

TerranearPMC Safety Share

Week of August 29, 2011 – Emergency Preparedness

A few days ago all the news channels were in full motion: Libya was in turmoil, the race for first place in the American League East between the Yankees and Red Sox was heating up and the East Coast had just experienced an Earthquake! Now, it looks like Hurricane Irene is ready to take a turn at the East Coast as well. When the Earthquake hit last week, it captivated the news. CNN, FOX and MSNBC all had outtakes of Letterman, Jay Leno and Conan O'Brien telling jokes; mostly making fun of the people on the East Coast about how they coped with the unexpected shaking. It was time for Californians – not usually known for their toughness and bravado in the face of danger (sorry California!); to scoff at the folks on the other coast during their unexpected moment of fear and loathing.

Earthquakes are different from other types of natural disasters as there is ZERO warning and therefore no time to get ready and prepare for nature's approaching wrath. Just take a look at what has been going on for the entire East in preparation of Hurricane Irene; windows are being boarded up, entire communities are evacuating, and food supplies are being stocked. In the case of an Earthquake, by the time a community realizes that they are in the midst of Earth's natural forces, the damage has been done. This is typically followed by a delayed reaction of people moving to more secure locations (but the incident is over). Therefore, while hurricanes and tornadoes can be devastating, in the sense of preparedness, Earthquakes must be placed in a category by itself.

Preparedness is the key to coping with earthquakes. This means having medical supplies, food and water, flashlights, first aid kits, and emergency phone numbers and contact information already available. In 1995, Kobe, Japan, the country suffered its worst earthquake, resulting in over 6400 deaths and destruction of their city's infrastructure. Although the city had an emergency plan, it was never examined or even tested. When the earthquake hit, their emergency plan could not be implemented as the city never took into consideration that roads would be destroyed and therefore, unusable. As a result, emergency vehicles, such as ambulances and fire trucks, could not be deployed, thus leaving thousands of their citizens helpless while in need of desperate medical attention.

When we are at work, it is important that everyone know the proper evacuation routes and where to assemble. In multi-storied buildings it is important that everyone know to NEVER use the elevator – always the stairs (which is what happened to a maintenance employee during the First Interstate Building fire in Los Angeles in the late 1980's – the result was a fatality that could have been prevented) and move quietly and directly to the designated assembly area. Every office should have at least one person designated as a "sweep" to assure that everyone has evacuated and not hiding in their work space (to finish that proposal or to e-mail a friend). Once at the assembly location another

designated person needs to take a roll call to ensure everyone is accounted for. This includes knowing who was absent for the day and who left the office to go on a field assignment.

In the case of earthquakes, one of the biggest mistakes that can be made is people running outside of a covered structure (building) during the actual event and not waiting for an “all clear” notification before proceeding outside. This is a time when concrete material, windows and other structural items can loosen and fall to the ground – obviously, not a place where anyone would want to be: yet it is a natural instinct for people to run away from the immediate area where destruction is occurring. However in the case of an earthquake, staying inside during the actual event is much safer than running outside! Therefore, it is important to recognize when an earthquake is occurring, and to remain calm and to seek shelter in the immediate location, such as going under a desk or table or moving an archway or under a doorway. These offer the best protection from items that may become dislodged and therefore become overhead, falling hazards.

Things to look out for in the office, as well as the home are overhead lights, tall bookshelves, hanging plants, file cabinets, TVs...in short, anything that can be thrown about and can cause severe contact with occupants. Gas appliances need to be turned off immediately. Know where the shut off valve is for the gas line entering your building or home (and know how to shut it off!).

Because earthquakes strike without warning, the only way an emergency response/evacuation can be effective, is to have periodic drills so acting during an actual event can become an instinctive process. Of course, after performing an emergency drill, it is important to have an evaluation process; something that will allow personnel to note what went well and what needs to be improved. Results of the evaluation need to be disseminated to everyone.

Because every location is different (warehouses, offices, field work sites, etc.) the emergency responses shall vary and therefore the planning needs to be location-specific.

So while other natural disaster situations may be quite dangerous, the proper response when encountering an earthquake is so critical. Fires, hurricanes, tornados, (even tidal waves) can all be preceded by some form of warning and therefore, can allow individuals to brace or prepare themselves. Earthquakes, in this respect, can be the most unforgiving of all.

Be a good listener. Your ears will never get you in trouble.

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