

Protecting Our Communities

By John Steen (written June 2002)

The threat of terrorism here in our own homeland is now reminding us that preserving our democracy requires public participation and civic renewal.

The wake-up call that destroyed our national complacency on September 11, 2001 demands an accommodation by our communities to threats of a frightening magnitude. That accommodation is being designed in new planning processes that are beginning all over the country, but not enough thought is being given to ensuring the successful implementation of those plans should that become necessary. What is going to be needed is greater appreciation of how the drastic measures that might have to be taken will be seen by the greater community whose cooperation will be crucial to their feasibility.

When the new plans are activated to deal with a major biological, chemical, nuclear, or radiological event, it will be too late to prevent what is likely to be the greatest danger: panic. It is likely that the numbers among the panicked public will exceed the event's actual victims. People act on what they perceive, and when such an event occurs, the authorities will hope they have made their greatest investment in how it is perceived and understood by all those affected. That investment must be made in providing the community with the information it needs, and in developing the confidence of the community in the roles of all of the plans' players, if those plans are to work. And no plans will work without having earned the confidence of emergency personnel and caregivers who will be required to minister to public need rather than to their own families.

Unprecedented threats call for unprecedented strategies, many of which have never been employed in our communities. The public needs to know beforehand why they may be denied entry to their own hospitals, why victims may be triaged in strange places, and transported to even stranger places. The formal planning process must seek community buy-in, consensus, and cooperation, particularly for the most visible parts of those plans such as the locations of command centers and treatment facilities, the use of limited resources, the roles of personnel, and public information protocols, including communication with the media. Through stakeholder support representing all of the community's major institutions, the hard work of building alliances among all the sectors to be included for the first time in such planning can be assured. The diversity of our communities offers us strength we must use in overcoming the natural fear of the unknown. The inclusion of diverse constituencies in the consensus reached is the best guarantee we can have for the success of the plans.

Among the added benefits of this approach is that direct communication between our government leaders and community leaders avoids the filtering of vital information through the media that too often results in a sensationalistic spin. The media are players too, and must have a place at the table and a role as an accountable educator in the community. Their coverage of the planning process and its features will serve to set the stage for the participation of community members. For public health, this approach provides the opportunity to avoid the paternalism that pervades so many well-intentioned government mandates. And most of all, these planning

initiatives offer a way in which we may once again come to see our government as what we have created to foster our best interests.

Our own vulnerability as a nation is in large part based on the underinvestment in public health over the past thirty years, part of a short-sighted judgment to favor quick profits and low taxes at the expense of community resources. Among these resources are the hospital beds needed to accommodate the victims of terrorism along with the nurses to staff them, the lab technicians to do the testing, and the home care workers to allow the victims to be sent home. People are our greatest resource, and we all need to have a role in protecting our own communities. To rely on technology to protect us is as stupid as it is dehumanizing.

We have lived in the age of home rule for so long, we have forgotten how to do regional and national planning in the public interest. Our communities need an education in new realities, and renewed interest in public policy. We need our government agencies to work with our communities, not just for them.