



Lake County
Radio Amateur Civil Emergency Service ®
Amateur Radio Emergency Services ®
1303 N. Milwaukee Avenue
Libertyville, IL 60048



COMMUNICATIONS WILL ALWAYS FAIL!

by Joseph Scanlon. He has spent 19 years studying crisis and disaster, examining the problems of emergency planning, and emergency management.

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"You can depend on it: communications **ALWAYS** fail in a disaster!" So reports Joseph Scanlon, Director of Emergency Communications Research Unit, Carleton University in the Alberta (Canada) Public Safety Services *INSIGHT* publication. The following excerpts from his article are food for thought, education and planning:

While working as a consultant, I was asked by an engineer how often communications fail in a disaster. I replied, "always." He looked at me in disbelief; so I asked a colleague, Dr. E. L. Quarantelli. His reply? "Communications always fail in a disaster."

Though that's a fact-and there's lots of evidence to support it-the hardest message about disasters to get across to emergency managers is that, at times, now matter how well prepared, they won't know what's going on.

Take the tornado which hit Edmonton, July 31, 1987. There was damage and destruction including downed power and telephone lines. Traffic routes were impassable. There was flooding, enough to block many north-south arteries. There were toxic chemical incidents. Emergency radio systems-police, fire and ambulance-were overloaded. Part of the phone system was destroyed. No one, for a time, could possibly know what happened.

That doesn't mean that Edmonton's plan, based on a central EOC, didn't work. It means it took time before the EOC had the information needed to make useful decisions.

Any disaster-no matter how well handled-has some communication problems, some uncertainty.

Effective emergency planning must assume such problems will occur. It must accept that there will be periods of uncertainty. And it must have systems in place to overcome the inevitable failures of communications.

I always liked what the mayor of one Canadian city once told me. He said that everything had gone wrong during an exercise, and that when things become confused during a real disaster, he was in good shape because "confusion seemed normal."

A word about disasters versus emergencies. Emergencies are serious events which require coordinated response to protect the health, safety and welfare of people, or to limit damage to property. Disasters are not just large emergencies, but differ substantially in nature. Disasters are disruptive and cause organizations and systems to break down. The recognized stages of response after a disaster are:

- Confusion (individual response)
- Decentralized response
- Coordinated response
- Cleanup
- Recovery

Disruption is a key feature of the confusion, and decentralized responses stages after a disaster.

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