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The ever-changing face of disaster response

By Dennis Evers

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Just a short while ago, the idea of having to prepare for intentional man-made disasters designed to inflict as much death, pain and destruction as possible was almost inconceivable.

While Oklahoma City and the WTC garage bombing were precursors of things to come, prior to 9/11 disaster response was primarily designed around weather- and transportation-related disasters and man-made accidents such as chemical leaks.

The emergence of cadres of highly trained, ready-to-die terrorists, eco-terrorists, militias and anti-government groups (all emerging in a relatively short time frame) has created a daunting task for everyone involved in disaster response planning.

While the need to prepare for “traditional” disasters hasn’t diminished in the least, the addition of chemical, biological, nuclear and explosive threats has added a whole new, highly technical and complex dimension to disaster response protocols, training and preparedness. The need for DHS, police, fire, the FBI and other agencies to work together in disaster preparation planning is now more vital than ever.

With the DHS oversight of FEMA being much like a rule change in the middle of a game, current disaster response is still in the catch-up phase. Hurricane Katrina rather publicly exposed the government’s inability at that time to organize an effective response, and while the sheer magnitude of the event was off-the-charts, some outfits, such as the U.S. Coast Guard, an organization that literally thrives in an adrenalin-rich environment, stood out as a shining example of how absolute professionalism, training and the proper equipment pays off.

While it is impossible to plan for all possible contingencies, the need to prepare to the highest level of response is

essential.

Unfortunately, with hard times come cutbacks in funding, training and equipment. But cutting police and fire services to save a buck, can be "penny wise and pound foolish" in the disaster response arena. There will always be disasters and we will always need to respond to them effectively.

Every organization, whether private or governmental, needs to have crystal-clear disaster response protocols in place, the command staff ready to make tough, timely, common sense decisions, and the personnel and resources to execute those decisions

It doesn't matter whether the event is an act of terrorism caused by a Jihadist or a natural phenomenon, disaster response should always be in a positive state of flux, anticipating, training, equipping -- ready to shine in the darkest of times.

Dennis Evers, a former Arizona chief of police, is co-author of *Pocket Partner*, a reference guide for law enforcement officials and first responders. Evers can be reached at: evers@frontier.net

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