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MAINE VOICES: *Paul Averill Liebow, M.D.*

Beef up state emergency plans, funds

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I had the great pleasure of working on the Legislative Task Force to Examine Maine's Homeland Security Needs.

This bipartisan group of six legislators and five citizen representatives came up with a number of unanimous recommendations that will help throw our emergency preparedness systems into high gear.

"Politics" never surfaced. Some recommendations came out of committee essentially unchanged and are now proposed for consideration by the Legislature, while some are resolutions calling for further study of issues.

Now we need support from Mainers that is communicated directly to our elected officials.

"All-hazards preparedness," like most modern endeavors, requires dedicated individuals and institutions - and systems to unite them. All actions must be planned and rehearsed well in advance to bring out everyone's best response.

When disaster strikes, Maine is a small town of a million souls. During the Great Ice Storm of 1998, Mainers didn't need FEMA permission to see if old Mrs. Jones needed light, heat, food, water or just neighborly caring.

When Bucksport's Town Manager Roger Raymond moved operations to the Middle School and found that the generator supplied barely enough power to keep the pipes from freezing, he called Johnny Wardwell to inquire about an industrial generator. "It'll be there in half an hour," he was told.

An emergency on Cranberry Island brings 10 strong men there to help in minutes. When a woman crashed her car on the way to see her son fly through Bangor from Iraq, cars going both ways stopped. She was in one before the first teardrop fell and reached the airport in time to get a 3-minute hug from her son, who then waved to the crowd and was gone.

MONEY AN ISSUE

About the Author

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Our people are ready. Our organizations are ready. But Maine also needs a fair share of federal dollars for training and equipment and some tweaking of institutional and legal infrastructures at all levels to make sure they can function as a team.

As amazing as it may sound, first responders often cannot communicate with each other.

A simple solution proposed by the Maine State Police should enable federal, state and local agencies to speak to each other on six dedicated statewide hand-held radio channels that require no repeater towers.

Maine's Emergency Management Agency should be permanently headed by a career professional, as it is so capably now, by Art Cleaves. The office should be confirmed by the Legislature, with legislative oversight by Criminal Justice and Public Safety in common with all other first-responding agencies, and offer direct access to the governor during a disaster.

A budget of \$3 million in state funds should be available yearly to deserving Mainers for local disasters not large enough for federal relief.

CENTERS NEEDED

We must preserve the three Regional Resource Centers that have been so valuable in coordinating disaster preparedness with local and regional hospital systems and first responders.

We must assure adequate evacuation plans and shelter facilities with heat, light and water.

We must have adequate health care "surge capacity" so that, if the bird flu scare becomes a real pandemic, thousands of beds can be found, housed and staffed, with medications made available.

We must provide trained and authorized local public health officers to function in austere environments. Disaster preparedness must be taught in public schools and public service announcements.

A few of the many other areas to be looked at are our National Guard, the public health system, chemical security, early warning systems, mass evacuation and credentialing and liability protection for health personnel and institutions.

These proposals, plus others at the federal level, will go a long way to making our million-person village more secure.

- Special to the Press Herald