

St. Louis Regional Disaster Preparedness September 11, 2007



Executive Summary

Bi-state residents have seen other regions cope with major disruptions—at times with success and at other times with disastrous results. The consequences of an inability to cope are potentially immense. But are we ready for a “mega-disaster”? Are we prepared to handle a broad-based disaster that will cause immense, widespread economic loss and loss of life? Our ability to respond effectively may not eliminate the devastation, but it could significantly reduce the loss of life and suffering.

Mega-disasters have a widespread effect on a region and significant adverse impacts on economic activity, property, and/or human life. A major earthquake, a severe tornado, a chemical spill (intentional or accidental), or a deadly virus infecting the metropolitan area can cause extensive damage. Experts estimate that in any given year, a mega-disaster in the bi-state region could surpass \$1.7 billion in economic loss and cause more than 1,700 deaths. These are only predictions—the reality could actually be far worse.

The severity of casualties and economic losses will depend on the bi-state region’s level of preparation and the related financial investment. The cost of preparedness is not cheap. While initial federal funding after 9/11 provided opportunities for communities and organizations to be better prepared, cutbacks and reallocation of funding have placed organizations and communities at risk. The bi-state region must continue to fund preparedness effectively and efficiently. Difficult choices are necessary about how to allocate and sustain funds. This money serves as an insurance policy, one that we cannot let expire. The potential loss of life and economic impact is too great not to financially invest in disaster preparedness.

Fortunately, St. Louis has made some progress in recent years with regard to disaster preparation. More than \$30 million in federal dollars has been received, initiatives are underway, and an organization, the St. Louis Area Regional Response System (STARRS), was created in

2003 to guide the region's efforts. STARRS has made great strides in organizing disaster preparedness efforts.

Unfortunately, the process of assessing the bi-state region's preparedness is a difficult task. Analyzing levels of preparedness against basic readiness checklists cannot easily be accomplished. The region's disjointed government structure creates many questions about whether or not a single entity will emerge as "in charge" and be able to effectively direct resources to those most in need. Health institutions have some plans in place, but staffing levels and overall coordination between institutions still needs further clarification. Local business disaster plans are not easily tracked, nor is the level of education that companies have provided to their employees regarding disaster response.

Ultimately, though, in the event of a disaster regardless of its size, it will be up to the individual to be trained and prepared. The general public needs to understand its own critical role in the face of a disaster. In a widespread disaster, there will be an immediate shortage of emergency responders. The public's expectation of emergency responder support is beyond the capabilities of the present system. Emergency responders simply cannot be in all places at once, and individuals cannot depend on assistance from responders as soon as the disaster unfolds. **The public mindset of "waiting for help" must be replaced with an ability to self-sustain for a minimum of three days.**

Also of grave concern are populations within the bi-state area that cannot adequately prepare for a disaster due to health or economic reasons. This is not an excuse but a reality. Communities in economically challenged areas will depend on assistance from community organizations and the government to sustain them during a mega-disaster. The ability of social and community organizations to sustain these communities will be crucial in minimizing the impact. If they cannot effectively respond to those in need, the impact of the mega-disaster will be exacerbated,

creating another internal crisis in the midst of the mega-disaster. Coordination to maximize efforts between community organizations and government officials will be necessary to help those individuals who simply will not be prepared because of poverty, a disability, mental illness, or old age.

There are three main elements that must be addressed to ensure that the bi-state region, as a whole, can be better prepared for a disaster—communication, advance organizational preparation, and individual preparedness.

When a mega-disaster strikes, **communication** will be critical to response efforts. While municipalities and other local governing structures may have disaster preparedness plans and procedures in place, an overall official governing entity is necessary to manage the disaster response and aid. This entity must be established prior to a disaster. Emergency responders and hospital personnel along with community organizations will need to communicate with each other about the situation, needs assessment, and immediate assistance required. Although costly, a standardized communication system must be established that enables all necessary entities to communicate with each other even if telephone services and electrical grids have been compromised. Accurate communication to the public is also a necessary component of disaster management. Before a disaster strikes, a structured public information plan must be in place at every level of government to reduce the risk of confusion, rumor mills, and misinformation.

Advance **organizational preparation** can significantly reduce the impact and likelihood of a mega-disaster. Effective communication channels and collaboration efforts can be maximized through drills and exercises with all emergency responding entities including community and social service organizations. Working together to anticipate possible threats and conducting drills to test emergency preparedness plans will enable the bi-state region to assess the extent of capabilities, identify gaps, and work to fill those gaps.

Everyone including government officials, community organizations, businesses, and neighborhood groups has a vital role to play in disasters. The better these roles are understood, coordinated, and practiced, the better the potential outcome. Training is necessary to prepare all groups for disasters. There are several training programs available to ensure that our government and community leaders know how to judiciously handle a disaster and are as prepared as possible. We must require that all key stakeholders receive the necessary training enabling them to make the right decisions during a crisis situation.

Individual preparedness will be critical in the initial aftermath of a mega-disaster. Unfortunately, when FOCUS St. Louis conducted several polls to test individual preparedness levels, the results were worrisome. When the *St. Louis Business Journal* polled its readers, only 50 percent indicated that they had adequate supplies of food, water, and medications for a minimum of three days. When FOCUS polled its own membership, 71 percent of the respondents admitted that they had not developed a family emergency plan and only 21 percent of FOCUS membership could correctly identify the local emergency broadcasting radio station. When FOCUS surveyed those in the poorest communities in our area, only 23 percent had developed a family emergency plan and only half of the respondents had a three-day supply of food on hand.

A public education campaign is necessary to educate individuals to prepare their family for a disaster and to recognize those around them in need. There are a variety of avenues that can be utilized to coordinate these efforts including a “Disaster Awareness Day”; public service announcements; and educational materials distributed through schools, community organizations, neighborhoods, and local business. The simple reality represents a critical message for citizens: **Individual and family preparedness and action are crucial to survival.**

There are serious risks for which the St. Louis metropolitan region is not prepared.

It is imperative that the bi-state region exercise all possible avenues to educate, fund, plan, and practice measures deemed necessary to sustain our communities and the bi-state region prior to, during, and after a disaster. Success will require a partnership among government, citizens, emergency personnel, community organizations, and businesses—all of which have critical roles to play in disaster prevention and response.

The region is not prepared. We can never be completely prepared but we can be **better** prepared. We owe it to ourselves, our children, and our communities to heed the warnings in this report and take action.

Recommendations

The task force recommendations may seem daunting. However, with a cooperative community effort, the suggestions can and must be accomplished if the bi-state region is to be truly prepared for a large-scale disaster.

Progress has been made in certain areas of disaster preparedness, and there are community organizations conducting substantial work in this area. However, the biggest need remains in establishing distinct and smooth lines of communication and pre-established lines of authority. Effective communication channels and chain of command established prior to a disaster are imperative to ensure that a disaster is handled effectively and efficiently. The three top recommendations to address this need are:

- **Develop a Regional Emergency Coordination Plan.** Determination of who is in charge in the event of a mega-disaster that crosses jurisdictional boundaries will be difficult. A regional emergency coordination plan should contain a process for establishing leadership in regional emergencies. Key leaders would consist of chief elected officials in the region and

their principal staff from subject matter areas pertinent to the disaster. The regional plan should contain procedures for naming who is in charge, methods on how to obtain access to regional resources, and protocols for deciding where shelters and other support services should be established.

- **Establish a communication and coordination system for secondary responders.**

Planning is necessary to ensure that utility companies, the American Red Cross, the United Way of Greater St. Louis, and other secondary service providers know how to coordinate services during a disaster. One possibility is the development of a “go to” website that filters information to be used in advance of, during, and after a disaster. The United Way of Greater St. Louis’ 211 website and the Missouri Department of Transportation’s 511 system are potential models.

- **Strengthen grassroots networks for communication and assistance at the local level.**

Because there will likely be a shortage of first responders in a mega-disaster, it is critical to strengthen existing groups and support the development of new ones to help communicate with and assist citizens at the local level. These can take a variety of forms. One model is the Community Emergency Response Team, or CERT, which has begun earnest development in the St. Louis area with recent federal funding. Another model could be developed among local businesses, churches, employers, or schools. To be effective, these grassroots organizations will need to connect with the existing emergency response community (e.g., the local emergency management agency, the Red Cross) in their areas for information and training in advance so they are prepared when a disaster hits.

For ease of implementation, the remaining recommendations have been categorized according to four key areas: communication/governance, ongoing preparation, individual/business responsibility, and funding.

COMMUNICATION/GOVERNANCE

In any disaster, small or large, communication is critical. Success in times of disaster is achieved through an effective communications system that is utilized to its fullest capacity. Not only do emergency personnel and government officials need to communicate with each other, it is also imperative that two-way communication is occurring between the people in charge and private citizens. This two-way communication will enable emergency responders and government officials to make the best decisions for the community as a whole and direct emergency assistance to those most in need. The bi-state region is challenged by the fact that authority and responsibility for disaster preparedness and response are fragmented among more than 860 governmental units in two states.

- **Coordinate efforts among regional public, private, and civic organizations for a sustained public awareness campaign.** In order to achieve wide-spread public awareness at a level that will impact the behavior of residents and increase their level of preparedness, it is imperative that the public awareness campaign is high-profile, comprehensive, educational, and sustained. This campaign should build off of existing materials and resources, such as the American Red Cross’ “Be Ready” initiative and the State of Missouri Department of Health and Senior Service’s “Ready in 3” program, in order to maximize the resources that have already been invested in preparedness education. The awareness campaign will need additional financial and in-kind support in order to fully reach the general public and impact their actions.

- **Establish a sophisticated and all-encompassing public emergency communication system.** While certain arrangements are already in place with local media outlets, regional leadership needs to do more to ensure adequate communication with the region's citizens if landlines and wireless phone systems are non-functional. Detailed arrangements with local broadcast media (television and radio) should be considered in advance of disaster situations so that proper procedures and points of contact are in place to facilitate the consistent distribution of information with minimal speculation.
- **Standardize communication between public safety units and government entities.** Acknowledging significant cost considerations, every effort should be made to standardize the emergency responder communications systems among different municipalities so that the ability to communicate across the metropolitan region is not impaired.
- **Educate the public on how the region's emergency communication system functions.** Regional leadership should take the lead in engaging regional media outlets, community organizations, and citizen groups to consistently publicize how the public can access the public emergency communication system during a regional disaster.
- **Establish communication systems for high-risk/disadvantaged populations.** The disabled, senior citizens, and other high-risk populations residing in high rises, nursing homes, state facilities, etc. should be located and pre-surveyed and a database developed with the pertinent information to assist during response efforts. Facilities serving these populations must develop plans and stockpiles for sheltering-in-place. A "call in" system should be formalized where each high-risk site calls into an identified central location and provides

information in order to speed data collection and planning of response efforts during a disaster.

ONGOING PREPARATION

Advance preparation can significantly reduce the impact and likelihood of a mega-disaster. Training, role playing, and other exercises are necessary to prepare the region for natural and man-made disasters. However, it is essential that these efforts are coordinated with all stakeholders (including government, social service agencies, and faith and community centers) to ensure that efforts aren't duplicated and that resources are distributed and used most effectively.

- **Require mandatory training of all officials (elected, appointed, and appropriate staff) in an emergency decision-making position.** All elected officials should complete the required courses per the National Incident Management Systems (NIMS) so that they may be supportive in local emergency planning and execution efforts. An annual refresher training seminar should be established, required, and monitored at a minimum. Additionally, local elected officials should be required to participate in annual emergency response drills.
- **Identify and protect the critical transportation infrastructure.** Pinpoint critical choke points, designate emergency routes that are robust and essential, and maintain a reliable communication system for reporting the condition of transportation systems during a disaster.
- **Develop a plan and process to support the needs of families at or below poverty level.** Families with limited resources do not have the means to prepare an emergency kit or have a reserve of food and water for emergency use. Elected officials must work with community and social service organizations to assemble the

necessities to sustain those at the poverty level and develop a method to quickly distribute these items when a disaster strikes.

- **Establish a team of social service organizations and volunteers to train local groups using a common curriculum.** St. Louis Area Regional Response System (STARRS) or another organization needs to prepare a standard set of training programs that can be given to social service and community-based organizations. The Red Cross, community organizations, and other volunteer groups should be assembled to offer training seminars to members of the healthcare system, businesses, community organizations, schools, local governments, and the media. STARRS or another organization must be responsible for keeping track of social service and community-based organizations that have received training.
- **Support law enforcement agencies to continue vigorous anti-terrorism activities.** The existence of terrorists increases the likelihood of many disasters: chemical, biological, and cyber-attacks as well as nuclear detonation. The success, training, and activism of law enforcement representatives reduce the likelihood of these incidents. Federal, state, and local government should actively support anti-terrorism activities.

INDIVIDUAL/BUSINESS RESPONSIBILITY

It is generally thought that the first responders are police, fire, HAZMAT teams, or similar groups. In fact, the first responders during many disasters such as tornadoes or chemical spills are individuals and their neighbors who are affected. Knowing what to do in these early minutes can save lives. There is still a significant need to educate the public about what they can do to get ready for disasters and protect themselves and their families.

During mega-disasters, emergency responders will not be able to instantly administer aid and relief to all affected areas. It will become the responsibility of individuals in waiting areas to sustain themselves until assistance arrives. It is imperative that individuals have the essentials that enable them to survive a minimum of three days on their own.

- **Establish a “Disaster Preparedness Day.”** Establishing a “Disaster Preparedness Day” is a great route to educate the bi-state region on the importance of disaster preparedness and steps for achieving individual preparedness. This yearly event would be a regular reminder keeping disaster preparedness in the forefront of people’s consciousness. The day would also be an opportunity for the media to focus on the region’s current preparedness needs and a chance for businesses to educate their employees.
- **Educate residents about being prepared for emergencies.** Educational materials should be developed at a fourth grade level of comprehension to ensure wide-spread comprehension. The content should be available free of charge and stress the necessity for self-sustainment for a variety of audiences including non-English speakers. Materials should be reviewed regularly, updated, and re-distributed as needed. Prime candidates to receive materials include local neighborhood associations, veterans groups, PTOs/PTAs, fraternal organizations, faith groups, and elementary and secondary school children.
- **Educate businesses on the need to have disaster plans and business continuity plans in place.** A focused education effort must be undertaken to encourage businesses to develop these critical disaster preparedness plans. A series of workshops and seminars [in partner-

ship with other organizations such as the Regional Chamber and Growth Association (RCGA) and the Regional Business Council (RBC)] should be conducted to assist businesses with development of plans and provide the expertise required to implement plans.

- **Ask every major business to commit to promoting individual preparedness education within their company.** Working with an entity to standardize the training and the information, utilize companies to educate their employees on how to effectively prepare their homes and families for disasters.

FUNDING

The cost of preparedness is not cheap. With the initial acquisition of emergency response equipment, HAZMAT gear, etc., communities also acquired the need to fund the operation, repair, calibration, and replacement costs. This does not even account for the ongoing expense of personnel training in the use of the equipment. Federal funds, while available at the outset, are not guaranteed to continue. Initial cut-backs in funding or reallocation of funding to other communities/risk scenarios has placed responder organizations in a position of cutting from other (previous) operations in order to afford the new ones.

- **Establish or identify a regional mechanism to pursue continued funding of emergency preparedness operations.** Alternative funding sources need to be identified so that development efforts continue in the areas of disaster preparedness.

INDIVIDUAL PREPAREDNESS

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A checklist that every citizen should utilize to ensure that they are prepared for a disaster:

Individual and Family Preparedness

- Trained in CPR and First Aid
- Trained through a community program that educates citizens on disasters
- Develop family emergency plans including responsibility for elderly relatives and neighbors who need help, rapid evacuation plans, meeting locations, and contact information for children and family members
- Develop a family communication plan, including contingencies for loss of local phone service
- Have adequate emergency supplies: first aid kit, battery-operated radio, flashlights/lanterns, and spare batteries
- Know how to locate the emergency broadcasting station on the radio
- Have adequate supplies of food, water, and medications
- Know how to turn off the gas and water
- Have a plan for the needs of your pets
- Become familiar with your children's disaster recovery plan at school
- Become familiar with your disaster preparedness plan at your workplace

This checklist was developed from various sources, including material from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and lists published in disaster-related books and publications.

Acknowledgements

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For a complete listing of the FOCUS St. Louis Regional Disaster Preparedness Task Force and guest speakers who addressed the task force, please visit www.focus-stl.org.

FOCUS St. Louis works to develop leadership, influence policy, and promote community connections throughout the bi-state St. Louis region. The mission of FOCUS St. Louis is to create a thriving, cooperative region by engaging citizens to participate in active leadership roles and to influence positive community change. A nonpartisan 501(c)(3), FOCUS St. Louis has four key priorities for the 16-county area: good governance, social justice, quality educational opportunities, and sustainable infrastructure.

Developing a region that is sufficiently prepared for a disaster requires everyone's involvement. If you would like to do more to help the region prepare for a disaster, contact Reggie Williams at 314-622-1250 x105 or reggiew@focus-stl.org. To download copies of this executive summary or the full report, please visit www.focus-stl.org.



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