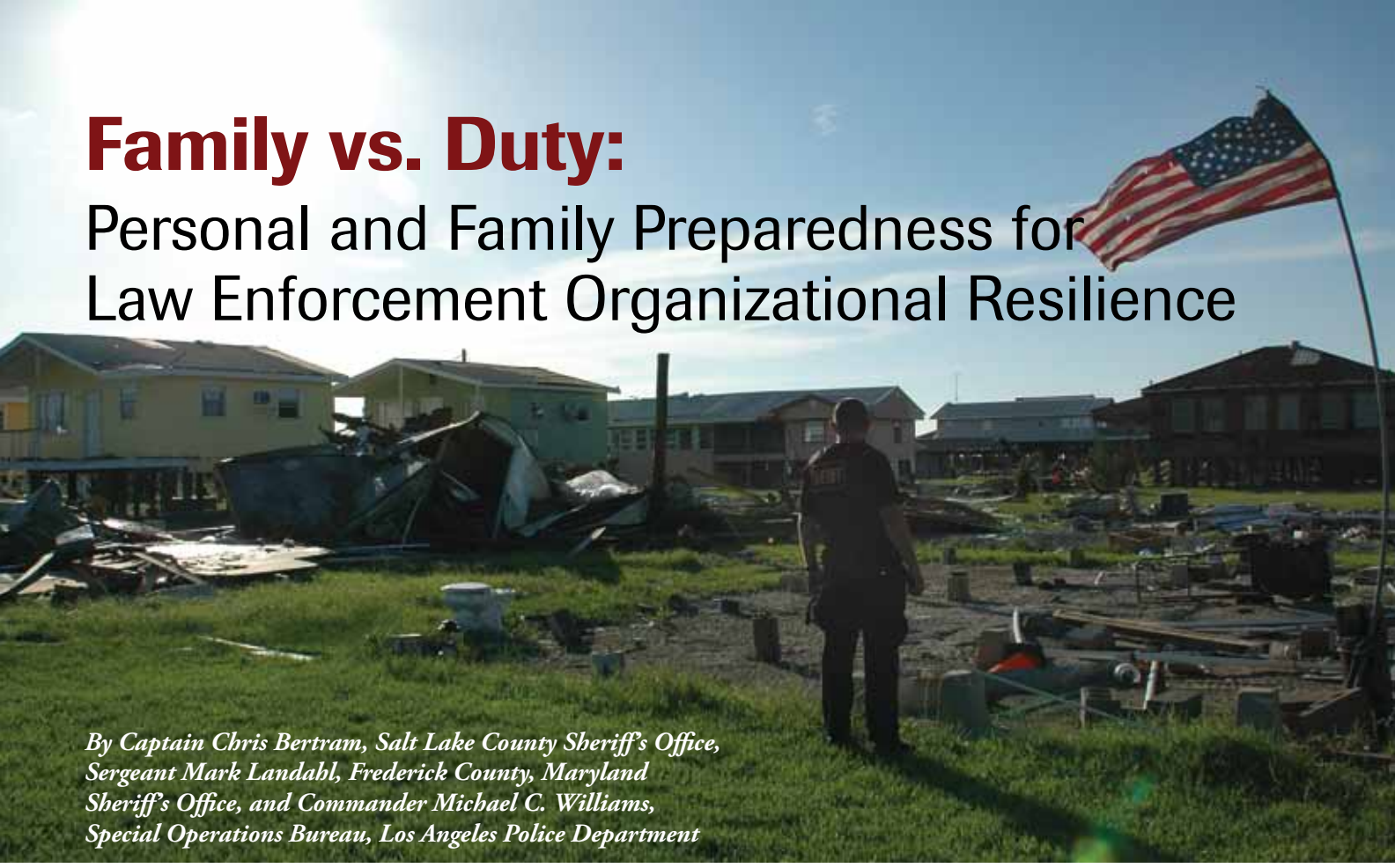
Family vs. Duty:

Personal and Family Preparedness for Law Enforcement Organizational Resilience



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It has been more than four years since Hurricane Katrina opened our eyes to the personal struggles faced by law enforcement officers in the wake of disaster. The law enforcement response to Hurricane Katrina brought to the forefront the challenges that ensue when the intended responders become victims. Many law Enforcement Officers had to make the choice between their responsibility to their families and their duties as police officers. As law enforcement officers, how do we balance the needs and safety of our families with our duty to respond in a crisis? As employers and managers of law enforcement officers what are our responsibilities to our employees and their families in developing and maintaining personal and family preparedness? What steps can be taken by organizations to increase employee and family preparedness of law enforcement personnel?

This article provides an overview of personal and family preparedness of police officers and its relationship to law enforcement organizational readiness. The role of the law enforcement agency in developing and supporting personal and family preparedness will also be reviewed. The overall goal of this article is to develop the general elements of an effective program for law enforcement agencies that advances the personal and family preparedness of law enforcement officers to increase the likelihood that officers will report in emergency situations.

Hurricane Katrina: Preparedness and Organizational Effectiveness

The New Orleans Police Department (NOPD) faced a multitude of challenges in efforts to respond to the impact of Hurricane Katrina that resulted in an "almost total loss of police capabilities in New Orleans."[1] The official reports crafted in the wake of the disaster identify several issues that led to the "collapse of law enforcement."[2] These identified problems included "missing police officers led to a law enforcement manpower shortage."[3] While there were some officers who were derelict in their duties in failing to report, the vast majority had become victims themselves, or dealt with family crises related to the disaster, making it difficult or impossible to report for duty. There are estimates that as much as 5 percent of the NOPD force were stranded at home.[4] Other elements, including the technological failures of electric power grids, communications systems, etc., can be overcome through effective continuity planning. The loss of significant numbers of personnel through their failure to report is completely debilitating for the law enforcement function. Regardless of the technological enhancements, policing is accomplished by people, without them there is no maintenance of civil order.

Previous Research: Ability and Willingness to Report

Although the conditions faced by NOPD in its efforts to respond to Hurricane Katrina were of a scale not seen in our modern history, ensuring that personnel are *willing* and *able* to report for assignment is critical. This is an easier task when notice of the potential crisis, such as an approaching Hurricane, is known for several days in advance. Developing the organizational agility for officers to report in sudden unexpected conditions is more challenging.

There has been little research conducted directly on the *ability* and *willingness* of police officers to report in crisis situa-

tions. There have been several studies conducted in the public health and healthcare community, and limited studies among firefighters and emergency medical technicians. While there are many parallels that can be drawn across first response organizations, each has unique challenges in different emergency situations that may impact the willingness of responders to report.

There are two studies that have been conducted on the ability and willingness of law enforcement officers to report in disaster. A 2007 study of police officers in the Washington, DC area by Demme revealed that family preparedness and safety were the determinant factors in the ability and willingness of law enforcement officers to report for duty in the event of a biological incident.[5] In an unpublished study, Nestal (2005) examined the ability and willingness of police officers in Philadelphia to respond using the National Planning Scenarios outlined in Department of Homeland Security preparedness guidance. The planning scenarios presented fifteen disaster situations that range from natural disasters to terrorist attacks. The study revealed that based on the given scenario, 55-66 percent of police officers reported they would refuse to adhere to an emergency recall or would consider abandoning their position based upon concerns for the safety of their family.[6]

These studies illustrate the importance of family preparedness to the resilience of law enforcement agencies in disaster. Although further research is needed, these studies make employee and family preparedness impossible to ignore in overall agency preparedness efforts.

The Role of the Employer in Employee and Family Preparedness

A recent study by Landahl & Cox (2009) examined the actions being taken by first response organizations related to employee and family preparedness and the attitudes and opinions of senior leaders on the role of the employer in the development of employee and family preparedness. The study showed that 97 percent of homeland security leaders identified that employee and family preparedness is an essential element to organizational resilience during large-scale emergencies.[7] In addition, the results showed that a majority (52.9 percent) reported that organizations should be prepared to assume some responsibility for the care of essential employees and their families.[8] The study concluded that "there is a fundamental disconnect between problem recognition by homeland security leaders and organizational activities; only 29 percent of participants reported their organizations had conducted training in or had written plans to support employees and families during disaster."[9]

Essentially, the problem has been recognized, but little has been accomplished towards a solution. Although the issue of employee and family preparedness was exposed during the response to Hurricane Katrina and recognized through research, the issue remains absent from Department of Homeland Security planning and preparedness guidance.

Implementing Policy to Increase Personal and Family Preparedness

Law enforcement agencies train officers for confrontations, teach them how to investigate crimes and help them develop skills to earn promotions. However, as leaders we fail to teach our officers how to prepare their families and themselves if they are called to duty during a crisis. To improve the chances that law enforcement officers will be in a position to make the decision to report in a crisis situation, leaders should develop clear expectations through policy and planning; including a Mission Statement and Strategic Plan. According to Whisenand, the agencies that have gone through difficult times, managerially, have had three things in common. Each of these agencies exhibited signs of a lack of leadership, an absence of a shared vision and their strategic plans were either poorly developed or had not been established.[10] Therefore, administrators should create a clear policy for their officers so expectations are established before disaster strikes.

Such a policy should include the following:

Emergency Recall Guidelines
Clear emergency recall guidelines allow officers to understand the methods and expectations following the notification of off-duty personnel to return to work. The policy should establish how the decision will be made, how officers will be contacted, reporting locations, and expected time from notification to reporting. Notifications may be accomplished through radio communication, telephone contact, pagers, or media utilizing the Emergency Alert System. These guidelines also establish who is exempt from returning. This may include officers who are on vacation, sick leave, or military duty.

Hold-Over Guidelines
These guidelines establish the process for extending the tour of on-duty personnel. This should include the decision process, which personnel may be affected.

Schedule Assignments
While maintaining the flexibility to respond to a variety of incidents, expected emergency pre-planned shift assignments should be communicated to personnel. For example, agencies may choose to implement 12-hour A/B platoon shifts. The expectation should be communicated to personnel in order to facilitate personal and family preparedness planning.

Levels of Mobilization
Levels of mobilization should be established to set parameters for how many personnel will report for duty. Will the entire department report or will it be selected divisions, or specialized units that will be mobilized.

Civilian Support Staff
Communicating policies and roles for support staff is critical to emergency operations. They must be included in policies and personal and family preparedness process.

Logistical Support
Roles and responsibilities for logistical support of law enforcement operations in disasters need to be clearly defined. The Senate Hurricane Katrina report indicated that there were deficiencies in that there "did not appear to be any pre-planning for food, water, weapons, and medical care."[11] Officer's need to know how they will be supported during disaster operations, will they have off-shift food and lodging available? Concerns about on-duty and off-duty

support may impact officers' willingness to report for assignment. The clear articulation and communication of support that officers can expect will allow for personal and family planning, strong support efforts may increase response rates.

Family Support

Agencies must determine their level of commitment to support officer families and communicate the expected relationship between the organization and families to officers. There is a range of support that agencies can provide to families ranging from basic home logistical support to providing a shelter to locate officers' families during a disaster or an emergency situation. If agencies do not plan to provide support to families, they must communicate this expectation and prepare officers and families to be self-sufficient. The decision to provide no support to families may impact recall and dereliction of duty rates.

Anticipated Emergencies

Following their experience in Hurricane Katrina, the NOPD took a different approach in preparing officers to report for duty prior to Hurricane Gustav in 2008. NOPD provided employees paid time off to prepare and evacuate their families if necessary before reporting for duty.[12] The effectiveness of the strategy on response rates could not be measured as Hurricane Gustav largely missed New Orleans. Pre-incident policies such as time off to prepare should be considered and communicated to personnel.

Policy Enforcement/ Discipline Guidelines

Policy should clearly articulate the consequences when officers elect not to report for duty. Leaders must deal decisively with the issue. The failure of the chief executive to address such cases could erode confidence in their ability to maintain discipline within the department. Failure to enforce can also call into question the importance of such a policy.

Training and Exercise

Training in emergency policies should occur at least on an annual basis and be reinforced regularly by supervisory personnel. Training should include instruction in the development of personal and family preparedness plans and emergency kits. Emergency exercises should include the extension to families, in order for officers to engage their families in the potential impact of agency emergency operations on the home.

Conclusion

The general public and agency leadership have the expectation that law enforcement officers report for duty when significant events or crises occurs. An established policy that includes protocols, training, clear organizational mission, and communication of the expected relationship between agencies and families of officers can help officers prepare and facilitate the decision to report for duty. Agency executives must place high organizational value on personal and family preparedness and reinforce it through training, exercise, and the supervision process. Provisions for the safety of officers' families should be a key component of a plan. Planning and policy development can steer the organizational culture to a culture of preparedness that include the families of our most critical asset; our people. ✪

Endnotes

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12 Cable News Network, "City works to keep officers' families safe, officers in town," September 1, 2008, www.cnn.com/2008/CRIME/09/01/gustav.nola.police.ap.

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