

# More than Just Preparing an Emergency Kit: Engaging the Public in the Emergency Management Cycle

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Recently, I had the opportunity to hear Past FEMA Administrator Craig Fugate present his *Seven Deadly Sins of Emergency Management*. One critical issue that recurs in his list is the role of the public in emergency management (EM). As Craig states, we treat the public as a “liability,” meaning that citizens are given a passive role in the EM cycle and often are seen simply as victims.

This needs to change. From experience and research, we know that in the aftermath of an emergency or disaster, traditional response resources are quickly overwhelmed, while disrupted transportation and communication networks hinder the public’s ability to call for and get assistance. We also know that members of an affected community are the true “first responders,” as they are on the ground and quickly turn to assisting affected neighbours, family and friends.

## Advance a Whole-of-Society Approach: Recast The Public as a Resource

As EM professionals, we need to be advancing a “whole-of-society” approach which recasts the public as a resource. Here are a few ways we can achieve this.

■ **We need to change how we talk about preparedness.** The guidance, *Know the hazards, Have a kit, Make a plan*, has been the core of our public messaging for years. However, when we look at the statistics the outcomes are underwhelming. The 2017 American Housing Survey found that while 81% of participants reported having

enough non-perishable food to last three days, only 58% reported having enough water, 53% had an evacuation kit, and 26% had an emergency communication plan (including a contingency for cellular network disruption). In Canada, the 2014 Survey of Emergency Preparedness and Resilience, found that 55% of households had an emergency communications plan, and 47% had an emergency supply kit.

The statistics are disappointing, but they also raise a troubling question – do these one-off activities really equate to preparedness? While having a 72-hour emergency kit is preferable to not having one, I would also argue that having an emergency kit or a household plan are steps on the road to preparedness, but they should not be the end goal.

The real goal is individuals, households and communities that have the knowledge, skills and resources to withstand an extreme event but also to mitigate their risks, assist with response efforts, and support recovery. In short, our aim is resilience, and for this, we need citizens to do more than prepare an emergency kit.

■ **We need to promote citizen-led volunteer emergency management groups.** There are numerous models we can look to, including FEMA’s Community Emergency Response Teams, Australia’s State Emergency Service, or Germany’s *Bundesanstalt Technisches Hilfswerk* (THW). These programs focus on transmitting emergency management knowledge and technical skills – such as flood protection, fire suppression, storm

preparation, urban search and rescue, emergency medical care, debris clearing and removal, and drinking water provision – as well as advancing working relationships with police, fire, emergency medical and other response services.

The benefit of these programs is that they give community members a clear role and further share the responsibility for keeping communities safe. More importantly, they also strengthen the community ties that are essential for resilience. Some also offer the opportunity to involve groups we traditionally label “vulnerable,” such as youth, seniors, and persons with disabilities or special needs. These programs should be available nationally in every municipality and region.

Of course, the road forward is not without its challenges. For some, these programs present an entirely new way of envisioning the community’s role in emergency management and entail a cultural shift in thinking about preparedness and response. For jurisdictions that do not currently have these groups, legal and liability concerns as well as questions about coordination between volunteers and professional emergency responders can present real obstacles. Therefore, exchanging with and learning from jurisdictions with established programs is key.

■ **We need to become advocates for community participation.** As EM professionals, we should be promoting citizen-led volunteer initiatives in our communities, advancing working relationships between professional responders

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and volunteer groups, and supporting creative solutions for reaching a whole-of-society approach. It is not our role to lead the response efforts of private citizens, but it is our role to support and advocate for community involvement. If volunteer programs are already established in our communities, we should ask how we can further support their efforts. If there is no such program in our jurisdiction, we should look for partners to help create one. (*Note: many CERT training materials are available [online from FEMA](#).)* We also should be lobbying state or provincial, and federal governments to take a strategic leadership role in supporting the development and maintenance of these groups.

### Conclusion

As emergency managers, one of the greatest tools we have in our toolkit is our holistic perspective and the ability to bring together diverse groups – governments, businesses, volunteer and service organizations, and so on. We should be using this collaborative approach to support the advancement of whole-of-society solutions for hazard mitigation and preparedness and the promotion of opportunities for the public to lead their own resilience efforts.

I'd be interested to hear your thoughts on this topic. Please feel free to contact me at [sarah.g.delisle@gmail.com](mailto:sarah.g.delisle@gmail.com). ▲



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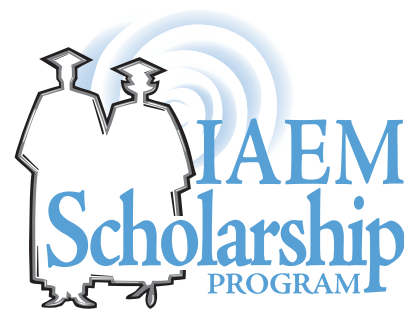
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