AMERICAN LEGION
CENTRAL AREA
Disaster Preparedness Newsletter
PREPAREDNESS | RESPONSE | RECOVERY
Building Resilient Posts Before Disaster Strikes

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Closing the Loop: When Sending the Message Isn't Enough

Building Reliable Communications Before Disaster Strikes

The Message Was Sent. But Was It Received?

It's Saturday evening. A severe storm has moved through part of Florida, leaving damaged buildings, flooded roads, and widespread power outages. Several communities have been affected, and American Legion Posts in the area may be dealing with damage of their own.

An urgent message goes out requesting information from affected Posts. Are their facilities damaged? Are their members safe? Do they need assistance? Are they in a position to help others?

The message is sent successfully.

But what happens next?

Did it reach the right people? Did anyone acknowledge receiving it? And what happens when a Post doesn't respond?

These aren't questions about whether someone has done their job. They're questions about whether our communication systems are prepared to function when we need them most.

In disaster preparedness, we spend considerable time discussing plans, supplies, facilities, and emergency procedures. All are important. But even the best disaster plan depends on something we sometimes take for granted: the ability to communicate.

And communication involves more than sending a message.

The Difference Between Sending and Communicating

Under normal circumstances, it's easy to assume that an email has reached its destination. We send it, perhaps receive confirmation that it was delivered, and move on to the next task.

But delivery doesn't necessarily mean the message was read, understood, or acted upon.

During a disaster, that distinction becomes especially important.

Imagine a District Commander trying to determine which Posts have been affected by a storm. Messages have gone out, but only some Posts have responded. Are the others unaffected? Are their communications down? Have their officers evacuated? Or has the message simply gone unnoticed?

Without some form of acknowledgment, there's no reliable way to know.

A simple reply saying “Received” may seem insignificant, but it tells the sender that the communication reached someone. If action is requested, an acknowledgment can also confirm who is handling it or when a response can be expected.

It’s a matter of good communication practices and, frankly, professional courtesy.

That doesn’t mean every routine email needs a formal response or that Posts should be burdened with additional reporting requirements. But when information is time-sensitive or affects the safety and welfare of others, confirming receipt can make a meaningful difference.

The goal isn’t to create more paperwork. It’s to reduce uncertainty.

When the Normal Channels Stop Working

Florida’s hurricanes have taught us that communication systems can be just as vulnerable as the communities they serve.

Electricity fails. Internet service disappears. Cellular networks become overloaded or damaged. People evacuate, sometimes hundreds of miles from home.

And the people responsible for coordinating a response may be dealing with the same challenges as everyone else.

This is why disaster communication deserves attention before an emergency develops.

A Post may normally rely on its Commander or Adjutant to receive and distribute information. But what happens if both are unavailable? Who else can be contacted? Does District leadership have another way to reach the Post?

The same questions apply throughout the organization, from Posts to Districts, Areas, and Department leadership.

No communication system is completely reliable, and no individual can be available around the clock. But identifying alternate contacts and maintaining more than one way to communicate can help prevent a temporary disruption from becoming a complete loss of contact.

Sometimes the most valuable backup isn’t another person in the same community. It may be someone outside the affected area who can receive information and help relay it where it needs to go.

That’s where relationships established before a disaster become especially valuable.



Communication Must Travel Both Ways

Much of our attention naturally focuses on getting information from Department leadership through Areas and Districts to individual Posts.

That communication is important. But it's only half of the process.

After a disaster, information must also travel in the opposite direction.

A Post may have suffered building damage, lost electrical power, or discovered that several members need assistance. Another Post may be unaffected and ready to provide volunteers, supplies, or temporary facilities.

Both situations represent information that could help coordinate an effective response.

But someone needs to know.

A request for assistance that never reaches the appropriate people cannot be acted upon. Likewise, an offer of assistance has limited value if those coordinating the response don't know the resource is available.

This is one reason maintaining communication with District and Area leadership matters. It helps connect needs with available resources and supports coordination through established channels.

Disaster response is rarely something one Post or one organization can accomplish alone.

The relationships we develop with neighboring Posts, community organizations, and emergency management partners can become essential when normal operations are disrupted.

And those relationships are much easier to use when they've been established before the emergency.

Buddy Checks: More Than a Welfare Call

One of the most valuable communication tools available to the American Legion is also one of our most familiar: the Buddy Check.

Checking on fellow Legionnaires is already an important part of our commitment to service, and member welfare checks are included in the recommended Post disaster preparedness plan.

But Buddy Checks also offer an opportunity to strengthen communication readiness.

Consider what happens during a routine Buddy Check. We reach out to a fellow member, ask how they're doing, and determine whether they need assistance.

At the same time, we may discover that a telephone number has changed, an email address is no longer being used, or the member has moved. We might learn that someone has difficulty receiving text messages or would prefer a telephone call.

Those details may seem minor during ordinary circumstances. During a disaster, they could determine whether we're able to reach someone at all.

Buddy Checks also remind us that communication isn't always about waiting for someone to respond.

A member who doesn't answer may be away from home, without telephone service, hospitalized, or otherwise unable to communicate.

A lack of response doesn't necessarily mean a lack of interest.

It may mean we need to try another method of contact or ask someone nearby to check on their welfare when it is safe and appropriate to do so.

And just as importantly, members should know how to contact their Post when they need assistance.

A Buddy Check helps us determine whether we can reach someone. Good disaster planning also considers whether that person can reach us.

Before the Storm, Tell People How to Reach You Afterward

We often think about disaster communications in terms of warnings, announcements, and instructions issued as an emergency approaches.

But one of the most useful messages a Post can send before an anticipated disaster may be surprisingly simple:

"If you need assistance after the storm, here's how to reach us."

That message could be delivered through telephone calls, email, text messages, or whatever methods a Post already uses to communicate with its members.

It might identify a primary contact, an alternate contact, or another Post that has agreed to help relay information if local communications are disrupted.

The method is less important than the principle.

Members should not have to wait until after a disaster to figure out whom to call.

And Posts should consider what happens if their own building, telephone service, or leadership becomes unavailable.

This is another reason partnerships and mutual aid arrangements are valuable. A neighboring Post or an organization outside the affected area may be able to serve as a temporary communication link.

The technology doesn't have to be sophisticated. The important thing is that the arrangements are understood before they're needed.

When the Backup Plan Became the Plan

A Lesson from Hurricane Irma

During Hurricane Irma in 2017, a communications continuity plan developed to support military families in Florida was put to the test.

Before the storm, families received automated calls explaining how to request assistance afterward. A toll-free number connected callers to Military Family Assistance specialists through a virtual telephone system capable of routing calls to personnel outside the affected area.

When Florida personnel became unavailable, previously established mutual aid agreements allowed specialists in New Jersey and Hawaii to answer calls and relay information back to the Florida Emergency Operations Center.

The system worked because alternate contacts, communication procedures, and mutual aid agreements had been established before the disaster.

The lesson for American Legion Posts:

Maintaining communications doesn't necessarily require sophisticated technology. Identifying alternate contacts, establishing mutual aid relationships, and making sure members know how to request assistance can help keep information moving when local operations are disrupted.

Based on firsthand experience supporting military families during Hurricane Irma, shared by the Central Area Disaster Preparedness Chair.

Practice the Communication, Not Just the Plan

We often encourage Posts to review and practice their disaster preparedness plans. But how often do we consider whether the communication portion of those plans actually works?

A simple exercise could reveal a great deal.

Imagine a District sending a test message to its Posts and asking for a brief acknowledgment. How many responses would come back? Would the message reach the correct people? Would alternate contacts be available when needed?

The purpose wouldn't be to grade Posts or criticize anyone who didn't respond.

It would be to identify gaps while there's still time to address them.

The same principle applies to Buddy Checks. Regular contact with members helps maintain relationships, verify contact information, and identify individuals who may need additional attention during an emergency.

These are practical opportunities to strengthen preparedness without creating elaborate exercises or expensive systems.

Not every Post has the same resources, membership, or capabilities. What works for a large Post may not be practical for a smaller one.

The objective is not to establish a single communication system for everyone. It's to encourage each Post to consider whether its existing methods will continue working when conditions are far from normal.

Closing the Loop

When disaster strikes, information becomes one of our most important resources.

We need to know which Posts are affected, which members need assistance, what resources are available, and where help is needed most.

But that information is useful only when it reaches the people who can act upon it.

Closing the communication loop doesn't require complicated technology or another layer of bureaucracy. It begins with simple habits: maintaining reliable contacts, acknowledging important messages, establishing alternate communication paths, and making sure information can travel in both directions.

Most importantly, it means remembering why we're communicating in the first place.

Our goal isn't simply to prove that a message was delivered or that someone answered an email.

It's to make sure that when a fellow Legionnaire, veteran, family, or community needs assistance, their request doesn't get lost along the way.

Because in disaster preparedness, the most important message isn't always the one we send. Sometimes it's the one we need to make sure someone receives.

This Month's Preparedness Challenge

Consider one question:

If an urgent message went out tonight, would your Post know how to receive it, respond to it, and reach someone for assistance if normal communications were unavailable?

If the answer is uncertain, that's a good place to begin.

The recommended Post disaster preparedness plan, including member welfare checks and other planning resources, is available on the Central Area Disaster Preparedness Resource Page:

https://flpost15.org/dp

Stay prepared. Stay connected. And be ready to serve.