

Emergency Planning
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The Safety Office led the revision of the emergency planning process at George Mason University. Previously a Crises Management Committee was charged with responding to incidents on campus. However, the process had not been updated to address the wider range of risks facing a modern university. In place of the Committee, the university established an Emergency Policy Group, an Emergency Operations Group, and a Business Continuity Group. In addition, an Emergency Plans Officer was hired, an Emergency Operations Center concept implemented and several important documents published to support a more consolidated and comprehensive emergency planning effort.

Introduction of the Organization

George Mason University is a distributed university with three campuses in Fairfax, Arlington, and Prince William counties, and two satellite sites in Herndon and Reston. At each campus, students and faculty have access to all the university's resources, while duplication of programs and support services is minimized through the use of technology. The university's more than 900 full-time instructional and research faculty members are experts in a broad range of fields, have published widely, contributed to major research findings, and consulted with government and business.

The majority of the university's 28,000 students are from Virginia, with all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and 130 countries and regions represented in the student body. While full-time undergraduates, 18 to 24 years in age, make up the largest student group, part-time graduate and undergraduate students account for nearly half of the student population.

George Mason University is accredited by the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools to award bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees.

Problem/Initiative

In the aftermath of such the tragic events of September 11, 2001, the anthrax scare, the “Beltway Sniper” and the imminent possibility of going to a “Code Red Alert” it was apparent that the system the university had in place to respond to emergencies, whether they were on campus, regional or national was insufficient. The existing crisis management system was designed to respond to student incidents, such as demonstrations and protests, and subsequently address the public relations aspects of such incidents. Because of the university’s proximity to Washington, D.C., on-going work in the biodefense field, and a large proportion of international students, the safety and security of our students and staff was of particular concern in light of on-going events.

Design

As early as 1999, when the Safety Office was created, a proposal was submitted to the University’s leadership to hire an Emergency Plans Officer. Due to budgetary constraints, that position was not filled until February 2003. In the interim however, the Safety Officer, under the guidance of the Vice President of Operations and the Chief of Staff began revising the system from the inside. One of the first undertakings was to change the membership and the focus of the Crises Management Committee. That effort began in the fall of 2000 with the addition of more members with an “operational” interest to the Committee and a reduction in the number of “student services” representatives. The group’s focus was further shifted by means of a table top exercise that served as a learning experience for the members and set the stage for future planning efforts.

Implementation

During 2001 and 2002, a series of documents was produced by the Safety Officer to further redefine the role of the Committee and to provide specific guidance on responding to a wide range of potential incidents. The publications included a Comprehensive Safety Plan, an Emergency Planning Guide, a Unit Emergency Plan Guide and several shorter documents dealing with classroom and office emergency procedures. Again because of the changed environment, the university community eagerly received the materials. All documents were placed on the Safety Office web site and comments from students, staff and faculty were encouraged. Additionally the members of the Safety Office met with various groups to discuss the university's policies and talked about what they could do to improve their own preparedness. These efforts continue across the entire range of Safety Office functions.

In early 2003, the Executive Council approved a proposal from the Safety Officer to establish three distinct groups to better address the emergency planning function. Those three groups were: (1) an Emergency Policy Group comprised of the most senior members of the university's leadership with the responsibility for providing overall guidance; (2) an Emergency Operations Group comprised of representatives from such "operations" offices such as Police, Physical Plant, Safety, Housing, and others who would plan for, and respond to, an actual emergency; and (3) a Business Continuity Group responsible for planning for recovery and continuing operations following an incident to be comprised of representatives from Fiscal Service, Human Resources, Student Activities, the Registrar and other similar organizations.

In February 2003, the position of Emergency Plans Officer was filled. That individual was immediately tasked with reviewing all existing documents, coordinating the university plans with external support agencies, and conducting training for both in house personnel and jointly with local emergency responders. Within the last three months, both a revised Emergency Response Plan and a revised Hazardous Materials Response Plan were published and a highly successful training exercise involving the Emergency Operations Group, local fire fighters and a representative from Virginia Department of Emergency Management was conducted. In addition, during the past few months the University Police Department received training in responding to hazardous material incidents, detailed plans pertaining to responding to incidents in our research laboratories were developed and the university continued to work closely with county and state officials to coordinate the use of university resources in the event of a regional emergency.

Benefits

One of the immediate benefits was the increased awareness among the university's various communities of the efforts to prepare for emergency situations. A second benefit was the implementation of more formalized and efficient procedures for identifying and responding to emergencies. A third benefit was increased coordination both among internal offices and with external support agencies. All three of these benefits were demonstrated in the university's response to the recent threat posed by Hurricane Isabel. The activation of the Emergency Operations Center (minus) and improved communication among all parties as a result of the planning process resulted in very professional and effective responses before, during and after the storm.

Retrospect

It would have benefited the university if the Emergency Plans Officer was hired earlier.

Having someone responsible for emergency planning on a full time basis is far superior to several people during so on a part-time basis.