

Role of Public Health in Emergency Management



1. What is Emergency Management

Emergency Management is a systematic process leading to action before, during and after a disaster to save lives and prevent injury. "Disaster" here means a major emergency that exceeds the community's capacity to respond successfully with its own resources. Emergency Management is organized into four phases:

Mitigation: actions taken to eliminate a hazard or reduce its potential impact.

Preparedness: planning for major emergencies, including training and exercises.

Response: actions taken in response to emergencies.

Recovery: actions taken after a disaster to restore services and reconstruct communities.

These activities are not the sole responsibility of the designed emergency management agency. All agencies have a role. Law enforcement, fire services, public works and public health play key roles in the process. Your emergency manager is the coordinator for these sometimes competing interests. It is a tough job that requires your support.

2. The Public Health Role in Emergency Management

The role of local public health in Kentucky will vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. Laws, ordinances, policies, plans, resources and other factors determine how each community builds and maintains its emergency organization. Public health departments and their partners in the health care system are important to fully functioning emergency management systems and are responsible for activities during all phases of emergency management.

Routine immunization programs are examples of public health **mitigation**. In relation to bioterrorism preparedness immunizing first responder and the public prior to an event would help mitigate the impact of an attack with an infectious disease agent.

Public health **preparedness** activities include development of emergency response plans and procedures, training staff and volunteers on their roles under the plan, and then testing of plans through realistic exercises. In other words, it involves getting ready to respond. Day to day communicable disease investigation procedures developed by local and state public health staff are preparedness activities.

The North Central District Health Department would certainly be a crucial player in any response to a widespread communicable disease emergency, whether from a bioterrorism attack or through natural causes. As an example, the response might include receiving antibiotics from the National Pharmaceutical Stockpile and the subsequent distribution of those drugs in local immunization clinics and treatment centers. The routine field investigation of communicable disease is a response action. Public health recovery activities might include, for example, testing to ensure that drinking water and food supplies are safe after an attack or disaster has happened. Advising a down stream water system that a release of hazardous material upstream has passed is an example of a recovery activity.

3. Emergency Plans

Each level of government is responsible for developing and maintaining emergency management plans. The Federal Response Plan (FRP) describes what actions agencies of the U.S. government will take in support of state and local governments. At the state level, agencies have a plan that describes how they will carry out their responsibilities. At the county level, agencies plans list their resources and how they plan to utilize them in response to an emergency.

All of this can be a bit confusing, but one way to think of the relationship among emergency plans is that the plans are layered on top of each other. The Federal plan (FRP) is the top layer, followed by the State plan then the County plan. Annexes are part of the basic plan (state or county).

In recognition of the fact that disasters happen at the local level, state and federal level plans generally describe how to support local officials when their resources have been exhausted while dealing with a major emergency.