


THE HOMELAND SECURITY POLICY INSTITUTE
PRESIDENTIAL TRANSITION TASK FORCE ROUNDTABLE SERIES

Citizen Preparedness: Harnessing an Engaged Public
January 30, 2009

On January 30, The George Washington University's Homeland Security Policy Institute (HSPI) hosted a panel discussion titled "Citizen Preparedness: Harnessing an Engaged Public." This event, the fourth and final in HSPI's Presidential Transition Roundtable Series: "Thinking Anew: Security Priorities for the Next Administration," featured presentations by leading journalists and authors Andy Carvin, Senior Product Manager for Online Communities, National Public Radio; and Amanda Ripley, reporter for TIME Magazine and author of The Unthinkable - Who Survives When Disaster Strikes. Jan Lane, HSPI Deputy Director, and former government relations lead for the American Red Cross, acted as respondent and provided comment.

Ripley suggested that the U.S. government writ large tends to attempt to carry the burden of preparedness, response, and recovery during disasters, rather than including ordinary citizens in the process of making and facilitating such policy. However, Ripley notes that "the most important people" that government needs to include are its citizens, those who will be on the scene and responding in their communities. To better involve "regular people", Ripley suggests that these citizens not only be at the table during policymaking, but that the government should also be specific in directing citizens about what they could be doing to prepare, respond, or recover. Finally, the government should tell the truth, including about the threats for which communities should be preparing. In other words, by being "frank and specific," the nation as a whole will better understand the nature of the threat, and society will become more resilient. According to Ripley, the federal role in public preparedness efforts is, in short, to "inspire, facilitate, and then get out of the way."

Carvin presented the evolution of online-mobilization of citizens during crises starting with the earthquake in Los Angeles, California in 1994. As use of the internet has increased over the last 15 years, so has the ability of the public to communicate using new technological tools. In the aftermath of the 2001 terrorist attacks on the U.S., volunteers set up email listservs to discuss where they could assist; by 2006, citizens on the ground posted information and photos on blogs during the tsunamis that ravaged Southeast Asia, a phenomenon now known as "citizen journalism." In preparation for Hurricane Gustav in 2008, over 500




volunteers across the globe worked together to build a citizen-coordinated website to provide real-time information. Carvin noted that through such movement of information, “taken as a whole, you can observe the trends” of what is occurring on the ground—in effect, situational awareness. Carvin suggested that “we need to create various ways of visualizing” how to exploit this mobilization of volunteers online, and “have the infrastructure available” so that next time there will be a portal through which to channel people who wish to assist. An additional challenge is balancing the needs of specific communities in particular geographic locations, while finding ways to take advantage of organized communities online whose members may reside in different parts of the world.

Lane noted the HSPI Presidential Transition Task Force recommendation that active civic engagement underpin the new Administration’s homeland security efforts. She pointed out that President Obama’s calls for public service and personal responsibility provide the opportunity for greater engagement. Noting that there has been a history of government reluctance to bring the public into preparedness planning, Lane said “we need a real discussion with the American people of what the threat is, why it matters to them, and how the public can be effectively involved.” Government officials need to understand the evolving nature of public preparedness and how to incorporate social media to aid in public safety, situational awareness, and mobilization of resources outside of government control. Civic engagement is vital to rebuilding the public’s trust in governments’ disaster preparedness and response capabilities following Katrina. In response, Cilluffo proposed that “trust and confidence is crucial” to calibrating the discourse and cementing the bonds between the public and government.

In the discussion that followed, the key themes of education and training arose. During crises, citizens able to overcome the paralysis engendered by such an event are those that in past have been educated and trained to respond, whether on the job or through volunteer organizations such as the Boy Scouts of America. If people know what to do and have practiced it, they are more likely to take action. Many city fire departments have engaged the public on issues including risk assessment (geared to prevention) and have instructed citizens on response techniques. Public outreach, whether in the schools or online, is crucial to effective preparation for disaster.

The Ready.gov campaign is one example of government action; but Ripley and other experts participating in the roundtable discussion posited that government could do more – and better. For example, DHS provides a list of various supplies families might gather in preparation for a disaster. The lists are not tailored to specific geographic locations, though effective preparation is context-dependent. One suggestion made to improve this list was to add a forum to its online version, in order for the public to give their opinions on what else could be helpful to have on hand. By comparison, the United Kingdom has made baseline threat and risk information available to its citizens, which facilitates preparedness efforts.



Clearly, the keys to drawing successfully upon volunteers during a disaster include education, training, engagement, and the use of social media tools before, during and after disaster strikes. That said, “you don’t have to wait to have all the pieces right before you act,” as Cilluffo notes, “you just have to act.”

HSPI’s Presidential Transition Roundtable Series seeks to foster thoughtful dialogue in order to generate actionable recommendations designed to meet the most vexing challenges the United States faces today. The findings of the Series are expected to supplement and complement the work of HSPI’s Presidential Transition Task Force.

For more information, see http://www.gwumc.edu/hspi/transition_task_force.htm