

Emergency Preparedness

Problem:

Limited ability of communities to effectively respond to and recover from emergencies due to gaps in planning and training activities.

Similar to the rest of the State and Nation, Washington County communities and citizens are at risk for a broad range of natural and technological disasters on a daily basis – straight-line winds, tornados, flooding, severe winter storms, hazardous materials releases, infectious disease outbreaks, radiological incidents, and terrorism.

Many residents have been witness to and affected by such events. This experience has heightened their awareness for the need for individual and community-wide emergency preparedness. Numerous other residents have not been impacted by a disaster and do not recognize the need for individual and family preparedness. Additional planning and training resources to resident and community/government organizations are needed to assure that the county is prepared to for any emergency.

Washington County has a history of quality emergency preparedness. Through local level planning, private partner participation, and long-term investment efforts, many communities have increased their preparedness efforts and have taken steps to reach optimal levels. With the assistance of local, state, and national public education and planning efforts, Washington County has also strived to educate its citizens on the need to prepare and improve their ability to respond to and recover from natural, technological, and terrorism-related emergencies. In recent years, residents of Washington County have taken many personal steps to increase their preparedness levels. For example, in 2006, only 31% of residents had a household emergency plan. In 2008, that number grew to 58%.

Emergency preparedness remains a constant priority for Washington County, and the county is concerned about the ability of its citizens and communities' ability to respond to natural, technological, and terrorist events. Fifty-four percent of residents are concerned about their fellow citizens' ability to respond to a disaster and 46% are concerned about governments' abilities to respond. Twenty-six percent of county and municipal public safety officials consider their jurisdictions somewhat unprepared or not prepared at all. This perceived inability or absence of optimal emergency preparedness in a single or all-hazards approach exposes these groups to heightened levels of vulnerability to any number of community-based emergency events/incidents.

Multiple partners collaborate to respond to small-scale incidents, as well as to more wide-spread emergencies. The local public health department is charged with protecting the public health and safety of its citizens, operating in a proactive and preventative approach to healthcare, and informing and educating the public. Consequently, public health's role is to assure that all partners are adequately prepared to respond to and



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recover from disasters. The primary goals are to: prevent injury, death and disability; avoid unnecessary response delays, and minimize recovery costs by having optimal preparedness levels. A few examples of emergencies with public health implications and responses are the recent Hugo tornado, flooding in southeastern Minnesota, the 35W bridge collapse, and seasonal flu outbreaks.

Effective incident management and the prevention of emergencies begins with a continuous and integrated cycle of planning, training, exercising, and revision that takes place throughout the four phases of the emergency management cycle: prevention, preparedness, response and recovery. Washington County recognizes this cycle, and its municipalities recognize their need for additional planning and training opportunities and resources.

“We cannot stress enough the importance of being prepared for all types of emergencies, from natural disasters to terrorist attacks...Having a plan can make all the difference...The time for individuals, families and businesses to plan is now, and to resolve to make readiness a priority...”²

Community Feedback

Multiple measurement tools were utilized to assess the continued need for emergency preparedness initiatives. Primary measures included an on-line survey of Washington County residents, which indicated that a majority of residents are concerned about government’s ability, and their own, to respond to a natural disaster, an infectious disease outbreak, or terrorism.

Further study, through the 2008 Washington County Residential Survey, indicates that county residents have taken steps in recent years to improve their emergency preparedness levels, as well as their ability to respond. However, this service remains near the bottom of average ratings for county characteristics. Residents also report not knowing about emergency preparedness and response initiatives within their cities and the county.

Finally, Washington County Emergency Management staff conducted a survey of all public safety officials throughout the county to assess city-level preparedness, county emergency services provided to cities, and the additional needs of emergency responders. With a response rate just over 50%, county public safety officials indicate that they are somewhat prepared, but that currently available resources are not meeting their planning and training needs.

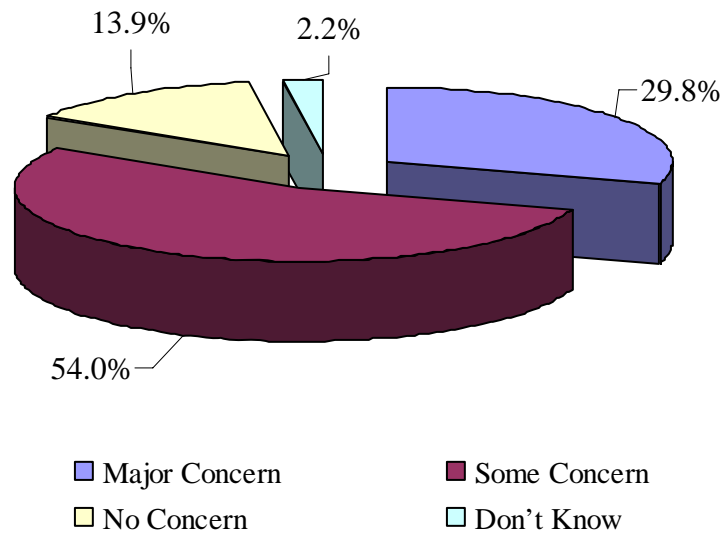
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Key Data

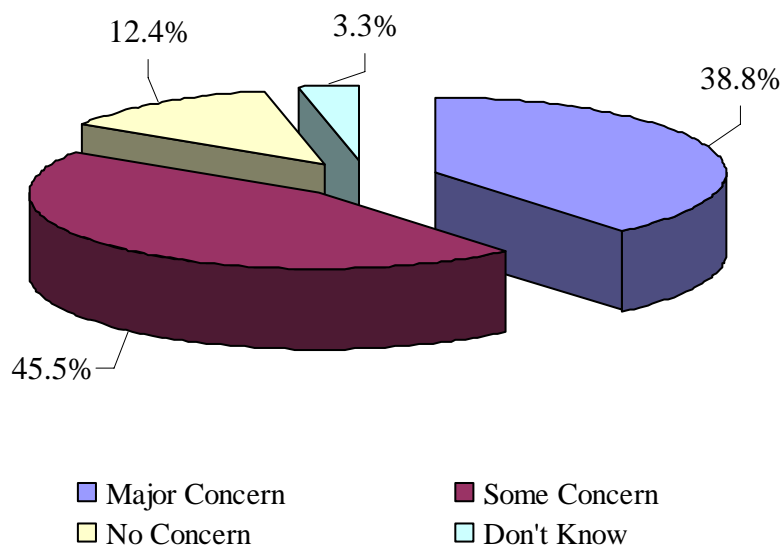
Figure 1. Resident Concern About Citizens' Ability to Respond



Source: 2008 Community Health Assessment On-line Survey

Figure 2.

Resident Concern About the County's Ability to Respond



Source: 2008 Community Health Assessment On-line Survey

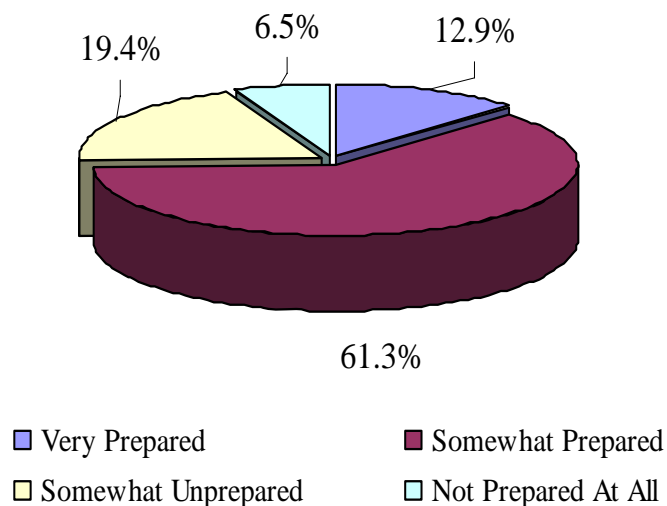
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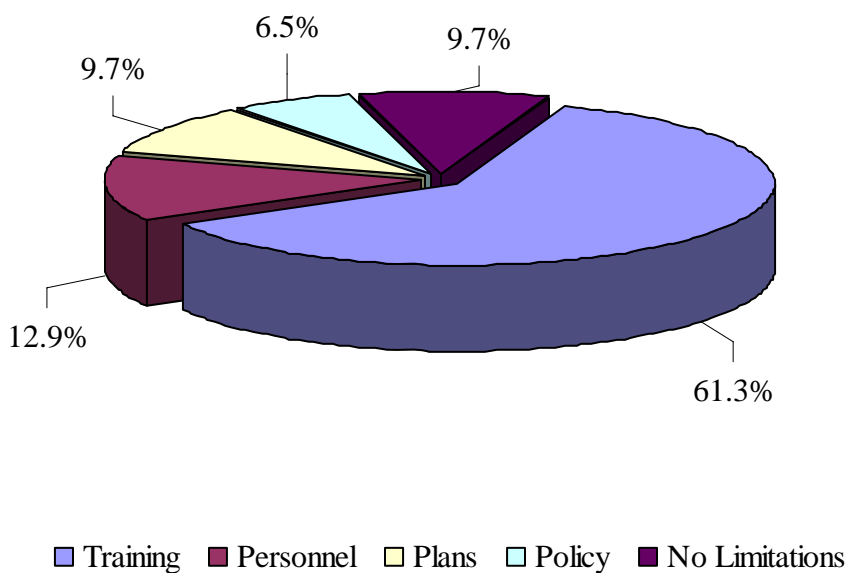
Key Data

Figure 3. Emergency Responder Rating of their Jurisdiction's Preparedness for an Emergency



Source: 2008 Community Health Assessment Emergency Responder Survey

Figure 4. Responder-identified Limitations to Emergency Preparedness



Source: 2008 Community Health Assessment Emergency Responder Survey

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Community Assets

- ◆ Multi-disciplinary, all-hazard planning for first responders
- ◆ The county's support of the National Incident Management System (NIMS) and incident command training, ensuring that a system is in place for identifying proper authorities and their roles
- ◆ Planning and training activities conducted by individual municipalities and organizations
- ◆ County Emergency Management staff provide in-person planning and training opportunities
- ◆ The U.S. Department of Homeland Security's *Ready* and the state of Minnesota's *CodeReady* educational campaigns
- ◆ Numerous local level public safety agencies, volunteer and community organizations have established community emergency preparedness and response education initiatives.
- ◆ Medical Reserve Corp
- ◆ Multiple education and training opportunities also exist for community emergency responders and government officials.
- ◆ Washington County's *Be Prepared* campaign, providing information and educational materials to county businesses, medical facilities, and residents regarding pandemic influenza, mass dispensing, infectious disease, and other public health emergencies
- ◆ Washington County's All-Hazards Emergency Response Plan is in place.

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Community Gaps and Risks

- ◆ Despite the availability of emergency preparedness resources, residents and government officials do not access them easily nor regularly.
- ◆ Proximity to federal and state training sites, time spent away from communities, and the lack of information on requirements, recommendations, and best practices impedes communities from taking steps to improve their emergency preparedness.
- ◆ Public safety officials struggle to express the importance of preparing for emergencies to their fellow residents and government officials.
- ◆ Public safety officials are also in a continuous search for resources, training and exercise opportunities, educational materials, and guidance that will aid them in ensuring that their performance levels and community readiness are optimal.
- ◆ Many residents have not experienced a widespread emergency, so they may be complacent about preparing for one.

Summary

The continued recognition of a need for more coordinated planning and training makes it essential that the Emergency Management program continue to provide a structured and coordinated approach to all-hazard emergency preparedness activities throughout the county. Doing so provides residents and communities with the ability to prepare, respond to, and recover from emergencies of all types, while also highlighting areas where they can take action to prevent catastrophic losses when an emergency event does take place.

Sources

- ¹ Chertoff, Michael. (05 October 2007) “DHS Declares Fourth Annual National Preparedness Month Most Successful Ready Effort to Date” Press Release. Retrieved 2008-08-11.
- ² Chertoff, Michael. (20 December 2007) “DHS Encourages Americans to Resolve to be Ready in 2008.” Press Release. Retrieved 2008-08-11.