

## **Emergency Preparedness Planning: Finding Value in an Unwelcome Challenge**

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Emergency planning is a great leveller in that faced with either natural disaster or terrorist attack, we are all vulnerable, and we are all faced, equally, with unpredictability. We know that hurricanes happen, that suicide-bombers blow themselves up; but it is in the nature of both that we do not know until the actual moment of impact where and when the blow will strike. Persons with disability are amongst our best resources for learning how to plan for such random eventualities since they know from everyday experience where the challenges and pitfalls of unpredictability lie, and what can be done to avoid, or cope with them. They have become much more adept at dealing with uncertainty and sporadic risks and have much to offer the community as a whole, if the community will only stop for a moment to listen, to learn and to imitate.

But currently this is how planning for emergency is approached, at least not consistently. Planning tends, however well intentioned, to reflect a view that emergency services are primarily those that are provided by the able bodied to those who are not. Of course, at one level this may be true – but only in the moment of acute need. In all other respects, it is best to start with the day to day experiences of those who face a daily stream of challenges and observe how they deal with them. This is not a particularly complex or extended process; it is more a question of approach and attitude. Once we start to look in the right way, we all make rapid progress.

At the January 2006 conference in Tampa, there was a wake-up call for all of us in this regards – an overnight fire in the conference hotel. The incident happily ended with no injury, but it exposed that even the best prepared were not well-prepared enough, especially for night-time scares. Debriefing the following day with all participants on lessons learned, the common conclusion was that we need to keep fresh, and keep refreshing, the knowledge of how to deal with emergencies, because in the real ones we may only get one shot.

Our practical approach to Emergency Planning focuses on two themes:

1. the **planning process**: a way to approach this is captured in the form we have developed for this purpose. We see the process as community-based and participative not private, not an individual obligation. We need to realise that at any one time we may be helper, or victim, or both; and we need to prepare collectively accordingly.
2. the **self-realization process**: we prepare for emergencies because we value life and each other; if we didn't why would we bother. But is this the real driver when we sit down to plan? We advocate the use of the planning process to advance our understanding both of our own needs, and of our opportunities to transform those needs into opportunities to strengthen personal and community values and bonds.

In the presentation phase of our workshops we share a model of self-realization which we have built on the admirable foundations of Abraham Maslow in his analysis of our immediate and our higher order needs. We use this model to analyze how different types of emergency may challenge us to respond in different ways, while at the heart of everything is dealing with the damage fear may do to our minds and lives, if we let it. We are happy to collaborate further with any group or community reflecting on the same themes.

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