

Communicating Potential Hazards to Homeless Populations

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Introduction

Arguably, among the most vulnerable in our communities are those who are chronically homeless. Failure to develop effective plans to communicate potential hazards and to provide emergency aid to this vulnerable population could result in preventable casualties. It has been identified that during the 2002-2003 severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak in Toronto, there were a number of communication shortfalls with regards to information getting to homeless populations and the homeless service providers (Leung, Ho, Kiss, Gundlapalli, & Hwang, 2008).

Background

In Canadian local (municipal or regional) emergency plans, the emergency managers are responsible for communication to the public about potential threats and hazards. For example the British Colombia Local Authority Emergency Management Regulation includes the “impact on people and property” but does not distinguish between groups or specific categories of people (Local Authority Emergency Management Regulation, B.C. Reg. 380/95 s. 2(1)(b)). Significant research has been undertaken in the United States on communication with homeless communities in the event of a disaster or emergency to ensure that this segment of the population is reached. Very little research or information is available from Canadian studies or resources. Therefore, this research paper endeavours to address, from a Canadian perspective, the following questions: In what ways do emergency managers and homeless service providers (HSPs) communicate in order to ensure that information relating to potential hazards and threats are passed to homeless populations? What formal processes are currently in place to communicate information to homeless communities and how is that done?

Methods

A literary review was completed using journals, academic papers, government publications and reports. Questionnaires were sent to both Canadian emergency managers and Canadian HSPs (N=30). The information obtained from the completed questionnaires was compared to that obtained in the literary review to see if there are any common themes between Canada and the United States.

Results/Findings

After conducting research on communication between emergency managers, HSPs and homeless populations, three themes have become apparent. First, emergency management organizations rely heavily on HSPs to communicate emergency information to homeless communities in the United States (US). Secondly, HSPs in the US do not have the expertise to develop business continuity plans or provide training to staff to help homeless communities to become more resilient. Thirdly, a common question is being asked: Who is responsible for communication with homeless and other vulnerable communities? In the US advice and guidance is given to emergency managers but there does not appear to be any consistency in how it is applied. The data from Canadian emergency managers (n=5) show that 80% of municipal emergency plans do not have communications plans with homeless populations included; 80% do not provide assistance to HSPs to develop business continuity plans (BCPs); and, 40% do not have contingencies in the event that the HSP is unable to operate. The data received from the HSPs also indicates that 25% of HSPs do not have a BCP; 25% do not receive any threat or hazard information; and, 25% of HSPs do not participate in municipal emergency planning. Comparing the new data with the literary review it is evident that Canada and the US have the same three themes. Sundareswaran, Ghazzawi and O'Sullivan (2015) conducted a Canadian study, acknowledged that emergency managers usually communicate with the homeless service providers, but suggested that communication needs to be strengthened (Sundareswaran et al., 2015, p. 3). This is supported by the questionnaires where 20% of emergency managers are unaware of their responsibility to communicate with homeless populations and 25% of HSPs do not receive information about hazards or threats.



Gary Blasi. 2 December 2014. (26 year old woman who lives on skid row trying to keep dry). Retrieved from <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-1123-biasi-homeless-emergency-declaration-20151123-story.html>

Discussion

The same themes from the literary review became apparent in the data obtained from the questionnaires. In Canada, emergency management organizations (80%) rely heavily on homeless service providers to communicate information to homeless populations. With regards to training and assistance, 25% of service providers do not have a business continuity plan and 80% of emergency managers do not have programs in place to assist the HSPs with completing BCPs and 40% do not have contingency plans for when the HSPs stop operations. The additional resources needed to address this vulnerable population in the event of an emergency would likely be far greater than the cost of assisting the service providers to continue operations by developing a BCP. However, it would appear that 80% of emergency planners (n=4) are not even aware of the scale of homeless populations in their community. In both the United States and Canada, there does not appear to be any organization who is legally responsible for communication with homeless populations in the event of an emergency. In the United States three federal departments do supply guidance to emergency planners in how to make their plans inclusive of homeless populations. A review of a number of Canadian emergency plans shows that the planners use the words “the public”. As there are no exclusions, one can infer that municipal emergency managers are accepting responsibility, on behalf of the city or region, for communicating emergency information and warnings to the public, whether they live in homes or tents or cardboard boxes. From the data collected in the questionnaire, 20% of municipal emergency management teams (n=1) only inform the homeless service providers of the emergency information and not homeless populations themselves. Does this mean they have met their responsibility and their legal obligation under provincial legislative framework and, sometimes, municipal by-laws?

Conclusions

The information obtained from the literary review was compared with the new information received from Canadian emergency planners and service providers via a questionnaire. The results of the questionnaire reveal that, similar to the United States, there are three consistent themes that emerged. First, emergency planners rely very heavily on service providers to communicate with homeless communities in the event of a disaster. While the cities fund service providers, more can be done by the cities to mitigate the risk that service providers can’t continue operations. Secondly, service providers need training and assistance in developing business continuity plans. In return, they can help the city to prepare for the possibility that service providers need to close in the event of an emergency. Thirdly, homeless populations are part of the community and communication with them, either directly or via the service providers, is required to ensure their safety in the event of an emergency. Further research into best practices in Canada could be conducted with a view to developing a guidance document for Canadian emergency planners. This could provide an opportunity for consistency and inclusive planning from coast to coast to coast.

References

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