



# RHarper Consulting Update

## Emergency Planning

### Lessons From a Great Flood



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I have recently witnessed a natural disaster; The Great Flood of Nashville, May 2010. Fortunately, we were spared but I have several friends who have lost their homes and personal belongings. While there are thousands of heart lifting stories of strangers helping strangers, miracles, and extraordinary efforts above and beyond the call, we are now starting to reflect on what went right, what went wrong, and how we become better prepared for the next unplanned catastrophic event.

Nashville is said to have experienced either a 500 - or 1,000 - year flood event, depending upon whom you believe. We experienced over fourteen inches of rain in less than thirty-six hours on top of what had already been a very wet spring. Two major rivers (The Cumberland and The Harpeth) overflowed their banks and levees taking over thirty lives, flooding over two thousand homes and businesses, and amassing well over \$2 billion in property damage.

For me, one of the most startling images on that Sunday afternoon and evening as we watched this unfold on local TV was of a nursing home and the surrounding neighborhood that had been cut off by the flood with the only remaining access was by boat. Volunteers with boats literally materialized out of nowhere and began evacuating the residents, often carrying them in their arms to waiting family members while the waters continued to rise. It was a good outcome, but, I would venture that relying on volunteers and their private boats was not part of the emergency planning for that particular facility.

Disasters bring to light deficiencies in our emergency planning. Our challenge and duty is to fully explore these lessons, face the reality of where our emergency planning may be falling short, and respond with the right measures to prepare for future events. While you might debate the specifics of planning for a 500-year flood event, there are a number of common challenges in every natural disaster:

**Communications** – Our society relies on cellular communications and those are always the first to fail. Towers get knocked out of commission, traffic overloads and bogs down the system, emergency power is inadequate to support transmissions, cellular switching facilities go underwater – anything that can happen will and land lines are not much better. Have your critical response personnel equipped with hand held radios that are multi-channel and reliable.

**Reliable information** – As a general rule, there is no such thing as reliable information while the disaster is unfolding. Your world will be limited to whatever is right in front of you, and anything that’s happening anywhere else will probably not be on your personal radar; if it is, be sure that you’re dealing with facts instead of rumor. Your first response is to stick with your emergency plan and adapt as circumstances dictate. Talk with your local emergency management and law enforcement agencies now, before the next crisis – provide them with a copy of your emergency plan, including floor plans and locations of all staff and residents, and cooperate with them as they prepare their own plans. You want them to know, and they want to know, who is in your facility and how to keep them safe .

**Backup of backups** – Extra flashlights, batteries and bulbs aren't enough. Think about alternative fuel sources for your emergency generator, provide for a mobile generator hook-up in case your permanent EG has to be taken out of service for maintenance or failure. Water systems are prone to contamination, so provide for substitute water sources including large stores of bottled water. First aid and backup medical equipment are also essentials.

**Evacuations** – I have been involved in evacuation of assisted living and dementia care properties in the past and it presents tremendous challenges. Resident security, prescription access, food in transit, and the very real problem of evacuating staff and their families along with the residents has to be part of the planning.

If you have been around the industry for any length of time, you probably have as many harrowing “war stories” as anyone. Having seen results of good emergency planning and execution as well as some that were not so good, nothing brings it to your attention more than a “near miss” or worse yet a “direct hit.” Take some time now to review your emergency planning and ask yourself “have we really covered all the possibilities and do we really have plans that will work?” .

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*RHarper Consulting Group provides development consulting, program management, and owner representation services focused on the senior living and mixed use sectors. In addition, Mr. Harper is also a listed mediator and arbitrator providing dispute resolution services for the construction and real estate industries.*

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