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Preparing Americans for disaster

By Paul C. Light

NEW YORK - As they ponder the final 9/11 commission report detailing the continued lack of preparedness among federal agencies, Congress and President Bush should also consider the parallel lack of preparedness among the citizenry as a whole.

They might start by addressing the most important lesson that emerged from hurricane Katrina: Despite unrelenting coverage of the chaos that followed the storm, Katrina had virtually no effect on the public's preparedness for disaster.

Americans clearly believe something is coming, however. According to a New York University survey conducted last July, a majority of Americans believe terrorists will hit again within five years.

Yet, Americans also believe disaster will strike just about anywhere but home. Asked last summer why their communities were unlikely targets, most Americans either said their part of the country was too unimportant to attack, terrorists were on the run, or the government would protect them.

Many also said they needed more time and money to prepare, almost half said they did not know exactly what to do and where to turn for help, and two-thirds did not have a plan with family and friends about whom they would contact after a disaster.

Such complacency can only breed the kind of chaos seen on the streets of New Orleans after Katrina. Asked what they would do if a suicide bombing or biological attack occurred in their own communities, Americans said they would go every which way but loose. Some said they would flee, others would volunteer, and still others would contact their friends and family, try to learn more about the event, gather supplies, pray, or lock and load. Americans have never been more dependent on local governments, businesses, and charitable institutions to guide them after disaster strikes.

Unfortunately, according to a second New York University survey conducted in mid-October, Katrina eroded public confidence in the very institutions that they depend upon. Barely a third said their fire departments and charitable organizations were very well prepared to help people in need, less than a fifth said the same about their local police, and barely a tenth said the same about local businesses and governments.

Katrina also created serious doubts about how well the federal government would respond to specific disasters such as terrorist bombings and a flu epidemic. Although the number of Americans who said they know what to expect from a potential disaster almost doubled in the weeks before and after Katrina, many appear to expect government failure. Only 11 percent of Americans said that the federal government was very well prepared for a flu epidemic, for example.

Although some cities such as New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles are working hard to be prepared for a range of hazards, others simply do not have the time, money, or the motivation to act, and still others suffer from "not in my backyard" syndrome.

Congress should be cautious about giving the Department of Homeland Security yet another responsibility, but it is the logical place to launch an effort to both raise public consciousness and close the preparedness divide between rich and poor.

With a budget in the millions, not billions, such a citizen-preparedness initiative could make an instant impact by merely reconciling the hundreds of federal programs already promoting everything from smoke detectors to evacuation kits. It could also start a long-needed conversation among the thousands of state and local governments, private business, charitable organizations, and first responders who play key roles in citizen education.

However, the most important job right now is to engage Americans in an honest conversation about how to prepare for different kinds of disasters. Too many emergency planners believe that citizens should prepare for every hazard at once. Too many also believe that citizens will panic if they get too much information about the specific threats they face. If nothing else, the New York University surveys show that Americans not only understand the difference between terrorist bombings and flu epidemics, but want more information on what to do in each case.

Such a preparedness initiative need not last forever. It can easily finish its work within a year or two. But it can only succeed if it has the power to speak to the public and is led by a single, nonpartisan executive, not a political crony looking for a plum job.

The cost of increased preparedness is nothing compared to the \$35 billion minimum estimates for building new levees in New Orleans or the millions for housing the thousands of citizens who lost their homes in Katrina, but it is every bit as important. Most Americans cannot last on their own after a natural or terrorist disaster for three days. It is just the kind of breach that government should address.

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