

Emergency Dispensing Sites

This week I will meet with a team of emergency responders at the Halifax Elementary School and we will take a walk through the all purpose room and hallways, cafeteria, some classrooms and the gymnasium. This group of emergency responders is not the usual one. There won't be any EMT's or any equipment. We aren't meeting in response to a problem. We are trying to make time to accomplish the unusual. We are trying to prepare for an emergency before it has happened.

The team will include Police Chiefs, Fire Chiefs, Council On Aging Directors, Highway Department Superintendents and Health Agents from Plympton and Halifax. A consultant funded by Massachusetts emergency preparedness grants will join us. We will have in our hands a color coded flow chart of the school being used as an emergency dispensing site. This is referred to as EDS in homeland security lingo.

My only experience with anything coming close to this is the flu clinic. A couple years ago the supply of flu vaccine was low and we had to have our flu clinic late and at a different location from the usual. We had to be very careful about checking ID's and the criteria of age and people with chronic disease as high priority. We soon realized that giving the shot was the easy part. In the large meeting space of Our Lady of The Lake Church, we could have used many more people to assist with paper work. As much as we tried to keep the process moving along and to keep people informed and comfortable, some became cranky and complained. With visions of canes waving in the air, we even hired one police officer in case anyone became unruly. Still, it was a simple situation compared to a true emergency.

An emergency dispensing site would be set up in response to an announcement of the presence of something such as smallpox. We might receive only a day or two of notice. There will be an entry area and an area for triaging, creating the possibility of the line splitting at that point into sick and non sick. There will be rooms set aside for mental health issues, for we can expect people to be more than cranky in this situation. Depending on the situation, there may be an area for education with perhaps an explanatory film. Finally, the people receive their shot and can leave. On the periphery of all this activity, there will be child care rooms and break areas for the staff. Police details will be needed indoors and out and the Highway Department will be needed to help with traffic flow and even to block roads.

We still have much to learn and to decide. For instance, how shall the Town be divided? Should we divide the Town into sections? People could ride together with neighbors. Or would that cause traffic congestion? Should we ease the traffic by having people from all over arrive by some other method such as alphabetically?

For now, we will become more familiar with the traffic flow in the school and the possible components of an emergency dispensing site. However, even with a great plan and lots of practice, I know we will need the help of many people to pull this off. Please consider joining your local CERT (Community Emergency Response Team) or MRC (Medical Reserve Corps) to receive training. If you feel that you don't have time for that kind of commitment now but would be willing to help in an emergency, please call or email your local Board of Health. Let us know your areas of interest and ability.

I know there are so many kind people out there who would do anything they could to help in an emergency. It would be very reassuring, though and more organized

if we could just gather those names, qualities and contact information in a data base. No promise or guarantee is needed. Being on such a list would not oblige you. If we call you, you help if you can.

Think about it. O.K.?

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