

Transit as Part of a Community's Emergency Response Plan

By Anne Lowder

Do you have written protocols for drivers, dispatchers and supervisors to be used during an emergency? Do you share these protocols with external stakeholders? Do employees train and practice the written protocols for taking emergency action? What do you do after an emergency?

On February 14, 2010 these and other questions were discussed after a freak snow storm created a massive crash on Interstate 70 between Bonner Springs and Lawrence. The westbound lanes of the highway were closed for hours as emergency crews freed trapped passengers. Over 40 vehicles were involved in the crash. Luckily no one was seriously hurt, and none of the vehicles involved was a transit vehicle, but transit vehicles were needed to help keep people warm and to also transport them to central locations for pickup by family and friends. To help in this emergency transportation, Tiblow Transit, located in Bonner Springs, was called upon to respond.

Plan ahead for emergency response

The moment of a crisis is not the time to decide who can be called, what type of equipment is available, who the responsible personnel are and what steps should be taken during the emergency. Instead, be proactive and create a written emergency preparedness plan. The plan must first address the transit agency's responsibilities and protocols

before, during and after an emergency and secondly, the plan needs to outline relationships and responsibilities within your agency and with other community stakeholders such as first responders (e.g. fire, police, EMS, public works).

Implementing a good plan starts with an agency self-assessment that evaluates your agency's strengths and gaps regarding safety, security and emergency preparedness. Once known, the gaps can be prioritized by: 1) impact they would have on employees, passengers and the community, and 2) the reality of the hazard or risk compared to the limitations of staffing and budget constraints.

An old saying goes "You never reach the mountaintop, you only experience the climb." Similarly, an emergency preparedness plan is a living document constantly being redeveloped as new resources become available. To help in building your agency's action plan go to www.bussafety.fta.dot.gov. The Federal Transportation Agency (FTA) web site offers templates to help you create policies and procedures, operating and maintenance protocols, employee training programs, human resource practices and developing external stakeholders.

Coordinate with emergency responders

It has been said more than once: "My agency has not been invited or asked to participate in the community's local emergency preparedness planning

meetings." So what do you do? Be proactive. Introduce yourself to the members of the planning committee and sell your agency as a valuable transportation resource within the community. It is important that your agency develop a strong ongoing relationship with the emergency management team and the local fire/police and EMS. Without these relationships, your community lacks critical knowledge from your expertise. For instance, do you maintain a list of individuals (who have voluntarily signed-up) that would need transportation assistance during an emergency such as a flood or tornado?

Your agency is the transportation expert in your community. You know how to transport persons with mobility disabilities and you have the equipment (wheelchair lift and securement) that will be needed during an emergency evacuation.

Example of transit participation

An example of a transit agency being involved in the community's emergency planning and response is "The T" in Lawrence, KS. The T's department head is a member of the Douglas County Emergency Management's Emergency Operations Center (EOC) team. The EOC team, composed of heads of city and county departments (fire, police, medical and transit), acts as central command

Sources

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in an emergency. The first responding agency at an emergency designates a field commander who communicates with and takes direction from the EOC team. This person is the team's eyes on the scene.

The EOC team decides what resources to provide to the scene, whether personnel, equipment, food, water, portable toilets, or vehicles. If the field commanders says that several types of transportation vehicles are needed, including some with lifts, the EOC team would reach out to its transportation contacts with those resources. The transit manager is a key resource for this information and these decisions.

The team plans ahead of time how they will respond to certain situations of different durations. For example, if an incident is projected to last 6 to 8 hours, what will be needed? What if recovery is expected to be much longer, like 6-8 months? If shelter is needed for victims, the EOC would contact the Red Cross to provide shelter. During an emergency the EOC team has the responsibility for determining when local resources are not sufficient and will call the Kansas Division of Personnel Management for additional support. If federal assistance is needed, the state has the responsibility for requesting that.

Some key considerations in emergency response for transit

In making sure transit is included in your own community's emergency response plans, several aspects of transportation need to be considered, from communication to insurance to training. Here are some of the key points:

Communication. Working with and exchanging information with other first responders such as fire and police is also an important part of planning and training for an incident. Do all personnel responding to an emergency use the same communication language and follow the same emergency protocols? Cohesiveness among stakeholders in emergency preparedness protocol and communication is an essential tool taught online under the National Incident Management System (NIMS).

Contingency plans. It's important to think through how an emergency could change how you operate. What about alternative routes if roads become blocked? Have shelter-areas been identified in which to take cover in case a transit vehicle needs to evacuate?

Liability. What if transit vehicles
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The pile-up on I-70 last winter near **Bonner Springs**, shown above, left many motorists stranded in the cold. City-run Tiblow Transit in Bonner Springs provided vehicles to respond to the scene. The Emergency Response Plan of the Unified Government of Wyandotte County and Kansas City, Kansas specified using Tiblow's vehicles in certain emergencies, like this one.

Rita Hoag, Bonner Springs City Clerk, said fire personnel on the scene who had established command determined the need for the transit vehicles, the EMS Chief then contacted her, and she contacted the transit drivers to respond to the command location.

"Our vehicles were basically at the scene to give people who were waiting to be processed a place to be out of the weather," Hoag said. A few people were transported in the vehicles—one person to a hospital to be with family members and the other to a non-emergency location. Hoag noted that the City's EMS and a couple of other EMS jurisdictions handled transport of injured persons.

After the emergency, the Unified Government had a meeting of all personnel who had any part in the event, to determine if things could have been done better. They discussed the sequence of what happened from the time of the first call to when all personnel cleared the scene, said Hoag. A few discussion points will play out in new policies and procedures, and continued training.

Bonner Springs now has a Mobile Command Vehicle for similar incidents, donated by an adjacent city. The vehicle is equipped with necessary gear, forms and other supplies that might be needed during an emergency. This vehicle also houses a copy of the City's emergency operations book that has been expanded to include tactical inter-operability—i.e., coordinating with other communities to respond to an event. The book will be reviewed at least twice a year to make sure it is up to date and includes contact information for hospitals, adjacent emergency services, hospitals, Kansas Highway Patrol, etc.

Last February, one glitch in providing transit vehicles to the crash scene was getting the building open to access the keys for the drivers. Other than that, no other real obstacles occurred, said Hoag. She is drafting a new policy to provide quicker access to the vehicles. "I will make sure that our headquarters office has [their own set of] keys along with proper training for use of the vehicles by emergency personnel if Tiblow drivers are not available to drive them," Hoag said. "KDOT already concurred with the use of these vehicles for such purposes so long as there are controls in place."

Overall, Hoag said the crash response was handled very well, especially given the fact that there was another pileup west of the one in Bonner Springs on I-70, another major one on I-435 and multiple small ones throughout the metro area. Hoag said the Mid-America Regional Council (MARC) is working with area responders to improve inter-operability for similar multiple events.

Lawrence Journal-World photo

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Benchmarks for Security and Emergency Preparedness

Management.

Management should develop the agency's mission statement that includes an organizational chart, written policies concerning safety, security and procurement, formal contractual agreements for safety and security mechanisms, proper insurance coverage and written labor/management protocols.

Equipment and Systems Operations and Maintenance.

Equipment and systems operations and maintenance need to be tasked under the oversight of an individual. Policies should be written to be in compliance with federal and state regulations and standards, that building design and equipment procurement is acquisitioned with safety and security considerations, hazard material training and that vehicles have a written maintenance plan, documentation forms for inspections /defects and that formal records are maintained. A written policy should be available to passengers, operators, stakeholders and the community on related safety concern, radio and communication equipment and policies and to evaluate the driver through supervisor on-board audits.

Human Resources.

Human resources should have written agency policies procedures for drug and alcohol, workplace violence, wellness/fitness for duty, operator/employee recruitment and selection and training, a drivers' handbook, a dispatcher handbook and a customer service handbook.

Safety Activities and Security Activities.

Safety activities should identify individual's roles and responsibilities for safety activities for hazard management, accident reporting, internal safety audit and contractor safety audit. Security activities should be identified through a security assessment which will establish strengths and weaknesses of reporting and revenue collection procedures, vehicle storage and facility protection and internal security audit.

Emergency/ All Hazards Management.

Emergency/All hazards management is externally working with stakeholders in your community to participate in local written protocols for emergencies that include incident management, recovery analysis, coordinate with first responders and simulations. Internally, your agency should develop protocols for drivers, dispatchers and supervisors ensure NIMS certification and identify essential employees.

Source: Federal Transit Administration Transit Bus Safety and Security Program. *Transit Bus Safety and Security Program*. FTA and State DOT Orientation Seminar. Salina, Kansas 6-22-2010.

are needed for evacuation, and first responders, such as firefighters, will be the drivers? Do the firefighters have the knowledge and skill set to operate the vehicle and the lift? Are protocols in place that protects against liability of the vehicle and driver during such an emergency? This is a conversation you should have with your insurance carrier and with your human resources manager. Does your insurance cover your equipment if it is being used for something other than day-to-day transportation activity?

Contractual agreements. Have you made contractual agreements with the local emergency preparedness committee for reimbursement of expenses? Pre-incident agreements establish funding guidelines for your agency's cost of labor and equipment that would be incurred during an emergency. Some vehicles used in the Katrina National disaster did not have coverage or contractual agreements and were not able to be reimbursed for expenses. The funding flows from Homeland Security through the Emergency

Management Assistance Compact (EMAC) to the local government for pre-identified and credentialed resources.

Training. Training and more training is integral to effective incident management. Transit is a community resource and it is important for your agency to participate in community emergency management exercises. Participating in emergency simulations helps you to evaluate your strengths and weaknesses. Then lets you adjust and edit your agency's written protocols and become bettered prepared to react to an emergency. Managers, supervisors and frontline employees need to participate in practice drills and simulations.

Your staff also need agency-specific training. For example, you might have an instance of a threatening passenger on your vehicle and police would need to be called. Are emergency radio protocols in place for both the dispatcher and the driver? Have they practiced these protocols to ensure that the skill set is there to react to the emergency?

What about cross-training? Who would dispatch if your one dispatcher is unavailable? Training exercises will ensure that written protocols are not only followed by your employees but that they are viable. If something doesn't work well in the training, it can be remedied before an actual emergency.

Practice makes perfect. What else can be said?

Job descriptions. Finally, have you reviewed your employees' job descriptions to cover work as an essential employee? An essential employee is required to report to work in emergency situations.

Post-incident de-briefing

What do you do after an incident? Go have a cup a coffee and talk about it? That's actually a good strategy. Stakeholders need to come together—not to criticize or brag but to acknowledge the strengths and recognize the gaps that occurred during the incident. Formal action reports need to be completed about the emergency event and submitted to all members of the local emergency preparedness planning committee. The reports should document vehicle use, staff on duty, and who among them were designated as "essential" employees. (An essential employee is defined by the Federal Transit Administration as

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Emergency response *Continued from page 12*

How To Reach Us

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More About NIMS Training

Are your agency's supervisors and managers National Incident Management System (NIMS) certified?

As mandated by Homeland Security Presidential Directive-5, beginning in FY 2005, adoption of NIMS will be a condition for the receipt of federal preparedness funds, including grants, contracts and other activities.

NIMS education and training is directed towards all emergency management and response efforts by individuals on an executive, managerial, or first-hand level. The training is not required for all employees.

The online training program is composed of a core curriculum of courses that range from beginner to advanced. This training provides managers and supervisors with a comprehensive approach to incident management as well as provides first-line employees with the basic protocols of NIMS. The online training provides core sets of concepts, principles, terminology and organizational processes for all hazards.

Basically, NIMS creates a proactive system to assist those responding to incidents or planned events. The five components of the NIMS training include:

- Preparedness
- Communications and information management
- Resource management
- Command and management
- Ongoing management and maintenance

Two vital courses are ICS 100 and ICS 800. ICS 100 teaches the basics of NIMS protocol. The ICS 800 is a course for emergency response and prevention workers. Training and certification for the National Incident Management System (NIMS) is at: <http://www.fema.gov/emergency/nims/NIMSTrainingCourses.shtml>.

"an employee whose duties are of such a nature as to require the employee to report for work or remain at the work site to continue agency operations during an emergency situation.")

In your discussions with the emergency preparedness planning committee, also ask: Does there need to be a contractual element to your agency's vehicles and personnel during an emergency? (Who's paying the bill for maintenance, equipment and personnel during the emergency?) Were the written protocols followed or did they fail and why?

Once these reports are completed, it's back to the written emergency planning stage to revise the plans based on the information learned during the incident.

Summary

For effective emergency response, it's important to start at the beginning and know your agency's baseline for emergency response. This is done with a self-evaluation of your agency's safety, security and emergency preparedness.

Once the baseline is established, any

gaps/ needs can be prioritized based on community impact, possibilities of certain types of emergencies occurring and the resource limitations of your agency. Create an action plan using Web resources for templates. Look at all areas of your agency: management, equipment and systems operations and maintenance, human resources, safety activities, security activities, emergency/ all hazards management and develop benchmarks for each of these areas (see sidebar on page 12). Integrate and share your agency's working emergency preparedness plan with the community's local emergency planning committee.

And practice! Make sure that your agency is involved and participating in community and internal drills, simulations and exercises. Then evaluate. Have you reached your benchmarks? Did training follow protocol? Finally, edit and re-engineer your written protocols so that they stay current with new information, resources and technology. Your community will be better able to respond to emergencies as a result.