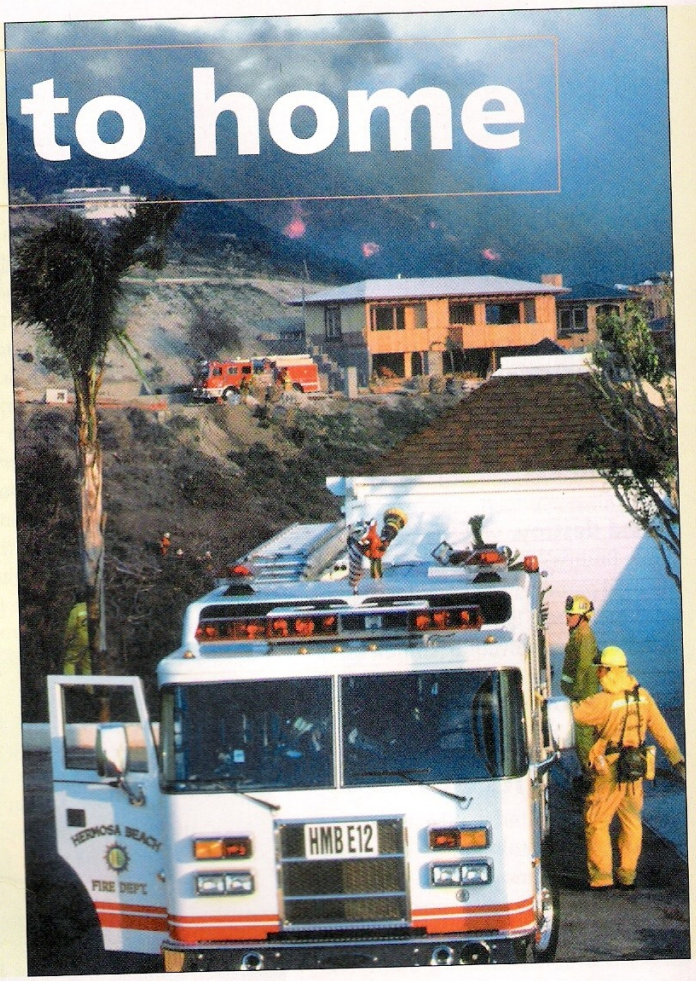
Too close to home

Since responders can lose focus on their jobs when a disaster threatens their own families, why aren't dependent-preparedness programs more common?



Keith D. Cullom, IFPA

Firefighters from the Hermosa Beach (Calif.) Fire Department, along with other units of the South Bay Cities Strike Team, set up for structure protection as the January 2003 Pacific Fire pushes through coastal brush to threaten hundreds of homes.

By Anne Louise Bannon
Contributing Editor

Nobody likes the call that hits too close to home. The overdosed teen or the helmetless skateboarder who's the same age as your son or daughter. Pulling up to an accident site and seeing the same model car as your spouse's all crumpled up.

The vast majority of the time, you know your kid is safely at school and your spouse's car is in the parking lot where he or she works. So after the initial gulp of fear, you get your head back in the game and go to work.

But then there was what happened to Chris Albertson, now chief of the Petaluma (Calif.) Fire Department.

Close calls

Back in 1977, Albertson was working for a fire department in Santa Barbara County, a married man with young kids.

"We saw the fire start," he recalls. He decided to go into work, even though he was off at the time. "I figured to get some overtime. They put me to work, and I was there two days."

In the meantime, what had started as a small brush fire in the hills had all but exploded through Sycamore Canyon — and Albertson's house was in the fire zone.

"The phone lines had burned," Albertson says. "I can't get hold of my family. My wife has my small kids and my dog."

Then he heard from a fire chief from another department that his whole neighborhood had been consumed by the fire.

"I'm really depressed," he says. "I'm wondering if my wife got the insurance papers. We've talked about it, but I'm wondering if she did that. Geez, how bad is my neighborhood?"

Albertson was left to worry for several hours until it was finally confirmed that the street that had been destroyed was the next one over from the street where his house was. Also, his wife, children and dog had safely evacuated to an in-law's home.

Albertson was lucky, but he says that before he found out his home was all right, working was no easy thing. "For several hours, I wasn't focused on my job."

Even worse was what happened to one of the dispatchers on that fire, who heard a captain identify his home, then order the crew to pull into the driveway, grab a hose and try to save the house. Silence followed, then the crew was ordered over the radio to move down the canyon. More silence, while the dispatcher agonized. Finally, someone thought to pick up a mike and tell him his garage was gone, but the house was OK.

Lessons learned...

Whether it's a terrorist attack, pandemic flu, an earthquake, wildfire, flood, tornado or hurricane, when a disaster

hits, emergency responders are expected to be on the job, protecting their communities.

"The general population expects to call 911 and have someone show up," said Kenneth Kuntz, fire studies specialist for the U.S. Fire Administration.

And the vast majority do, but sometimes at tremendous cost to their peace of mind and ability to concentrate on their jobs when their own families are among those in danger.

"I think it is a big distraction," says Chief Bill Metcalf of the North County Fire Protection District, in Fallbrook, a suburb of San Diego.

Carle Jackson, criminal justice policy advisor for the Louisiana Commission on Law Enforcement, says that worry about their families was a significant problem for New Orleans police officers. So when Jackson wrote his initial plan based on post-Katrina issues, priority evacuation of emergency responders' families was a very strongly worded recommendation.

"Predetermined emergency evacuation and shelter sites for First Responder families is [sic] critical for effective response," reads the report, "Managing Catastrophic Events: The Lessons of Katrina," which Jackson wrote in September 2005.

"A major lesson of Katrina," the report states, "is that first responder personnel cannot function at best efficiency if they are worried about their own families. The role of law enforcement, fire, EMS, and other front line personnel is highly stressful. In situations where these local responders are uncertain about the welfare and even survival of their families, that stress level is raised to the breaking point. During Katrina this point was tragically made when a New Orleans police officer committed suicide after finding his family dead in their home. Other officers left their duty assignments to check on and evacuate their families. Such conduct, while not to be condoned, is certainly understandable and predictable. Evacuating and sheltering families ahead of time, or having a preset plan when the disaster is of such a nature as to provide no advance warning, is, therefore, critical to the first responder role. "

... but not implemented

Even so, programs to provide shelter and other care for the families of emergency responders remain very rare.

"It's certainly needs to be something that a department needs to plan for, but I don't know of anybody who has," Metcalf says.

"We talked a lot about doing this kind of planning, but I don't actually have a sense of how many [staff members] have done anything about that," says Barbara Worgess, public health officer for Coconino County, Ariz., and chair of the Public Health Ready Work Group for the National Association of County and City Health Officials.

Kuntz points out that dependent care for responder families is less of an issue in communities protected by volunteer fire departments, mostly because the volunteers are already largely community-oriented and the families of the volunteers tend to be involved in support functions during larger events anyway.

Even so, there are logistics issues, such as potentially using the fire station as a temporary shelter, which both Kuntz and Metcalf think is a bad idea.

"The last thing you want is a bunch of rug rats running around the apparatus plant," Kuntz says. "It's just not the kind of environment that's good for kids."

Brad Mason, special operations chief of the Johnson County, Kan., paramedic service, says that when his department faces an emergency all-call, the business office suddenly becomes a childcare center for the responders, with the office staff and spouses taking care of the children.

But beyond the shelter, evacuees usually need water, food, blankets, toilet paper and other essentials, all of which cost money.

Finally, there's the problem of how one defines "family member."

"Is it significant others?" Kuntz asks. "Does it mean the dog and the cat? My distant uncle who happens to be in residence? My ex with my two kids? Is it shelter, food, assisting to getting medical care, providing those things in a shelter?"

Perceptions and politics

Kuntz also says that in areas where the firefighters and other emergency responders are paid employees, providing shelter for family members could be misconstrued by the public that expects responders to be protecting them.

"Those become issues with some political consequence," Kuntz says. "It looks like preferential treatment."

Like most public health officials, Worgess is grappling with the whole question of who gets vaccinations or anti-virals from a very limited supply in the event of a pandemic flu crisis.

Robert Kaufmann/FEMA

The Carnival Cruise Ships Ecstasy and Sensation were docked in New Orleans from September 2005 through February 2006, providing housing for local victims of Hurricane Katrina and funded by FEMA. The two ships housed mostly first responders, as well as some other municipal employees, explains Jennifer De La Cruz, a Carnival Cruise Lines spokesperson. The ships housed more than 6,000 victims and served more than 1.4 million meals.

She points out that while it will be necessary for public health officials and emergency responders to get the drugs first, it might be difficult to convince the public that workers' families and elected officials may need to be included in that group.

"It will look like favoritism," she says. "At least there's been discussion about the different possibilities about getting the best use out of the limited vaccine, so that whatever we have, it ensures protection to the most people."

"What is fair?" Albertson replies when asked about potential perception of favoritism. "That, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. If your family has no place else to go, you come to the fire station, and I'll make sure that you are dry, fed and comfortable here. We are a community building. If people in the community … show up, we will keep them here until I can get them safe transportation to a designated evacuation center."

Sherrie Collins, emergency manager for Coconino County, says she hasn't heard any concerns from the public about favoritism toward emergency responders and their families getting vaccinated first in a flu crisis.

"They're very receptive that those groups get immunized first," she says, explaining that most people seem to get it that if emergency responders are home taking care of sick kids, they won't be taking care of the community.

"I would imagine the public would be very supportive if we were to put it to a vote," Jackson says. "It helps the first responder better perform their duty, so it's to everyone's advantage" to provide for families.

The self-sufficiency necessity

Everyone who was interviewed agrees that emergency responders absolutely need to work with their families to get them prepared to be relatively self-sufficient when Mom or Dad needs to be at work.

"It's no different than being in the armed forces," Metcalf says, pointing out that being part of a military family means learning to deal with things without the help of the loved one who's away on duty.

But beyond that, opinions vary on how much responsibility a department has for care of their employees' dependents. Jackson believes that there should be special shelters for families of first responders, but Chief Steven Nicholas, assistant superintendent and chief of operations for the New Orleans Police Department, doesn't think that's crucial.

"We did a post-Katrina survey and most of our police were not for self-sheltering," he says.

Worgess says that her staff, when hired, must sign a letter acknowledging that in the face of an emergency, they will report to work. On the flip side, however, Worgess' office provides a family preparedness plan.

"It kind of prompts them in all the things they should think about to make sure they're ready and that they're prepared for the worker to be away," Worgess says. "Places where the family can meet, who they can call if the parent can't be home. A list of supplies if they have to stay home, or a go bag for evacuations."

In fact, providing families with the

Robert Kaufmann/FEMA

In February 2006, a FEMA community relations specialist (right) helps a New Orleans police officer, then living on the Carnival Cruise Ship Ecstasy, secure alternate housing.

Robert Kaufmann/FEMA

Connie Daniel, a chaplain for the New Orleans Police Department, gets help from a FEMA community relations crew as she moves into her new FEMA trailer. Daniel, whose home had been destroyed by Katrina, had lived temporarily on the cruise ship Ecstasy.

tools to prepare themselves seems to be the most popular option. Kuntz mentions a department in Washington State that requires their first responders' families to keep a 72-hour "go kit" as a requirement of the responder's employment.

Shared responsibility

Still, that's only part of the solution. "My responsibility is to make the training and the opportunity available," Albertson says. "It's your responsibility, as the employee, to take advantage of it."

He points out, as do several others, that one really can't force families of responders to do the emergency prep.

"It's difficult to regulate what an officer does with his family," agrees Nicholas.

His department did have a hurricane protocol before Katrina, which included giving officers time before the storm hit to get their families evacuated and settled before returning. In addition, officers had been strongly encouraged to have an emergency plan in place ahead of time. When things did fall apart for officers, it was partly because no one was expecting the extensive scope of the catastrophe, and also when an officer's plans were ambiguous or not really effective.

"It's been tightened," Nicholas says about the protocol since Katrina. "The chapter's been modified to put more emphasis on providing actual locations where people are going to be, phone numbers. We are capable of making them understand that their plan has to be in place and have a good chance of success, and submitting it in a form that's reviewable."

Nonetheless, Nicholas says, if the family doesn't follow the plan, there's not much his department can do.

Several sources suggest that departments keep on hand phone numbers of employees' third-party contacts, such as Aunt Edna who lives in another state. If the responders and their families all know that Aunt Edna will be in charge of keeping track of who's where and how they are, that eliminates confusion for families.

Jackson also points out that if a department also has this information, then in those circumstances when the unthinkable happens and the first responder is killed or seriously injured, department members can readily get hold of family members.

Albertson also had an agreement at one time with an out-of-area sister department to keep phone records for one another's employees so that if a fire station had to be abandoned, there would still be records available.

Facilitating communication between family members and responders in the field, however, seems to be the single most important thing a department can do. Jackson believes that in addition to the departments, families should also have contact information for whatever command center is in place, preferably with one or more officers in charge of nothing but coordinating communication between family members and personnel in the field.

Because when responders don't know whether their families are safe, that isn't safe for the community. HPP

Anne Louise Bannon is a Los Angeles–based freelance writer.