

Local Community Preparedness

We have seen what has happened in the Gulf Coast states as a result of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, and the complaints regarding the emergency response. Would the mountain community here be any better prepared for a large disaster?

As a result of the 9/11 terrorist attack on the United States and the fires in the summer of 2002, many believe the answer is yes.

Following the fires in 2002, a number of local community organizations interested in becoming better prepared created the Mountain Community Disaster Council (MCDC). The purpose of MCDC was to improve disaster response in the community by providing communication, cooperation, coordination, and leadership development for and among member organizations, and to provide training and increasing awareness and preparedness for each member organization and the community at large. In May 2004 it was renamed Mountain Communities Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (MCVOAD) to better reflect its status as a VOAD.

As one of its functions MCVOAD maintains a database of resources in the community who can provide various goods and services during a disaster. This database is updated yearly through the assistance of member organizations, particularly Mountain Resource Center (MRC). MRC will also provide volunteers to properly utilize this information and assure that requests for goods and services are quickly passed on to the organizations which are prepared to handle them.

Also in response to the fires of 2002, DSV - Disaster Support Volunteers Inc. (DSV) was founded. The goals of DSV include providing accurate and timely information regarding natural and human caused disasters and raising public awareness about how to mitigate the threat of those disasters, coordinating volunteers to assist in times of disaster, and soliciting and distributing funds to assist emergency response organizations and businesses/individuals affected by such disasters.

DSV has always recognized that we can accomplish little working alone, but can accomplish much working in cooperation with others. For this reason we joined MCDC, and were active in its reorganization as MCVOAD. Also for this reason Board members are active in Park County Radio Club (PCRC), Amateur Radio Emergency Service (ARES) District 6, (Park, Chaffee and Lake Counties), and District 23 (Jefferson County), Scouts, and the PC Crisis Center.

Through the forums on our website (<http://www.disastersupportvolunteers.com>) DSV provides the most consistent, timely and accurate scanner information reports in our area, as well as the best and most consistent information in our area about how to mitigate the threat of disasters.

DSV has a database of volunteers willing to assist in an incident. Since MRC has established a trained volunteer group, and to avoid duplication of effort, our volunteer effort has been re-focused to include those frequently referred to as SUVs. The term as commonly used refers to Spontaneous Uninvited Volunteers, because they are not requested by any involved organization, but rather simply show up and try to help. This creates significant problems because their efforts are uncoordinated, and they may actually do more harm than good, unintentionally. As we are using the term it means Spontaneous Untrained Volunteers, because through DSV we take the same individuals and coordinate their efforts so that they fit in with the overall incident plan. In accordance with what we saw in the summer of 2002, these are not, in general, the individuals who are willing to commit to training and specific commitments. Those individuals we refer to the organization which best fits their interest for the necessary training. The volunteers we are most interested in are those who can provide some 'small' service, such as transporting some supplies up the hill on their way

home, and who are not currently being utilized by any other organizations, but have a sincere willingness to help. Thus we can transform what is frequently a liability in an incident into the asset it is intended to be.

In response to the 9/11 terrorist attack on the United States, the Department of Homeland Security was established. In February 2003 President Bush directed the Secretary of Homeland Security to develop and administer a National Incident Management System (NIMS) to provide a consistent nationwide template to enable all government, private-sector, and nongovernmental organizations to work together during domestic incidents, and a National Response Plan (NRP) to integrate Federal Government domestic prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery plans into one all-discipline, all-hazards plan.

The foundation for NIMS is the Incident Command System (ICS), which was developed in California for fighting forest fires, and is used widely for incident management by firefighters, rescuers, emergency medical teams, and hazardous materials teams. ICS has been tested for more than 30 years and used for planned events, fires, hazardous materials spills, and multicasualty incidents; multijurisdictional and multiagency disasters, such as earthquakes, hurricanes, and winter storms; search and rescue missions; biological outbreaks and disease containment; and acts of terrorism. The ICS was modified as required to apply to all hazards, and became NIMS. Federal departments and agencies are required to make the adoption of NIMS by State and local organizations a condition for Federal preparedness assistance (grants, contracts, and other activities) by Fiscal Year 2005.

The National Response Plan (NRP) establishes a comprehensive, national, all-hazards approach to domestic incident management across a spectrum of activities. It is predicated on NIMS and provides the structure and mechanisms for national-level policy and operational coordination for domestic incident management. It does not alter or impede the ability of Federal, State, local, or tribal departments and agencies to carry out their specific authorities, and assumes that incidents are typically managed at the lowest possible geographic, organizational, and jurisdictional level. The NRP was completed in December 2004.

Now what will really happen in an incident, and where do local organizations fit in? This will be based upon firefighting (which is called Emergency Support Function #4 in the NRP) – all other functions such as transportation, search and rescue, etc. will operate in the same manner.

The initial call for the incident will be handled by the Dispatch Center, and toned out to the local fire jurisdiction. That agency will respond, the senior level individual among those first on scene will become the Incident Commander (IC), and the situation will be sized up to determine what resources are required to handle the incident. If the responding agency is unable to provide all the necessary resources, the IC will ask Dispatch to request the additional resources needed through already in place mutual aid agreements with other neighboring fire jurisdictions.

If the incident escalates to the point where the resources available through these mutual aid agreements become insufficient, the IC will request additional resources from the county, in our case either Jefferson County (Jeffco) or Park County (Parkco). When the situation warrants it, Jeffco will activate the Jeffco Level 3 Incident Management Team (IMT). Because Parkco does not yet have an IMT, there is a mutual aid agreement in effect for the Jeffco IMT to respond if requested by Parkco.

The Jefferson County Type III Incident Management Team is comprised of over 80 members from 20 fire and law enforcement agencies. They are all trained in incident management, and meet regularly to discuss emergency preparedness, and also hold frequent training exercises. When the Jeffco IMT is activated, the Jeffco Emergency Operations Center (EOC) is automatically activated.

At this point, all resource requests will be routed thru, coordinated by, and tracked by the EOC. The EOC will forward resource requests to the appropriate organizations, based upon their database of resources available. The EOC recognizes MCVOAD as a coordinating agency for resources in the 285 corridor.

This is getting a bit confusing, so lets look at some examples. A request for sack lunches for 100 firefighters might be directed to and filled by Safeway, a request for shelter for 100 might be taken care of by the American Red Cross. A request for temporary storage location for supplies in the Conifer area would be directed to MCVOAD, and filled based upon their resource database. A request for someone to deliver the 100 sack lunches from Safeway to the Incident Command Post (ICP) or wherever in the 285 corridor would go to MCVOAD to be passed on to the appropriate resource, which would be DSV or another organization providing that service. A request for someone to evacuate 5 horses from a specific property would go to Jeffco HEAT or another organization providing those services, and so on. Note that these requests only go to organizations which have indicated an ability to fill them, and are not 'broadcast' so that duplications occur.

Note that all this takes place within the first few hours of an incident being reported, or escalating to the point where it is required.

If the incident escalates beyond the resources available to Jeffco, they may request assistance from adjoining counties thru existing mutual aid agreements, or go directly to the state, as appropriate in the circumstances. State participation requires action by the Governor, to go beyond that level, the Governor must request assistance from the Federal government.

For each additional level that is required to get involved in the response, additional time is required. For this reason, the Jefferson County Office of Emergency Management stresses the importance of individuals and neighborhoods being prepared to take care of themselves for 3 - 5 days at the beginning of an incident. The government simply cannot be everywhere instantaneously, and we will not be likely to have much advance notice that an incident is imminent.

DSV, MCVOAD, Jefferson County Office of Emergency Management, and many, many others throughout the nation recognize that the nation will not be properly prepared for disasters until each individual, and each neighborhood, is prepared. The Federal government cannot, the State government cannot, local government cannot, MCVOAD cannot, DSV cannot, make up for the failure of individuals to do their part.

Jefferson County and the many members of our emergency response community have been working with volunteer groups and citizens since April 2003 to develop a customized version of the national Citizens Emergency Response Team (CERT) program. Based on this partnership, CERT-Lite has been developed. This program is composed of six 1-hour training modules intended to provide you with practical information on what you can do to enhance personal, family and community preparedness.

Preparedness begins with the individual. It needs to be a part of every home, neighborhood and place of business. The most important thing you can do to help your community prepare for any disaster, whether it is natural or human caused, is have a simple practical plan to do one of two things. When a disaster strikes, you will be requested to either take shelter or evacuate. The CERT-Lite program is intended to give you the simple practical information you need to be ready to take either of these courses of action. Through its member organizations, MCVOAD is prepared and eager to provide CERT-Lite training to any organization or group that is interested. For further information, see the MCVOAD website (<http://www.mcvoad.org>) or call 303-838-7552.

In addition, Jefferson County has prepared an Emergency Preparedness Guidebook. It is available for hardcopy distribution to the public at the Jefferson County Office of Emergency

Management and at the MRC, as well as available for download on the Jefferson County Department of Emergency Management website (<http://co.jefferson.co.us/emerg/index.htm>). There is also good information available on the recently created ReadyColorado website, <http://www.readycolorado.com/>.

One question that is frequently asked is “Are there written plans for evacuation in the event of a wildfire, etc.?” The answer is no. Because of the dynamic nature of the types of incidents likely to be faced by our community, written plans are not considered appropriate because they would almost invariably indicate evacuation along a route which would not be available under the circumstances. In lieu of written plans, the Jeffco IMT and EOC provide real-time planning in the event of an incident. To advise the public of what the plan is, the Emergency Preparedness Network, also known as reverse 911, will be utilized, along with the media and other information sources such as the DSV website and Pinecam.com,

There is another item regarding emergency preparedness/response which needs to be discussed.

Any major incident is going to be accompanied by a certain amount of chaos. It is unreasonable to expect that everything will go smoothly. A large number of activities are required to be in progress simultaneously involving a large number of organizations, and the activities may be in constricted areas or cover a large area, or both. Usually the weather conditions are not favorable, to put it mildly. Frequently, emergency communications must be established. Some time is required to assess the situation, to determine what is really needed. Even with the best possible pre-planning, some needs will arise which were not foreseen. The requirements for some resources will be over-estimated, and some will be under-estimated.

The disaster response is entirely provided by human beings. Human beings are subject to mistakes, especially under conditions of high stress and fatigue.

Do not expect super-human response, it simply can't happen.

Remember, disaster preparedness begins with YOU. Have you mitigated the fire danger on YOUR property? Do you know all the escape routes out of your area, and what is required to negotiate them? Do you know which of your neighbors may have special needs in an emergency, and how to assist them?

If not, YOU are part of the problem.

Jack Frank, WØDSV
President,
DSV – Disaster Support Volunteers Inc.