

April 4, 2008 *Mutual Aid in Reality*

For seven years now, emergency response preparedness has been popularized, cajoled, ordered, mandated, legislated, talked about and planned, planned, planned. Some of the mandates seem, in my opinion, out of touch with reality. They require, for instance, answers on paper for which there is no basis. How many trained volunteers do you have for an emergency dispensing site? How many trained volunteers do you have for relief of the first team? For relief of the second team? Who provides backup for medical response if the designated parties are unavailable? What is your backup for communication? What is your backup for computer availability? Who is available for information technology expertise? Where will you get food if all the stores are closed? (This line of thinking is called COOP, Continuity Of Operations Planning, in emergency preparedness lingo.)

It's not that I object to the questions being thought provoking; initiating the thinking process is a good thing. It is the demand of the answers, even when there are no answers that I find objectionable. I have come to the conclusion that many, many people are maintaining their job security and, whether they know it or not, are participants in political machinations aimed at looking good, at least on paper.

In the meantime and all the time, there are people training and preparing on a daily basis for likely or possible events. There are people who make arrangements for mutual aid because they trust each other and they need each other. Halifax and Plympton are fortunate to have Police, Fire and Medical response personnel who work with each other on practically a daily basis, whether or not they get credit or funding. They do this because it benefits everyone. Last weekend we benefited from their training, their practice and their spirit of cooperation.

On Saturday morning, March 29, 2008, a truck carrying propane fuel hit a telephone pole, spun out and flipped over, arriving upside down on route 106 in Plympton, fuel spilling out on the road. Even though the driver walked away from the accident, apparently unharmed and even though no one else was hurt at the time of the accident, it would be hours before anyone could say that disaster had been averted. Every responder there knew that an explosion or fire was possible and that immediate steps needed to be taken in hopes of preventing injury and/or death.

Homes in the vicinity were notified with a door-to-door approach and by receiving "reverse 911" calls to inform them of the imminent danger, ordering them to evacuate immediately. The leaking of propane had to be stopped. If and when the leaking was halted, the remaining fuel had to be transferred from the tipped over truck to another, receiving truck. Transformers were down and sources of electricity needed to be kept away from the fuel. Traffic had to be stopped and diverted. Since Plympton lacks fire hydrants, a source of water was needed in case of fire. A nearby brook served the purpose. A line of access from the highway to the accident scene had to be planned and assisted for the crane that would eventually lift the crashed truck.

While all of this was happening, the world turned and life went on as usual. "Usual" things still occurred. People fell down or choked, while others had domestic disputes. The town needed to be served and they were.

Off to the side, outside of the accident scene, there was another layer of people, myself among them, who wondered if they would be needed. They were ready, just in

case. Would CERT (Community Emergency Response Team) be needed? Would evacuated residents be able to return to their homes that evening? If not, would the shelter need to be opened?

In the end, there were no disasters. The first responders and their Fire and Police Chiefs are to be applauded and praised for their expertise, their training and their practice in assisting and trusting one another. No childish games of competition or King of the Hill interfered with this group's ability to respond to the needs of the community.

Their training, their equipment and their staffing are funded by money well spent. The needs are real. The implementation is in reality.

We say we were lucky last weekend. While there may be a certain degree of luck in any situation, we were fortunate to have dedicated and trained people cooperating with one another. I hope we continue to be so fortunate.

Federal and State funding sources; please pay attention: Funding for local every day needs and easily foreseen needs is money well spent. This funding that is necessary. That is the reality.

*Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for the town of Halifax. She welcomes your thoughts concerning this column. She looks forward to learning more about this incident. Was the truck up to date on inspections? What does the Department of Transportation (DOT) have to say? She is thankful for local input. There is no replacement for living encyclopedias such as Alan Vautrinot, who corrected WATD's Ed Perry. Thanks to Vautrinot, we learned it was not the Jones River but the Barrows Brook that was used by the Fire Department at the Harrob's Corner scene. Psst... I hear that the Barrow's Brook is stocked with trout.*

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