

Pulling the Curtain Back

Emergency Management or Magic?

Liam A. Carroll

When disaster strikes, the response and recovery will seem like magic. The planning and preparation prove that it is not magic, just old-fashioned hard work done by people usual out of sight. This is not Oz, so let's pull the curtain back and look at the herculean effort required to make, and keep, the citizens of Monroe County safe in the event of a large scale disaster at the Fermi II Nuclear Power Plant.

From within the walls of a small, modest building mid-county, a handful of dedicated Emergency Management personnel work tirelessly to prepare for disaster, in any form. Emergency Management must have plans in place to effectively stop a disaster, mid-step. In a county like Monroe, disaster can come in many surprising forms. Plans are made for water supply interruption, large underground pipeline ruptures, tornadoes, chemical trucking mishaps, railroad-based events and the ever-ominous man-made disasters. Whether the threat comes by sea, air or land, the Monroe County Emergency Management has a plan, and is ready to work its magic.

Recently, the magic was evaluated by the highest authority on disaster in the country, FEMA. The Federal Emergency Management Agency is required to periodically assess the local system's ability to ensure safety and protection of the citizens in its charge.

According to the Monroe Evening News "...from a FEMA perspective, the emergency response was able to meet its needs." This may seem as though it was a minimal effort. To pull the curtain back and give the ordinary citizen a better understanding of the sheer effort to pass a FEMA evaluation, numbers may describe it best*.

In the small Emergency Operations Center (EOC) over 35 positions are filled with 1-3 persons each. Besides the Emergency Management (EM) group, there are representatives from Fermi, Lake Erie Transit, Agriculture, Health and Human Services, local government, Red Cross, EMS, Hospitals, Schools, Central Dispatch, Ham-style radio operators, Communications, Roads, State, County and local Police, multiple Fire Departments, Media and others. The State of Michigan's Emergency Management group is also critiquing the county drill. Soon all 55 seats are filled and many people work from their feet, because the Fermi mock-disaster keeps getting bigger. In fact, a true disaster at FERMI could reach the "worst" type of FEMA disaster, a Type-1. This is exactly why FEMA does this evaluation. A nuclear plant disaster could require mobilizing, managing, deploying and accounting for thousands of workers, not to mention the 10s of thousands of civilians to protect and serve.

So putting a hundred people from different disciplines in a room might seem easy. It kind of is the easy part. Activate the alert system and they will come. But the planning and logistics required to ensure the busses are summoned to the right school or senior hall, and directed around the surge of fleeing traffic, and not in harms way of the event itself, is just one of the many, many logistical maladies that Emergency Management has prepared for. To prepare for the disaster, in this case the drill, required that the Emergency Management Division, lead by Director Mark Hammond, began preparing over a year ago! Fortunately Mr. Hammond has a team; Assistant Director Ed Gillman, Emergency Management Specialist Susan Martinez and Emergency Planner John Conlin. That makes 4 people behind the curtain. How do they conjure up enough magic to make the disaster disappear? By beginning over a year in advance they work their 40 hour weeks with increasing time spent on the Fermi Drill preparation, within about 6 months of drill day they begin working 40-60 hours a week.

That's a lot to absorb, it must be hocus-pocus. Actually, when we pull the curtain back all the way we discover that it takes almost 10,000 man-hours by 4 Emergency Management people, to prepare 60 or so responders in 3 days to handle one bad day at a local power plant. To get a real appreciation of how hard the Emergency Management Division works, remember they have plans like this for all the other possible disasters. Truly magic! So when a short article has a short quote stating that the emergency response met the needs, I would remind you to peek behind the curtain, it is vastly more magical than that.

Be informed, be prepared, be safe.

Author's Bio:

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*data used in this article is approximate.