

## Coalinga: Minimizing Rumors—Maximizing Communication

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"Rumor was our main source of information." That was how Noreen and Jerry Oliver, store owners in Coalinga, viewed the information system in their city following the May 2 earthquake.

Rumors are prevalent in emergencies and constitute a major problem for local officials. How you cope with them and how you effectively communicate with citizens in a disaster were the focus of a discussion between federal, state, local, and Red Cross officials critiquing the operations following the Coalinga earthquake.

About two months before the earthquake struck, Robert Semple, Public Information Officer for the city of Coalinga, and Fresno County Public Information Officer Craig Reid attended an earthquake public information workshop conducted by the California Office of Emergency Services (OES). Semple said the one-day training session, which is offered regularly by OES, proved to be invaluable to him—he learned that his highest priority was to provide emergency life-saving information to the citizens.

Since the local Coalinga radio station, KOLI, was off the air for six hours, Semple used Fresno stations located about 60 miles away to reach Coalingans. Information broadcast included locations of emergency shelters, food, and triage stations; notices that water, electricity, gas, and sanitation systems weren't operating; and word that assistance was coming from other parts of the state.

In addition, Semple lacked direct radio or telephone communications with other city or county departments, or any staff to assist with providing information to the onslaught of out-of-town media that started arriving within an hour after the first earthquake occurred. Semple depended on having information relayed to him by a county sheriff's deputy who was monitoring his department's radio based in Fresno.

One of his biggest problems with rumor control was coordinating information between city and county departments so that he could provide both the local people and the outside media with accurate statistics and facts. An example of a major rumor was the reported destruction of the local hospital. In reality, it sustained damage and some loss of power, but it was still operating.

Another priority was to tell residents that they should stay out of their homes and businesses if buildings appeared to be badly damaged. Severe aftershocks could be expected and might inflict further damage. Another vital concern was whether residents could safely use water and toilet facilities. When darkness fell, lights were out for several hours and telephones remained inoperative. Several fires erupted, causing concern among

the displaced Coalingans. Semple had to deal with all of this and spent 40 continuous hours doing so.

All of these situations were compounded by media converging on the scene. They wanted to see the damage and photograph the devastated downtown area along with obtaining interviews. As a precaution, the local sheriff's deputy denied immediate access to the downtown area, stating that it was necessary to secure the area from possible looting. Some of the media representatives quickly cited Section 409.5 of the state Penal Code which specifically permits media access to a disaster area. The matter was resolved when Semple set up conducted tours of the area to meet media needs. One of the more bizarre aspects of the story was the media's refusal to accept the fact that there were no reported fatalities and only a few injuries—yet that was precisely the situation.

Semple has made some specific recommendations concerning the dissemination of information based on the lessons learned in Coalinga. He recommends:

- 1 Obtain a portable, battery-operated communications system which will permit coordination between city officials and departments on a dedicated frequency.
- 2 Buy a programmable, hand-held radio scanner that permits monitoring other government departments and media discussions concerning the recovery operation.
- 3 Have a portable, battery-operated public address system for briefings and news conferences. This reduces the time-consuming "one-on-one" interviews with individual reporters.
- 4 Use a portable status board to post statistics for easy access by the media.

These four items would probably cost less than a thousand dollars and could also be used in other than disaster situations.

- 5 In small communities, develop a locator system—perhaps in the form of a card file—containing the names, addresses, and telephone numbers of major property owners and merchants. If necessary, they could be organized for "neighborhood watch" efforts or asked to supply shelter to disaster victims.
- 6 Utilize or improve use of an emergency broadcast system in cooperation with the radio and television stations which are heard and seen in your area. Don't overlook including the many cable systems currently in operation. These localized "EBS" plans can improve relations with your local

broadcast media and provide a reliable means of informing and educating their listeners and viewers. With the broadcasters' help, the audience can be alerted to threats and will turn to the stations for important life-saving information.

- 7 Enlist the help of county, state, and federal agencies which can provide professional public information officers to gather, coordinate, and generally assist with the dissemination of information to the local citizenry and the outside world.

Based on experiences in Coalinga, FEMA's Region IX and the California Office of Emergency Services are pledged to assist local governments with equipment and personnel. Both would be available for use by local governments and would not, in any way, constitute an attempt to take over information operations from the local authorities.

One of these aids is the development of a joint information center (JIC) plan, which was in the developmental stage, under the aegis of FEMA's headquarters Office of Public Information when the Coalinga quake occurred. Such a JIC in California will serve as a prototype for national use by FEMA regions. It would serve as the focal point for coordinated information dissemination by local, state, and federal agencies.

Semple feels that implementation of these recommendations could reduce the flow of misleading rumors and provide the kind of reliable information people need in disaster situations. In addition, such an accomplishment would help the city and county officials involved in a disaster respond to the hundreds, even thousands, of "out-of-town" or area media inquiries which are so common in today's age of highly mobile and intensely competitive news operations. Such emergencies have become, by their very nature, media events, and there is little likelihood this will change in the near future.

Finally, Semple emphasized the importance of having local governments review emergency information plans and available facilities. Conducting exercises in cooperation with local media will test the paper plans and may help reveal shortcomings which could impair effective operations in the future. Doing that will clearly contribute toward minimizing rumors and maximizing communications in emergencies.

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