Opinion

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COVID-19 Highlights Best Emergency Preparedness Approach: Lead by Example

<https://doi.org/10.1515/jhsem-2020-0068>

Received October 19, 2020; accepted November 28, 2020

For nearly 20 years, I have given presentations on family emergency preparedness. I have spoken to reporters, written articles, even co-authored a book about it. I have developed online family preparedness guides. I have worked in emergency preparedness for the public sector, private sector, and for nonprofits. Yet when an unanticipated disaster arrived, I was unprepared.

Despite decades of lecturing on the subject, when COVID-19 struck earlier this year I had nothing prepared for my own family: no preparedness kit, no stock of water, no extra food. I had no plan. Like far too many Americans in the wake of disasters, I had always intended to build up a preparedness kit and emergency stock. But like the cobbler who was too busy to make shoes for his own children, I spent too much time telling others how to prepare for a disaster; not enough time preparing myself.

COVID-19 continues to teach all of us painful lessons about how unprepared we are for the unexpected and what we need to do to prepare for the future. For emergency preparedness specialists like me, the pandemic underscores how important it is that we lead by example. When we take the time to “prepare what we preach,” we see firsthand the challenges that all Americans face in doing so themselves and better understand how to address the challenges. We also highlight the role we play as preparedness messengers in our circle of family, friends, and neighbors.

My own exposure to family preparedness started when I was a child. I saw the preparedness efforts instilled upon my maternal grandmother who lived through the Great Depression. She was a young teen during the Depression and her pantry as an adult told a story of want. Like Scarlett O’Hara, she was determined to “never be hungry again.” In the face of pending hunger and poverty, she always stocked her pantry with hundreds of cans of Campbell’s Soup and bulk packages of spearmint

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Certs. Her linen closets were full of sheet sets still in the packaging and towels still bearing price tags. She was determined that regardless of life's cruel and brutal hits, she would never again be without the basics of life: towels, bedclothes, and food. Spearmint Certs was her small luxury. That determination was passed down through my mother who stocked about a year's worth of home-canned green beans, stewed tomatoes, and an assortment of jams, jellies, and preserves, including her incredibly delicious apple butter.

The preparedness efforts of my mother and grandmother may seem quaint by modern standards. Today's family plans include hazard assessments, evacuation plans, and important family information; "go kits" are meticulous lists of supplies. These items are far more likely to be at the core of the writing, presentations and volunteering I have done as an emergency preparedness specialist. But COVID has caused me to reconsider how we encourage people to prepare. It turns out that my grandmother and mother were on to something: preparedness must be practical in order to be widely practiced. When it is overly elaborate, confusing, or expensive, people simply won't do it. I turned out to be a living example of this.

Back in March, as news stories reported lockdowns in China, Spain, and Italy, I focused narrowly on purchasing several bottles of hand sanitizer. As I began to consider the possibility that lockdowns could become widespread in the U.S., I realized our home contained barely enough supplies to get us through several days, much less a long stretch of months. Similar rising concern among tens of millions of Americans meant that it would be practically impossible – and excessively expensive – to go stock up immediately. I was the example I had always warned others about. In the field of emergency preparedness and disaster management, I was not alone.

"Preparedness in America,"¹ a report issued by the Department of Homeland Security's Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), found that fewer than half (44%) of respondents surveyed who had experience as a preparedness/safety and disaster response professional kept disaster supplies at home. That means those, like me, who had the greatest exposure to the need for preparedness were more likely to be unprepared. This rendered our message to Americans merely theoretical.

Under the immediate threat of COVID, my thoughts coalesced around a simple question: what would I need in order to get me, my daughter, and my granddaughter through at least six months if we are unable to leave the house except for the most essential errands? While admittedly longer than the three days to a couple of weeks of supplies we normally recommend, the core question remained the same. With

¹ "Preparedness in America: Research Insights to Increase Individual, Organizational and Community Action;" Federal Emergency Management Agency, August 2014.

focus, the answers came quite easily: basic supplies of hygiene, cleaning supplies, medicines, and perishable and non-perishable food. This simple list was not too dissimilar from my grandmother's pantry.

Far too often, emergency preparedness professionals can overwhelm with information about what is needed to be prepared. In an Emergency Management article titled, "The Preparedness Message Isn't Reaching the Public,"² then-Director of Dallas Emergency Management, Kevin Oden, was quoted as saying, "it's better to ask people to prepare over time by bringing home extra water or nonperishable food when possible. And the best kits are not ones that were purchased whole but the ones built from supplies families use regularly and will use during a crisis." When the bar for preparedness is set too high – pre-stocked kits, massive and expensive lists of goods, people tune out and stockpile little or nothing. COVID underscored that fact for me. Basic supplies are what matters. I should have been focused on collecting them a little at a time well in advance.

My failure to expect the unexpected was a failure to act as a leader in my community. As an emergency preparedness expert, my own incremental approach to stockpiling basic supplies could have served as a model for my family, friends, and neighbors. By not practicing what I preached, I was unable to demonstrate how simple preparedness could be, and the importance of doing it prior to a disaster.

In that same story³ above, Ana-Marie Jones, Executive Director of the nonprofit organization Collaborating Agencies Responding to Disasters (CARD) said, "[p]eople need to hear the [preparedness] message from people they believe in." That should have been me, and the other 56% of preparedness/safety and disaster response volunteers who aren't keeping emergency supplies at home. Emergency preparedness professionals have an obligation to lead by example. COVID has served as a poignant reminder of that fact.

There is, however, a key element of my writing and presentations on emergency preparedness that I am proud to say I have modeled since the COVID outbreak began: that is, it's never too late to start. Late last year, my family and I moved into a new home. With that, I became the proud possessor of a pantry room. In March, I began to fill it one weekly grocery shopping trip at a time. It was much harder and more expensive than it would have been if I had started before the disaster. Surprisingly, items like toilet paper and flour were extremely limited or simply unavailable. My grandmother would have been proud as I began to stockpile simple but important supplies to maintain my family for an extended

2 "The Preparedness Message Isn't Reaching the Public;" Jim McKay; Emergency Management Magazine; November 12, 2012.

3 Ibid.

period – and she would have been disappointed that I was unable to find spearmint Certs.

As we settled into something of a routine, I manage to store enough to make me feel more prepared and continue to replace, refresh, and build out the scope of supplies. I also try to find items I can purchase and share with neighbors, friends, and family who are struggling to find items, including my son and his girlfriend and those battling illness.

I was lucky. Despite being an emergency management professional caught unprepared by a rapidly evolving disaster, I am weathering the crisis. COVID taught me an unforgettable lesson about practicing what I preach – a lesson all emergency preparedness professional should heed. We have a duty to ourselves and our community to demonstrate practical preparedness and encourage others to do the same. Preparedness is like being on an airplane when the oxygen masks drop. You put yours on first, then help your children or fellow passengers with theirs. If you put yourself last, you risk passing out and being unable to help anyone else.

I am now not only in a position to provide for my family in a long-term quarantine, but more available to help others. For me, that is the true meaning of preparedness.