



EM Alliance, LLC
4600 B Montgomery NE, Ste 204
Albuquerque, NM 87109
info@EMAllianceUSA.com 505.938.5872

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LTC Alliance, LLC • Fire and Life-Safety, Inc. •
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It's an Emergency. We're Not Prepared!

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Please contact John at jsolomon@incaseofemergencyblog.com

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By John D. Solomon
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It's an Emergency. We're Not Prepared!

Disaster is bearing down on all sides of late. A ravaging cyclone in Burma. A killer earthquake in China. Even the United States hasn't escaped unscathed, with tornadoes ripping across the heartland and Southeast and floods rising in the mid-Atlantic.

Still, most Americans have been watching the devastation in Asia from relative safety and, if I had to guess, with a certain sense of complacency, a feeling that disaster on that scale isn't likely to happen to them. But it could. And if it did, our country might face the same sort of crisis as our Asian cousins. A major reason: The American public isn't prepared.

Even after Sept. 11, 2001, even after Hurricane Katrina, a [Red Cross](#) survey last year found that 93 percent of Americans aren't prepared for a major calamity — a natural disaster, a pandemic or a terrorist attack. This is troubling, because the more prepared a population is, the more effective the response to and recovery from a catastrophe will be.

In the weeks after 9/11, my worried wife asked me, "What should we be doing?" We lived directly across the street from the Manhattan hospital where a woman had just died from anthrax exposure; I worked only a couple of blocks from the [World Trade Center](#).

Initially, I thought that the answer to her question would be pretty straightforward. But 6½ years later, I'm still trying to pin it down.

Reaching the public for the likely emergencies of the 21st century may be one of the most complex social-education challenges the nation has faced. Americans have to prepare for a range of threats, many of which the government can neither describe nor predict. Says George Foresman, former undersecretary for preparedness with the [Department of Homeland Security](#), "There's no playbook for any of us to go by."

In my search for a playbook, I've consulted government Web sites, including DHS's Ready.gov, read all the books I could find and spoken to first responders, policymakers and other experts. I've signed up for emergency e-mail lists and text alerts from all over the country — my [BlackBerry](#) now pings whenever there's a major storm heading toward New York, a tremor near San Francisco, a Metro train derailment in Washington or a new terror alert from the [FBI](#).

To get a more ground-level view, I completed the 11-week, 33-hour training for New York City's Community Emergency Response Team (CERT), the civilian auxiliary force that helps the authorities during emergencies. So far, as part of my neighborhood unit, I've responded to the plane crash that killed [New York Yankees](#) pitcher [Cory Lidle](#) near the East River, directed traffic during a power failure, played the role of

“Rude Evacuee No. 1” in a city hurricane drill, passed out preparedness guides in 11 languages at subway stations and mixed the hot chocolate at a Red Cross evacuation center.

My immersion has been so deep that last November I was selected “Ready New Yorker of the Month” by the city’s Office of Emergency Management.

As I’ve continued to educate myself, people have asked me whether I feel better or worse. The answer is, both. I feel more prepared and more empowered. I see how much an individual can do and am more confident in people’s inherent resilience in emergency situations. But I’ve also learned that my family’s safety and the ability of my community and my nation to respond to major disasters might depend on my fellow citizens’ preparedness. It may sound a little dramatic, but if even 93 Americans — let alone 93 percent of us — aren’t informed and engaged, then none of us fully are.

“It keeps me awake at night,” says John R. Gibb, New York state’s emergency management director and one of several top officials who acknowledged concern over the current level of public readiness.

Public engagement is important not only in responding to emergencies, but also in helping prevent them in the first place. “The weakest part of our homeland security is the citizen,” [9/11 Commission](#) chairman Thomas H. Kean told me. “Addressing that is very, very, very important. Ultimately, it’s as likely that a terrorist attack here will be stopped by the [CIA](#) or FBI as by someone who sees something suspicious and, instead of just going home for dinner, decides to tell his or her local police.”

Based on my research and experiences so far, here are 10 suggestions for achieving a more prepared public:

1. *Make public preparedness a priority, or it won’t happen.* Last year, Foresman asked a ballroom full of state first responders how many of them had made a family emergency plan. Of 300 people, nine raised their hands. If many of the folks promoting civilian preparedness aren’t following their own advice, it’s no wonder that the rest of us aren’t, either. “It needs to be a national imperative,” says [Joseph F. Bruno](#), New York City’s emergency management commissioner.
2. *Make preparedness part of 21st-century citizenship.* Being prepared may be the most significant contribution many citizens can make to their nation’s security. Not only are civilians likely to be the first first responders at any disaster scene, but the nation’s response will also be only as strong as that of the weakest link. And a new commitment to public preparedness would give the country a nonpartisan, substantive way of re-tapping the reservoir of post-9/11 goodwill. “We don’t ask enough of people,” says one city emergency manager. “Everyone asks me, ‘How are you going to take care of us in a disaster?’ You have a big role in taking care of you.”
3. *Don’t laugh at “duck and cover.”* The nation’s Cold War civil defense campaign is often parodied, but it offers helpful lessons for the present. “We threw the baby out with the bathwater,” says [R. David Paulison](#), administrator of the [Federal Emergency Management Agency](#). “We need to get back the preparedness ethic from our past.” In the 1950s, U.S. air defense had more than 100,000 civilian volunteers and thousands of observation posts (including my grandmother, Jeannette, an observer in the Bronx). We don’t need that many people looking up at the skies, but we could use that type of citizen interest and engagement.
4. *Knowledge is power.* Just about every emergency official I’ve interviewed says that public education could help mitigate the impact of a catastrophic disaster. The idea isn’t to overwhelm the citizenry with too much information but to tell people what they really need to know — so that, for example, they’ll understand the difference between a “dirty bomb” and a nuclear bomb with even a fraction of their ability to differentiate between Britney and Paris. In fact, experts believe that a “dirty bomb,” a traditional explosive laced with radiation, is a likely terrorist weapon in part because it could have a psychological impact far beyond its actual physical damage — particularly if people haven’t been briefed in advance.

5. *We should tell the children.* Like fire safety and seat belts, emergency preparedness may ultimately take a generation to take hold. So we need to include young people in the effort. We could make preparedness education part of the school curriculum by piggybacking on the successful fire or earthquake programs already in place. Going through kids makes it more likely that adults will follow. When my 5-year-old came home from school asking whether we were going to save the environment by getting new compact fluorescent bulbs, it sent me to the hardware store faster than any public service announcement.
6. *Try the carrot and the stick.* The government uses the bottom line when it wants to influence behavior. During hurricane season, the state of Louisiana provides a “tax holiday” for residents to purchase emergency supplies. Virginia will hold its first such holiday May 25-31. This could be replicated nationwide. Every year, I have to sign a form certifying that I have guards on my apartment windows. Could there be a similar form for having a family emergency plan? There are laws and insurance benefits for installing burglar and fire alarms; we could expand that to preparedness.
7. *Bring in business to help make the sale.* Marketing isn’t the public sector’s forte, and preparedness needs to be marketed as a consumer brand. A number of major corporations distinguished themselves in response to Katrina. It’s time to engage the private sector in advancing civilian preparation.
8. *Use 21st-century technology to prepare for 21st-century emergencies.* The use of camera phones, [Twitter](#) and [Google](#) map mash-ups after the Chinese earthquake and during last year’s Southern California wildfires are just the most recent examples of personal technology’s growing role in public emergency preparation and response. We need to make Americans more aware of the capabilities of the technology at their fingertips and integrate it better into disaster planning. Social networking sites, for instance, could help in finding family members in an emergency, but only if everyone in the family is networked and knows how to use them. Though I’m a 40-something who didn’t know “BFF” from “LOL,” I’m beginning to learn (with the help of my 8-year-old). My wife and I now know how to send text messages, which can sometimes get through when voice calls can’t (e.g., after the 2005 London subway bombings).
9. *Everyone should learn the drill.* The CERT hurricane drill in which I played a victim helped me think about what I’d do in an emergency. Drilling would help all Americans focus on and work through the questions everyone should ask in advance. (How will you get information and communicate with your family? Do you know the emergency plan of your children’s school?)
10. *Create a National Preparedness Day.* September was made National Preparedness Month in 2004, but sometimes more can be accomplished in 24 focused hours than in 30 diffuse days. Let’s have a day when we focus on this need — briefing citizens, conducting drills, filling emergency kits. A helpful model is Japan’s Disaster Prevention Day, held on the anniversary of the catastrophic 1923 Tokyo earthquake. Sept. 11 could be the official U.S. Preparedness Day: It would honor the memories of those who died by making sure that the United States is never so unprepared again.

History has shown that individuals will rise to the occasion in an emergency. But offering them the information, training, technology, support and encouragement to prepare in advance means that they’ll be in the best position to help themselves, their families and their community if — but probably when — that emergency arrives.

John D. Solomon is writing a book about emergency preparedness.

Contact him at jsolomon@incaseofemergencyblog.com

Find his blog at www.incaseofemergencyblog.com