History of Emergency Management and our Daily Lives

The United States has a long history of response to emergencies and disasters, including active civil defense and emergency management organizations at the local, state and federal government levels. The focus of these organizations has changed over time as new risks were identified and methods for dealing with these risks were developed. In the early part of the 20th century, ad hoc responses to catastrophic disasters and the implementation of large scale public works projects designed to reduce risks were the norm. The advent of the Cold War in the 1950s resulted in the establishment of Civil Defense programs around the nation with their focus on preparing for nuclear war. An example is the current Peoria County Emergency Management Agency building - a bunker style building located in rural Peoria County.

During subsequent decades, the United States was affected by a series of major natural disasters. As with disasters prior to the creation of Civil Defense programs, the response to each of these incidents was the passage of improvised disaster relief funds. Even though historically there has always been some aspect of emergency management in the United States, hurricanes and earthquakes in the late 1960s and early 1970s were catalysts behind legislation and an increased focus on natural disasters. A broad range of hazards and potential disasters put communities at risk. After review of response to many of these incidents it became apparent that various federal, state and local agencies were involved in some aspect of risk and disaster management. This duplication of programs added to confusion and turf wars, especially during relief efforts. In response to the absence of a unified and effective federal lead agency in emergency management, an effort to consolidate activities into a single agency was initiated. This effort to consolidate emergency preparedness, mitigation, and response activities resulted in the establishment of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

With the creation of FEMA, development of the Integrated Emergency Management System (IEMS) focused on an all-hazards approach of preparedness, response, recovery and mitigation. The goal of the IEMS was to develop and maintain credible emergency management capabilities nationwide by integrating activities along functional lines of all levels of government and across all-hazards. Early in FEMA’s history, natural and man-made disasters proved problematic for programs such as the Federal Response Plan, despite the all-hazards approach and advances in planning. As a result, disaster relief and
recovery operations were streamlined while an emphasis was put on preparedness and mitigation. In addition, the end of the Cold War enabled emergency managers to redirect focus from civil defense to disaster relief, recovery, and mitigation.

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 prompted dramatic changes in emergency management in the United States. These attacks and the subsequent Anthrax scare in Washington, DC in October 2001 have been the basis for a re-examination of the nation’s emergency management system, its priorities, funding, and practices. While significant changes to emergency management have occurred in response to these attacks, the fundamental philosophy of an all-hazards approach continues to guide the government function of emergency management. One of the signature initiatives of this approach is engagement of the “whole community” intended to involve the private sector, community groups, and individual citizens in disaster preparedness. This “whole community” approach is designed to harness the assets of civil society, draw attention to disaster resilience, and improve coordination.

Historically, emergency management and preparedness had been a reactive science. The discipline’s evolution has been the result of catastrophes, disasters, heightened risks, and newly identified threats that affect the population and its economic stability, the infrastructure, and community resilience. As this evolution continues, emergency management needs to be the resource for the community and provide coordination for all the local government partners during a time of emergency, crisis, or disaster. We have been involved in this all-hazards, whole community planning for decades. As a result, it is undeniable that emergency management is integral to the security of our daily lives. Considering this, the challenge moving forward is how we integrate emergency management into our daily decisions rather than being called upon only in response to major disasters.

Marks currently serves as Emergency Preparedness Coordinator at Peoria City/County Health Department and uses his subject matter expertise in local planning, development, and implementation of emergency preparedness activities to assure a prepared response to threats to the public’s health. Learn more about the benefits of public health policies and programs at www.pcchd.org - Peoria City/County Health Department, a nationally accredited public health department.

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The Peoria City/County Health Department continues efforts to improve community health in Peoria County with the overarching goal “to increase the number of people who are healthy at every stage of life.”