



The Four P's of Effective Community Engagement

by Steve Crimando, Principal, Behavioral Science Applications

The Four P's of Effective Community Engagement

Overview

Effective emergency preparedness, response and recovery require a strong partnership between a community's law enforcement, emergency management officials and its residents. In the midst of a crisis there is often increased distrust of public officials, while at the same time, questions of transparency, competence and expertise arise.

Engagement yields a number of important outcomes including awareness of local disaster preparedness plans and programs, as well as promoting both community and individual, home and family readiness. Efforts to ensure constructive communication, as well as collaboration during incidents that may provoke feelings of fear or anger must be both early and ongoing. It is essential for leaders at every level of government to facilitate public involvement in all phases of emergency management. Partnerships, perspective, presence and persistence – the Four P's – can provide simple and useful guidelines, and introduce key concepts and action steps for engagement.

What is Community Engagement?

“Community engagement is the mutual communication and deliberation that occurs between government and citizens (Cavaye, *CEO Committee on Land and Resources Community Engagement Framework Project Scoping and Review Paper*, 2002).”

Effective community engagement mobilizes public safety resources, promotes a shared vision and serves as a catalyst for changing policies, programs and practices. When done correctly, law enforcement and residents enter into a mutually beneficial partnership.

Partnerships

Engagement is done *with*, not *to* the community. To be successful, relationships with both traditional and non-traditional partners are critical. Traditional partners are those who may have pre-defined roles in emergency preparedness, response and recovery. Such partners typically include faith-based and community-based groups identified as VOADS (Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster); Medical Reserve Corps (MRC); Community Emergency Response Team (CERT); State and County Animal Response Teams (SART/CART); medical facilities and nearby schools, colleges and universities. Houses of Worship not defined as VOADS can also be important resources, and of course, representatives of local utilities and other owners of critical infrastructure should be included.

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Examples of non-traditional partners are hardware stores; big box stores, surplus stores; smaller, local retailers; business engaged in components of the supply chain, such as manufacturers, distributors, suppliers and logistics; home health care services; non-profit human service organizations; media outlets, and others.

Each of these partners can potentially make significant contributions to the community’s readiness and response to disasters, but relationships and roles must be developed, defined and nurtured. It is also helpful to delineate and document expectations through Memorandums of Agreement or Understanding (MOA/MOU) to avoid duplication, gaps and misunderstandings.

Perspective

The development of diverse, multidisciplinary emergency preparedness councils and committees with representation from all segments of the community can foster a sense of inclusion, and reduce tensions in actual emergency conditions. This may involve identifying key demographic groups and seeking brokers or opinion leaders who can represent their constituent’s concerns and disaster-related needs. Cultural considerations in sheltering, meals, and spiritual care, must be addressed in planning since they can become obstacles to the effective delivery of disaster relief services. It is also helpful to seek a multi-generational perspective. Attitudes and beliefs, as well as prior life experience varies widely across age groups, and approaches to preparedness,

response and recovery need to be adjusted accordingly. Actively seeking out and inviting participation from all quarters of the community takes time and effort, but can pay significant dividends in trust and collaboration during real-time incidents.

Presence

During times of fear and stress it is human nature to resist new and novel information and resources, people tend to fall back to what is previously known and trusted. The people, places and things associated with a community's emergency management apparatus should be introduced early and often to avoid this tendency for rejection. Publicizing and promoting emergency plans and exercises aids in ensuring transparency, familiarity, and confidence that local leaders and resources are up to the task during times of crisis.

Presence at community events, such as local fairs and special events, as well as presentations to civic groups, such as Rotary or Kiwanis Clubs, also help foster engagement, often at little or no cost. A booth or table displaying information about local services, Emergency Notification and Community Engagement Systems and training programs, personal and home "go kits," local hazards, and key volunteer services, such as CERT and MRC, all help familiarize residents with the various moving parts of the community's emergency response system. The presence of these parts of the emergency management system in everyday life can help demystify and reduce misinformation and fear.



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It is also important that residents form positive mental associations with all aspects of emergency management, including crisis communications systems, so that they are receptive and responsive when it really counts. If the only time the community sees emergency response personnel or

receives communications from emergency management leaders is during an acute crisis, just the sights and sounds related to emergency management may evoke fear.

At some level the community realizes that their emergency management system and leadership is engaged 24/7/365, like a computer program always running in the background, always on, through good times and bad. Having personnel present at positive events for EMS support or traffic control, or using notification systems to communicate during small “d” disasters, such as road closures, and not just big “D” disasters, such as fires, floods and earthquakes, helps community members understand and better utilize these resources.

Communities should know to look to your agency for information, so remember to keep your presence consistent when it comes to communication. Communicate on your notification system with relevant updates throughout an incident until its resolution. It is also important to communicate consistently before incidents with meaningful information that residents care about such as construction or local events. This will help build trust in the messages you provide which can lead to an increase in subscriptions in the system. This is important because when a real emergency happens you will be able to reach a greater audience with your community engagement solution.

Persistence

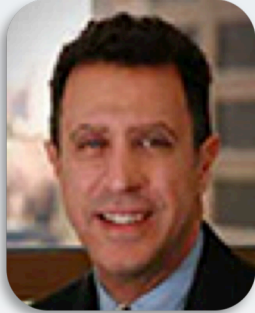
Community engagement also requires persistence and ongoing effort. It should not be done in bursts, but rather a sustained and continuous process. The institutions and relationships needed for effective engagement require maintenance. So “presence” cannot be occasional, it must be persistent and enduring. People and programs are subject to attrition. It is important for emergency management leaders to keep a finger on the pulse of the community and stay current with changes. Key contact people may change roles or move on, sometimes leaving a community. Programs and businesses may experience organizational changes that affect their ability to deliver important services or support during times of crisis. Community engagement benefits from the long-view; it is more of a marathon than a sprint.

Putting It All Together

Attention to the four P's can help leaders develop an effective strategy and identify important action steps on the path to positive community engagement. Each of the P's has a degree of dependency, but also a synergy with the others. Consider how the four P's may be applied in your community, and how your engagement goals may be better met through the application of these principles, especially when accompanied by a notification system.



About the Author



Steven M. Crimando is a subject matter expert and trainer specialized in human factors/behavioral sciences in homeland and corporate security, violence prevention and intervention, emergency and disaster management.

Steve is a Board Certified Expert in Traumatic Stress (BCETS) and Certified Trauma Specialist (CTS). He holds Diplomat status with the American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress and the National Center for Crisis Management. He has been awarded Level V Certification in Homeland Security. He is recognized as an expert in the behavioral response to CBRN emergencies, crowd behavior, and mass violence. Steve is the principal of Behavioral Science Applications and serves as a consultant and trainer for the federal, state and local law enforcement and emergency management agencies, as well as multinational corporations and NGO's worldwide.

About Nixle Community Engagement, by Everbridge

Engaged and active communities are built on a commitment to transparency and safety. Our Community Engagement application helps public safety and emergency management agencies to easily create a resident opt-in database, while providing you with control over authoring and publishing your message directly to the public.

Community Engagement enables:

- **Easy Resident Opt-in:** Easily increase resident opt-in's at an exponential rate. Maintain a robust database of resident contact information to foster a community dialogue or provide effective emergency notifications.
- **A Force Multiplier:** Publish and distribute public information at scale, with the push of one button, via social media, websites, email, text, **OneBridge** mobile app, and Google Alerts. Leverage residents to act as force multiplier to assist in preventing and solving crime. Ideal when internal resources are limited.
- **Control Public Information Dissemination:** Maintain complete power and control to author messages and disseminate information to the public at will.
- **Precise Neighborhood Targeting:** The most precise neighborhood-level geographic targeting system available. Send messages to specific communities or neighborhoods.
- **Focus on Public Safety:** The most trusted public safety product on the market, as used by over 8,000 public safety agencies. Completely focused on helping agencies keep residents safe and informed.