

RAY DOWNEY'S

THE RESCUE COMPANY

URBAN SEARCH AND RESCUE



The tragic October 1989 collapse of the Nimitz Freeway in Oakland, California provided hard-hitting reality to substantiate our need for a national urban search and rescue system. This system is by no means exclusive to earthquake-prone regions of this country: Hurricanes, floods, tornadoes, and other natural disasters make this system a necessity that demands full-scale, national involvement. (Photos courtesy of Manuel Navarro.)

What are the current capabilities and available resources in the United States to respond to devastating earthquakes such as those in Mexico City, Soviet Armenia, and the Philippines? The media provided us with an opportunity to view up close

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the destruction and tragic loss of life that occur as a result of these catastrophic events. This was especially true in October 1989, when millions of viewers awaiting the start of the World Series had a front-row seat to the Loma Prieta Earthquake in California. An analysis of the resulting damages from this quake qualify it as one of the most costly natural disasters that ever occurred in the United States. Unfortunately, experts have determined that this was not the "big one," which, based on research, seismologists say is probable in the next 30 years.

What has happened since the California earthquake is a major undertaking by the United States government. The Federal Emergency Management Agency has taken the responsibility for establishing a National Urban Search and Rescue (US&R) System.

PLANNING WORKSHOP

During January of this year, FEMA held a workshop in Seattle, Washington to bring together a variety of national experts in the area of urban search and rescue. For the purpose of the workshop, urban search and rescue was defined as the specialized search and rescue activities to save the lives of individuals trapped in collapsed buildings as a result of a catastrophic event such as an earthquake or other natural disaster. The aftermath of Hurricane Hugo was another vivid reminder of the destruction natural disasters can inflict.

The goals of the week-long workshop were to discuss the status of the existing national urban search and rescue capabilities, to identify requirements for a national urban search and rescue system, and to identify actions necessary to develop and implement a national system. Another important aspect of the workshop was the emphasis it placed on the structure of intergovernmental relationships necessary to facilitate the establishment and implementation of a national system.

Discussions focused on assessment of the current need and capability; structure of a US&R task force; train-

ing; equipment; and inventory. The 85 participants (including a broad representation from all geographic regions of the country, from all major areas of relevant technical expertise, and from federal, state, local, and private-sector organizations) reviewed, discussed, and accepted the conclusions of special focus groups during the plenary sessions of the workshops. Among the conclusions: the fact that the potential demand for US&R in probable future urban disasters far exceeds current capability in any vulnerable locality and probably exceeds current national response capability, and the current organized US&R capability in the United States is not comparable with that of several Western European countries.

TASK FORCES

What type of US&R structure is needed? All agreed that a national system should be based on the Incident Command System in order to provide compatible organizational and management structures. The urban search and rescue structure should be organized using a task force approach and be an integrated unit representing management, search, rescue, medical, technical, and communications functions.

The task forces would be divided into two 25-person modules that would work 12-hour shifts. They must be self-sufficient for the initial 72 hours; resupply operations after 72 hours will be handled by the Department of Defense. Equipment (rescue, medical, personal, and technical) will be cached and available under a six-hour call out. Separate and identical caches will be developed for each of the US&R task forces. The goal is to have a minimum of 25 task forces spread out geographically to provide assistance regardless of the disaster's location. The task forces should be ready for action by September 1991.

STEERING AND WORKING GROUPS

Work on this project has been ongoing since January 1990. As a result of the first workshop in Seattle, a steering group was appointed, which

includes 15 key members from the urban search and rescue field who will advise FEMA regarding the development and implementation of a national US&R capability. The steering group determined that one of the primary needs would be to form working groups to address specific subjects such as standards, equipment, communications, training, and management and coordination. Working group members were selected based on geographical distribution, technical expertise in the subject area, recognition in the subject field, and willingness to serve. These working groups have met for three- to four-day sessions to formulate, develop, and recommend necessary qualifications, standards, equipment, communications, training, mobilization and deployment, and operating procedures for the task force components. The steering and working groups are providing the necessary foundation from which the national US&R capability can be effectively formulated.

Many state and local organizations have expressed interest in this venture and have already contacted FEMA and their state emergency management agencies. Acceptance in the national task forces must be channeled through state emergency management agencies and will be based on meeting minimum personnel and equipment criteria currently being developed. Funding will be provided on a matching grant basis to enhance existing state and/or local US&R capabilities through training and equipment purchase.

FEMA has been encouraging state emergency management agencies to identify assets in their states for possible inclusion in the national system. Organizations interested in becoming part of the national task force system must go through their state emergency management agencies.

Questions regarding the national urban search and rescue system may be addressed to Federal Emergency Management Agency, Office of Disaster Assistance Programs, Attn: Bruce Baughman, SL-DA-PA-HM, Washington, DC 20472. ■