards by leading and supporting the nation in a comprehensive, risk-based emergency management program, centered around six specific goals. These goals are:

establishing partnerships at the local, state, volunteer and private sectors; collaborating on all-encompassing, risk-based, all-hazard approaches to disasters; making hazard mitigation the foundation of emergency management; providing an effective, rapid, and responsive strategy; strengthening local and state emergency management; and developing a more skilled and diverse group of support personnel (Witt, n.d.). In this case, the first goal is the most critical. Effective emergency management starts from the ground up. This means that focus on key strategies and processes around the four phases of emergency management must be grounded in local communities. Local governments, volunteer organizations, and, most importantly, the private sector play vital roles. These entities, when prepared, serve as a connected network of redundancy, creating resilience not only within their local communities but within the country as well.

The goal of this paper is to explore building an effective emergency management (EM) strategy at the local level, specifically in the private sector. It follows the experiences of a Concordia University student, Jesse Tillie. Tillie was tasked with performing a practicum project that demonstrated the culmination of his Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness (HLS) program experience. For the sake of the project, he chose to partner with Clark College in updating the institution's Emergency Operations Plan (EOP). The information found within will

cover Tillie's experience from start to finish, focusing on the challenges, lessons, and impact of the project.

THE PROCESS

As stated earlier, the institution chosen for the project was Clark College. Clark College is a local higher-education institution located in southwest Washington within the city limits of Vancouver, in Clark County, and directly across the river from Portland, Oregon. Its students, faculty, staff, and visitors comprise nearly 17,000 people, and the college has twenty-five buildings dedicated to student academic development. Regionally, the college impacts organizations and communities across Clark County and the State of Washington both economically and culturally. It was for this reason that Tillie felt that the selection of this organization was perfect from an emergency management perspective. The college, in its complexity, represents a great example of a population commonly found throughout the country. Like many, it does not have dedicated resources for mitigating, preparing, responding, and recovering from incidents. Without those resources, the college is at risk. According to the Clark Regional Emergency Services Agency (CRESA, 2011), this location is in an area vulnerable to large-scale natural disasters like severe local storms, earthquakes, and floods. In addition to these, there are also manmade disasters like hazardous materials spills, public health emergencies, and even power outages that also pose risks to students and faculty. Like others posed with the challenge of emergency preparedness, school administrators are tasked with addressing these concerns to keep students and faculty safe.

It was identified early in the process that while Clark did have an active Emergency Operations Plan (EOP), to address these concerns, it was woefully outdated, having missed its biennial revision two consecutive cycles. An initial connection was made with Michael See, who

is currently the Emergency Manager for Clark College. From the beginning, it was communicated that the college has gone through a few emergency managers in the last few years; See had been on the job for three months. After an initial meeting to establish history, experience, and credentials, it was decided that Tillie would work with See on revising the EOP for Clark. The final step before starting consisted of completing state volunteer forms and a stringent background check. With this project occurring in sensitive areas of the institution and among students, this step was needed to ensure the safety and security of the college and its population. To kick off the process, Tillie attended an Emergency Management Planning Committee (EMPC) meeting. The meeting focused on a 90-day analysis of the college, highlighting wins and opportunities in both planning and execution. While the material and participation were good, the attendance was not. Many of the senior leaders and decision makers were not present, thus revealing the initial challenge faced by the college: priority setting. While emergency preparedness is a high priority for administrators, it is still, in reality, a high-risk, low-probability occurrence. In addition to this, all of the members of the EMPC besides See have other roles and responsibilities that often take precedence. This leaves participation in emergency preparedness activities a matter of influence and persistence.

Having attended the meeting, the next step was analyzing the current EOP for wins and opportunities. Easily identifiable was the fact that the plan was not designed by an experienced emergency manager, nor did it follow the Comprehensive Preparedness structure set by FEMA. This meant that the current version of the plan did not promote the commonality of understanding of risk, nor did it allow for complete awareness of how to plan, integrate, and coordinate when synchronizing plans (FEMA, 2010). With this in mind, it was decided to not only revise and update the plan, but also to restructure it within these guidelines. Having not

utilized this format before, it was necessary to utilize the recourses provided by Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS). The REMS website provided an online course in how to develop EOPs using the Comprehensive Preparedness Guide by FEMA. Once completed, it was decided that Tillie would start writing content for the new EOP, with the Purpose, situation, and assumptions portion of the plan, based on the lessons from the REMS training program. With the structure questions answered, it was then time to research information regarding the college, including demographics, climate, and resources. This information was pulled from the Clark College website, the Clark Regional Emergency Services Agency (CRESA) website and vulnerability document, the Vancouver city website, FEMA, and more. These sources provided a multitude of new revelations about emergency preparedness, and the roles colleges play in it.

Looking back, the information identified about CRESA was outstanding. This organization serves as “a regional public safety agency that provides 9-1-1 dispatch, technology services and emergency management” to the local cities located within Clark County (CRESA, n.d). In addition to these efforts, CRESA is also the host agency for the Region IV Homeland Security Office, which coordinates all Homeland Security focuses for southwest Washington. That means that as far as emergency preparedness goes, this organization is one of the most valuable resources not only to Clark College but to the entire community as well. The information regarding community engagement and support services alone provided the most vital resource material utilized for the risk of hazards found within the EOP. This was huge because for an institution that does not have the resources to conduct analyzes of this scope, having an organization like CRESA provide it all is invaluable. Using the Comprehensive Preparedness Guide, content for the EOP was written over the course of two weeks. This was

mostly due to the challenges Tillie faced around time management. Similar to the faculty at Clark, there existed other priorities, like a senior course load, full-time work, and family life, that often took precedent over completing the assigned portion of the EOP. That made getting it done initially difficult, but after some reflection, Tillie realized that this document was not just a practicum project, but a foundation in helping Clark College become disaster resilient. With that in mind, the assigned portion was completed and submitted to See for review. After some revision regarding wording and formatting in support of the American with Disabilities Act (ADA), the document was finally finished.

THE IMPACT

When analyzing the process in its entirety, a big lesson involved the importance of building relationships. From the beginning, it was noticeable that all facets of preparedness planning require a network of support to be effective. The initial relationship between See and Tillie allowed a student to quickly come on board and get involved in the current EOP practices of the institution. It was through this relationship that Tillie was able to understand the realities of the emergency management role, and how critical the ability to influence is. In the real world, Emergency Managers are a minority population; as such, most improvement is dependent on their ability to connect with people and influence outcomes. This influence comes in the form of identifying risks associated with the population, detailing action plans, and articulating it all in a credible risk vs. benefit communicative. In the global scheme of things, restructuring the Purpose, Situation and Assumptions has only completed one part of a complex document that still needs to be completely updated. However, it will serve as a foundation to be utilized by See and the EMPC to continue to drive awareness and effective preparedness programs for the safety of the Clark College population.

In closing, the final and largest impact of the project on the student came in the form of understanding the value of priority setting and emergency management. As an institution with a history of zero incidents, lack of experience in emergency management and minimum buy in, Clark is complacent and vulnerable. There are always instances where the thought process is simply, “come back to it later.” However, disasters are sometimes unpredictable and mass incidents always end with the loss of property and lives. Taking the lessons from Hurricane Katrina and the Joplin Tornado into account, emergency preparedness must be a priority focus. Having a student like Tillie involved in developing their plan demonstrates a great example of what it means to make time. This could very well serve as the catalyst Clark needs to take their preparedness to the next level. The key to remember is that Clark is not only a college, but an import culture center for the community. As such, safety and security through effective emergency plans not only impact them, but the community and all of southwest Washington as well.

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