

## A Failure to Communicate

by Scott M. Stringer

Monday, August 27, 2007 12:00 AM

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New Yorkers have more reason than most Americans to be preoccupied with emergency preparedness. Given the fact that this month alone we've endured a system-wide transit shutdown, a building-shredding tornado, and a tragic and terrifying fire at Ground Zero, city residents have a right to ask tough questions about our government's ability to keep us informed in times of crisis.

Failures of infrastructure, high-impact accidents, natural disasters and terrorist attacks all carry risks of extreme danger that can only be mitigated by the receipt of timely, accurate information. That is why, in the aftermath of both the storm that shut down the subways and the fire at the Deutsche Bank building, New Yorkers' most persistent questions concern the City's failure to provide adequate and timely information during these crises. After all, public safety, which requires a high level of communication, is a core function of government.

While part of the immediate challenge is technological, the main impediments, it turns out, have to do, not with wires or electromagnetic fields, but with judgment, responsibility and fear of potential consequences. New York City, which has made great technological strides under

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Mayor Bloomberg, must move forward with a reverse 911 system that can deliver recorded messages to affected New Yorkers during an emergency. We should also exploit all the gadgets already in people's hands to get them emergency information. But we must do so with a full understanding that technological innovations alone will not solve the emergency communications dilemma.

From California to the nation's capital to here at home, and at every level of government, emergency response officials have been stymied in their efforts to provide timely information to citizens through their cell phones, PDAs and computers — not primarily due to gaps in technology, but due to a lack of human resources and the absence of clear lines of authority. In New York City, the Office of Emergency Management, which has proved its mettle again and again in times of crisis, has nevertheless been unable to fulfill its goal of updating residents “on active emergencies,” or to provide its promised “guidance on protective actions you may need to take to stay safe,” — both promises spelled out on office's website. The reasons for this are complex and interrelated.

For starters, there's the ever-present question of liability. This results in a tendency for officials to keep emergency information within tightly controlled channels and pass it on to the public piecemeal, and too often only after many hours of confusion.

Problems of authority and chain of command add to the information vacuum. In high stakes emergency situations, as events rapidly unfold, many people at numerous agencies and at different levels of government must gather information and analyze a situation that is in flux. During a time of high pressure and shifting insight, deciding what information can and must be conveyed to the public requires both keen judgment and a kind of “the-buck-stops-here” authority. Currently no single identifiable person or agency has that responsibility. As long as it's unclear where the authority rests, those hard judgments are unlikely to be made in a timely manner.

Given all the technology available to us today, the challenge is not as much in making sure that information gets out as in providing solid, reliable information in the first place. When information is shared freely, it spreads quickly. When just a few people in a building, school or other community receive word of what they can do to remain safe during an emergency, it has a viral effect. That is why during moments of danger it is so important to fill a vacuum of information with as much accurate and reliable information as can be made available to the public.

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What is needed is a strongly managed communications network able to respond to emergencies with reliable, authoritative information delivered as quickly as possible. Throughout the network, employees should be encouraged to make the tough decisions about what information should be conveyed to the public. The people who comprise the network should be designated in advance and everyone should know who they are.

Finally, the most fundamental part of improving emergency communications is making it a priority, which requires, above all, respecting its importance. If knowledge is power, it is also our primary bulwark against danger. Without knowledge of the danger, we cannot protect ourselves and our loved ones.

For the City of New York, August 2007 is a wake up call. There are intelligent steps we can and must take that will banish to the history books scenes of New Yorkers wandering the streets in confusion, shaking our heads. And the good news is, creating an excellent emergency communication system does not depend on our waiting for some new technological innovation – all we need is the political will and good sense to use our highly developed problem solving skills.

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