

Messages from “Elvis”—The Importance of Establishing a Response Plan with Defined Responsibilities, Effective Communication, and Logistics

Presented by Richard Bowker, Manager of Information Services, Memphis Light, Gas and Water, and President, Mid-South Association of Contingency Planners (Memphis/Shelby County Urban Area, Tennessee)

Lessons Learned: Communication and logistics during a disaster are critical; plans must be in place to foster communication and handle logistics, and then those plans must be followed. To recover quickly and efficiently from a disaster, a community should develop (1) a recovery plan that clearly defines responsibilities and (2) a list of restoration priorities that shows the services and areas taking precedence during the response and recovery period. Community resilience can be fortified before disaster strikes by ensuring that (1) larger businesses prepare continuity plans and (2) the right partnerships and agreements are in place.

In 2003 when a thunderstorm with straight-line winds exceeding 100 miles per hour (the level of a Category 2 hurricane) hit the Memphis/Shelby County Urban Area, the community had only 15 minutes’ notice to prepare for what is now known as “Hurricane Elvis.” The storm left 10 million pounds of debris, \$32 million of damage, and 82 percent of the residents without utilities. It took the county 11 days to return services and business operations to a normal level.

The community used the experience with Hurricane Elvis as a learning opportunity. Located in a major seismic zone, the area is expected to have a major earthquake at some point in the future. The community recognized that preparation and planning are vitally important to ensure their resilience.

Following the impact of Hurricane Elvis, Memphis Light, Gas and Water (MLGW) adopted the National Incident Management System (NIMS) as its approach to coordinate the response to disruptions. “Communications is critical,” said Richard Bowker, Manager of Information Services at MLGW. “I recommend adopting NIMS compliance to everyone—the training is free, and it’s a tremendous resource.”



This information was presented at the first CARRI Community Resilience Forum, held April 28, 2009, in Charleston, South Carolina. The Forum brought together representatives from three partner communities (Gulfport, Mississippi; Charleston/Tri-County Area, South Carolina; and Memphis/Shelby County Urban Area, Tennessee).

The MLGW team quickly found that with traditional communication methods unavailable, communicating the status of the recovery, providing updates, and disseminating information to residents and staff were the biggest problems they faced. Each day during the recovery effort,



the MLGW Crisis Response Team met to discuss the work plans for the day. The daily review of work plans helped the team stay focused and organized and allowed them to address the priorities of the restoration without being overwhelmed. Additionally, the team posted an outage map on the Internet that showed areas where power was restored, areas where crews were currently working, and areas still without power. The daily meetings also allowed the MLGW team to prioritize projects (e.g., restoring power to major intersections) and to focus on efforts with the most positive impact on the community.

As part of the recovery efforts, MLGW needed to care for hundreds of workers. “The logistics [of providing basic needs] – feeding, housing, washing clothes, etc. – of a disaster is a major planning effort in itself,” said Bowker. “We had 800 outside team members we needed to take care of in addition to our own.” MLGW had a logistics team in place and ready to handle the basic needs of its crews. Knowing that their basic needs would be met after a hard day’s work helped the workers focus on their jobs.

A team approach was important to the community’s recovery, but it was equally essential to have an established hierarchy with defined accountabilities and single sources for decision making. Today, MLGW has a full-time Crisis Management Coordinator. At the time of Hurricane Elvis, one manager had a collateral duty of basically being the librarian of crisis plans, resulting in little standardization and minimal coordination.

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From what was learned during Hurricane Elvis, MLGW now knows the levels of effort it can handle internally and the levels requiring outside resources. Plans are in place to estimate the resources necessary to contract with outside crews based on disaster severity. In addition, MLGW has established Memorandums of Understanding, agreements and partnerships to ensure the proper assistance. Just as important, plans are in place to ensure that everyone will be reimbursed for their efforts.

Also as a result of the experience with Hurricane Elvis, the Memphis/Shelby County Urban Area has expanded its efforts to raise community awareness about the restoration process and the importance of establishing plans to prepare for and respond to disaster. It has done so using town hall meetings, presentations to the business community, and expanded training opportunities. “Training and educating businesses in continuity and contingency planning are critical,” said Bowker.

One organization helping to lead the way is the Mid-South Association of Contingency Planners (MSACP), which was formed in June 2004. At its inception the organization had approximately 20 members, including FedEx and International Paper. Today, the organization has about 70 members who meet monthly. MSACP is dedicated to fostering professional growth and development in effective Contingency and Business Resumption Planning to ensure a business will remain resilient in the face of adversity. “Each month we try to have two presentations that address business continuity and disaster recovery,” said Bowker, also President of MSACP.

Another organization that is contributing to the resilience of the region is MemphisFIRST, a public/private partnership based on the ChicagoFIRST model. The mission of the MemphisFIRST Business Continuity Council is to enhance the preparedness of the greater Memphis community for responding to large disruptive events. In association with community and business leaders, public agency representatives, private organizations, academic representatives, and the public at large, the organization is working to reduce communications barriers, share resources, develop mutual aid agreements, conduct joint training and preparedness drills, and enhance public awareness of risks and mitigation methods. “Every business needs to do a business impact analysis,” noted Bowker. “Every business is unique, and different disasters will affect everyone differently. That’s why it’s important to look at your specific situation and plan accordingly.”



Additionally, the community has increased its emergency preparedness and response drills, training, and exercises. “We went from about two per year to two per month,” said Bowker. “Having different scenarios and various organizations involved helps you learn to coordinate and facilitate collaboration.”