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Front Page

Posted on Thu, Jul. 13, 2006

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Phila. unready for big disaster

Study says city would be "quickly overwhelmed."

By Jennifer Lin
Inquirer Staff Writer

The question weighed on the mind of every big-city mayor in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina: Could my city handle such a cataclysmic disaster?

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The answer for Mayor Street is no.

A million-dollar analysis of the city's emergency readiness, which is to be released at a news conference today, has concluded that Philadelphia could be "quickly overwhelmed" in a large-scale or catastrophic event.

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The report by consultant James Lee Witt, head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency in the Clinton administration, said gaps in resources and procedures would make the city vulnerable in times of extreme distress.

While the city can handle big planned events - like the 2000 Republican National Convention or the 2005 Live 8 concert - a major emergency caused by nature or terrorists could turn Philadelphia into New Orleans.

The review, which began in January, found that the city:

Relies heavily on individual knowledge for emergency planning.

Lacks up-to-date strategies and documents, as well as staffing and tools, to prepare for a major disaster.

Lacks "well-defined" processes for helping residents with special needs.

Lacks a comprehensive evacuation strategy with neighboring counties, cities and states.

The report offers 200 specific recommendations for making the city safer. But the Street administration has no time frame for addressing those recommendations, nor has it released a comprehensive estimate of how much it would cost to implement most suggestions.

"This can't be a report that sits on the shelf," Pedro Ramos, the city's managing director, said at a meeting Tuesday with the Inquirer Editorial Board.

Ramos said the city would immediately double the \$450,000 budget for the city's emergency management office and hire a deputy managing director to oversee its overhaul. The report found that the five-person emergency management staff was insufficient for a city the size of Philadelphia.

The report was based on the assumption - learned from New Orleans - that the city could be on its own for at least 72 hours after a catastrophe. The report found that Philadelphia would have difficulty handling a surge of evacuees for that long.

The city's Office of Adult Services could provide relief for up to 2,000 citizens, while the American Red Cross has capacity to shelter about 10,000, the report said.

But if 100,000 or more people were on the move, the report concluded, Philadelphia - with a population of 1.5 million - would need to make a "comprehensive effort" to line up contracts to feed and shelter that many evacuees.

According to the report, the two most urgent matters for the city are fixing the communications void for rescue workers in the city's rail and subway tunnels, and equipping city ambulances with two-way radios to talk to hospitals.

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Some of the suggestions are within the city's budget or are issues that deal with how city agencies are organized and operate, Ramos said.

A key recommendation, for instance, is giving the city's public health and medical sectors a larger role in emergency planning.

But some remedies - such as the inability of police, firefighters and paramedics to use their radios in rail tunnels - will cost millions and require the city to go hat in hand to Harrisburg and Washington.

SEPTA has estimated that it would cost at least \$20 million to wire tunnels with equipment to transmit the radio signals of police and firefighters.

The report said this problem was "a major deficiency." Today, firefighters in a tunnel emergency would have to resort to yelling back and forth.

Some suggestions for making the city safer, meanwhile, can only be addressed at the federal level. The report noted that passenger traffic at Philadelphia International Airport increased by three million last year. The report said the airport needs 100 more inspectors for the Transportation Security Agency.

Ramos said the review would help the city in terms of "how we lobby and what we lobby for."

The Witt report was a direct response to Street's concern about the city's preparedness after Katrina. To get a look at cities that had better emergency operations already in place, the Witt team took Philadelphia officials to New York, Washington and Chicago.

But, Witt said, "there's not been a city to undertake such an in-depth review. Mayor Street put everything on the table. He said, 'I want to know what we need to do.' "

And much of the job starts with the mayor.

The report said the city needs to do more to incorporate neighboring counties, cities and states into its emergency strategy. Emergency managers from the city and surrounding counties meet on a regular basis. But one of the lessons of New Orleans was the need for better coordination at the top - mayor to governor, as well as governor to governor.

That is not happening locally.

Ten months after Katrina, the report noted that Philadelphia's highest officials had not met with their local, county and state counterparts to discuss emergency preparedness efforts. The review recommends an ongoing forum for top officials.

"Meeting to discuss emergency management would foster mutual understanding, potentially save resources, and greatly reduce the response time during a disaster," the report said.

Asked why this hadn't happened yet, Ramos said, "The candid answer is, it has not become a normal thing to do."

Ramos said he was working with U.S. Attorney Patrick Meehan, who heads the federal government's regional counterterrorism task force, about conducting an exercise testing the ability of elected officials in the region to react to a disaster.

Ramos added that the report was "a call to the city to organize itself and set priorities now."

He said the city would spend more than \$1 million on a public education campaign in September to inform residents about what they should do in an emergency.

Different types of emergencies require different responses, a distinction lost on many residents.

A lethal cloud from a refinery would require people to take shelter at home, while a powerful hurricane might necessitate a mass evacuation.

Ramos said the city needed to make emergency information more accessible.

"We can't expect the public to go fishing through Web sites for information," he said. "We're going to be coming at you like a Frito-Lay campaign to get you to buy into emergency preparedness."

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Emergency Recommendations

After reviewing the city's emergency management capability for the last six months, consultants with James Lee Witt Associates of Washington recommended that Philadelphia:

- Enhance emergency management capacity.
- Enhance emergency communications.
- Integrate health and human services into emergency management.
- Enhance federal, state, regional and local partnerships.
- Promote transparency and community engagement in emergency management.
- Ensure continuity of government and continuity of operations planning.
- Protect critical infrastructure and promote public-private partnerships.
- Develop comprehensive evacuation plans.

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To read previous coverage about the region's emergency preparedness, go to <http://go.philly.com/prepared>

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