

Essential Personnel: A Challenging Commitment

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## **Executive Summary**

The challenges of organizational leadership in today's local government are many and varied. One challenge that can have dire consequences if not met is the ability to make sure that those employees considered essential personnel can respond during a disaster event. Without essential personnel, response functions during a disaster will not be fulfilled and local government will not be able to provide the necessary assistance to their communities. Organizational leaders must assist their essential personnel in removing barriers to response such as personal responsibilities through training. Providing training that addressed the different needs of essential personnel so that they can be better prepared personally will allow essential personnel to experience less conflict and be more likely to respond to work in a disaster. In order to be successful, training provided must recognize that essential personnel are made up of groups that have different personal obligations in a disaster, such as the differences between what men and women might be concerned about. Organizational leaders must understand what groups make up their essential personnel rosters, understand what personal concerns they may have in the event of a disaster, and provide training that addresses those concerns and allows essential personnel to become prepared personally so they can respond to work without conflict.

People are the backbone of a disaster response. When local governments find they must respond in time of disaster to protect citizens and infrastructure, they must rely on essential personnel to perform their duties. Essential personnel, those employees who are integral to a disaster response, are expected to fulfill work duties in time of disaster regardless of what personal concerns they may have. One of the challenges experienced by local government organizations is making sure that personnel considered essential are able to meet that expectation before a disaster ever occurs. Leaders must train and educate their essential personnel not only in matters of their duty but in how to manage personal responsibilities so that they do not interfere when they are needed by their organizations. This challenge has become harder to overcome in today's public safety organization as the demographics of those who are essential personnel have changed creating a wider variety of personal responsibilities as well as greater difficulty in overcoming them so that work responsibilities can take priority.

One of the largest barriers to essential personnel being able to report to work during a disaster is the personal obligations that they feel must take priority over work (Adams & Berry, 2012). When personal obligations take priority over work, essential personnel may choose not to come to work in a disaster (Adams & Berry, 2012) and so the duties they would perform remain incomplete and the organization they represent is not as able to fulfill its role in disaster response. In order for organizational leaders to ensure that essential personnel will fulfill their role and contribute to the successful disaster response from both the organization and the local government as a whole, they must take on the responsibility of assisting essential personnel in lessening the conflict they experience between their personal obligations work obligations through education. Organizational leaders must provide essential personnel with training and

knowledge so that employees can prepare themselves and those that depend on them for disaster before one occurs removing the conflict of personal obligations with that of their role as essential personnel (Adams & Berry, 2012). If essential personnel understand how to become personally prepared for a disaster and follow through with preparations taking into account their role as essential personnel at work, they will be more likely to be able to devote themselves to work needs and be confident they are not needed to fulfill personal obligations.

Adding additional training to the already full schedules of public safety responders is a challenge that will pay dividends in the form of an organization and local government better able to respond in a disaster. To make the challenge for organizational leaders even more difficult, the training presented must be tailored to the demographics of those who are essential personnel. Different groups are differently vulnerable to disaster and must have different skills and knowledge to prepare. Men and women have different concerns and needs in a disaster as do those of different socioeconomic groups, different ethnicities, and different age groups among others (Drabek, 2006; Tierney, 2006). Training that is provided to a group of essential personnel on how they can become prepared for a future disaster must take into account the different needs each demographic group might have. This means that those organizations already providing this type of training may need to reconsider what is being taught as those who are in essential personnel roles are not necessarily the same demographics in the same numbers as they were when this training was developed. If training is not offered in this subject at all, as it is developed, it must cover the wide variety of challenges that might be encountered by all groups making up the essential personnel roster for that organization.

One particular demographic, for example, which should be considered by leaders of public safety organizations when developing training on personal disaster preparedness, is the gender of their essential personnel. Public safety agencies employing first responders such as fire and police departments and emergency medical services have seen an increase in the amount of women who fill operational positions that are considered essential. According to data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2013), 12.6% law enforcement patrol officers are women, as well as 3.4% line level firefighters and 31.2% of emergency medical technicians and paramedics. While firefighting is still a predominantly male profession, 1 in 8 patrol officers are now women compared to the 1 in 13 in 1987 (Bureau of Justice Statistics) and almost a third of emergency medical responders are women. All of these response services are supported by emergency communications personnel who are predominantly women with this profession being included in the reported 61.5% of dispatchers (public safety and otherwise) who are women (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013).

Women have different concerns when personally preparing for a disaster. In today's society, women as a group are more likely to be single parents or to be the primary caretaker of children in a two-parent family, even when both parents work, and may have more concerns about child care if they must respond to work in a disaster (Enarson & Scanlon, 1999; Stehlik, Lawrence, & Gray, 2000). In addition, women are more likely to have the responsibility of care for elderly family members who will need additional support during a disaster (Enarson & Scanlon, 1999; Stehlik et al, 2000). Because women are more often single parents and caretakers of elderly, they more often find themselves in a lower socioeconomic status than their male counterparts (Enarson & Scanlon, 1999; Tierney, 2006). Not only do they find

themselves challenged by caring for others during a disaster but with fewer resources to do so. Another aspect that must be addressed in training is that women are more likely to be expected to make arrangements for the personal household such as what items will go in an evacuation, and what items should be stored away as well as what food should be brought with the family (Enarson & Scanlon, 1999). Men will be more likely to feel responsible for the outer portions of the household such as outbuildings, any livestock, the grounds, and vehicles that are owned by them and their families (Enarson & Scanlon, 1999).

While the above differences in gender concerns in time of disaster will not hold true for every man and every woman, for our society today, they will be encountered often in a group (Tierney, 2006). The personal responsibilities held by both men and women will create conflict with their ability to fulfill essential personnel expectations. Both men and women have that in common. The difference comes when those personal responsibilities are examined. They are not always the same. Any successful personal disaster preparedness training provided by organizational leadership must include education on the skills and knowledge needed to address the concerns of all groups, including both genders, so that all groups can feel comfortable prioritizing their essential personnel function over their personal obligations. This is not only true for gender but for all groups contained within the essential personnel roster including but not limited to socioeconomic status, educational level, ethnic group, sexual orientation, age group, and many other aspects. Organizational leadership must understand all groups that make up their essential personnel roster and provide the necessary training to all groups in order to remove the conflict between personal obligations and essential personnel

expectations in order to have the most efficient disaster response possible for the local community.

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