Meta-Leadership Lessons from the 2010 Massachusetts Water Emergency
An NPLI Case History

National Preparedness Leadership Initiative
A Joint Program of the Harvard School of Public Health and the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University
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Plans Come to Life
The pipe failure required that residents be immediately notified of the boil water order because the water that was flowing to their homes and businesses was being drawn from emergency reserves not subject to standard treatment processes. The event provided an opportunity for a “live test” of automated emergency notification systems that had been put in place including reverse 911 calls (more than 150,000 such calls were placed to households in greater Boston), e-mails, and text messages. Boyce noted that they were able to use the state’s Health and Homeland Alerting Network to pinpoint communications to identified emergency personnel in the regions where the affected communities were located. The Boston Globe reported that one Boston suburb, Swampscott, reached 5,000 of its 5,500 households and businesses within five minutes.

Other methods of notifying citizens included social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter – MEMA had gone “live” on those sites just months prior but had not

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Background
On May 1, 2010, the 10’ wide pipe that carried fresh water from reservoirs into Boston and the surrounding communities burst. While the flow to the tap was never interrupted, the break made it necessary for as many as 700,000 households, comprising two million people, to boil their water before drinking it. The break was called “catastrophic” and Governor Deval Patrick declared a state of emergency. At the time of the rupture, the projected time to repair the leak was indeterminate although expectations were set as days, not hours.

At the center of the response were two individuals from the NPLI: Don Boyce (Class Cohort IV), then Director of the Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency (MEMA) – Boyce was appointed Regional Administrator of FEMA Region 1 on May 19, 2010 – and Don McGough (Class Cohort VI), Director of the Mayor’s Office of Emergency Preparedness in Boston.
actively used them in the interim, traditional media alerts, and flashing highway signs. Some residents and businesses got the news the old fashioned way as police officers were dispatched to restaurants, elderly housing areas, and even simply roaming the streets with bullhorns. Also used were existing non-profits such as Meals on Wheels that regularly served at-risk populations.

Highway signs advised residents of the boil water order. (Credit: Craig Walker/Wicked Local)

“We were in immediate touch with the MWRA (Massachusetts Water Resources Authority) to clarify how MEMA could best support the efforts of the MWRA. MEMA took a large component of the coordinating role that left the MWRA with the opportunity to focus on the repair. MEMA, the MWRA, and other state, local, federal and proprietary organizations were represented at the MEMA bunker for the duration of the event. There was no “taking” of authority, the responsibilities for the response were on the Governor and all the state agencies involved collaborated to get the job done. After the initial press alert from the MWRA, all communication and coordination worked through MEMA,” Boyce said. He noted that this allowed the MWRA to focus on the engineering issues – that at which they are best – and MEMA to engage in the response activities for which it is most qualified. It facilitated “one coordinated voice leaving no room for confusion or misinterpretation,” Boyce added.

“This worked well now but was also a crucial test of the system we’d have to use in the event of a terrorist attack or other major event,” said McGough. He said that there were minor hiccups but that overall the system worked well. Spurred by the event, thousand of people signed up for Boston’s alert notification service which will enhance future response efforts. It is important to use “everyday disasters” to test the systems that are in place and enhance public understanding and participation.

Paul Biddinger, Associate Director of Harvard’s Center for Public Health Awareness, Director of Operations for Emergency Medicine and Medical Director for Emergency Preparedness at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston (and member of the NPLI’s National Advisory Board), said that recent efforts to improve emergency notification had shown dramatic results and that even just two years earlier the results would not have been as good.

Coordinating the Political Response

McGough told us that he was on the phone with Don Boyce, Director of the Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency (MEMA) as soon as he heard the news.
“Both Don (Boyce) and I knew that it would be important to have the Governor and Mayor on the same page,” he said. He said that this was both for consistent messaging to the public but also to help coordinate decision making. “In terms of meta-leadership, I knew that I needed to lead up and across simultaneously.” (For more on meta-leadership, see page 6).

Boyce was out-of-town for the weekend when he received word of the break. “I grabbed the first thing I could – a cardboard box – and wrote down who I needed to contact and what steps I needed to take before heading back. Don (McGough) was high on that list along with the MWRA, National Guard, key federal, state, and local agencies, the Red Cross, and other private concerns who might be called upon.”

Boyce was pleased to see that the Governor and Mayor came immediately to MEMA headquarters, also known as the “bunker” because it was built during the Cold War to withstand a nuclear attack. Getting politicians to the “bunker” allows them to be briefed by the relevant technical experts and ensures more consistent messaging to the public. His goal is that the process is the same no matter what the event, in this case the governor’s move to the bunker, because consistency diffuses chaos.

Once the decision was made to provide bottled water to the affected communities, “MEMA essentially became a warehousing and distribution operation,” Boyce said. Boyce pointed to a relationship with the Office of Procurement that had been further developed and enhanced under the Patrick administration, that allowed them to begin obtaining water right away. He also had representatives from some of the major private sector water suppliers come to the EOC.

One example of the coordination, and public-private partnership, was the decision to use an old supermarket distribution center identified by the mayor as the water distribution center for all of the affected cities and towns. “We were able to ramp up staffing quickly,” added McGough. He also noted, however, that in a future event he would better delineate the city portion of such a distribution center from the state portion in order to avoid confusion. Such arrangements must be predetermined.

McGough noted that the city decided against general water distribution to the public because boiling water was sufficient for most needs of most people. “What we had would have gone quickly – but not necessarily to those most in need. It took great political leadership from the Mayor to resist the pressure.”

**Understanding Who is Most in Need**

McGough said that with a limited supply of clean water to distribute, it was important to get it to the most vulnerable: the homebound, the elderly, the homeless, and similar populations. He said that he wished that he knew more about these populations in advance. “As more and more care facilities, such as assisted living communities, go private, public officials have less
visibility into exactly who is where and what their needs are,” he said. He also noted that some channels are “hidden” and they used police community service officers and personnel from the Elderly Affairs Commission to help find as many of those who might need bottled water as possible.

Special orders for 40 truckloads of bottled water – approximately 1.4 million bottles – were delivered to the area according to the International Bottled Water Association, an industry group. Boyce cautioned about having public entities purchase water to give to private enterprises. “If I heard that a hospital had a need, I would instruct the hospital’s water supplier, if present at the State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC), to divert water they might be providing for MEMA’s use to the hospital along with the appropriate bill for the water. We wanted to make sure that they got the water they needed, but not to appear to use public money to favor any one private entity over another.”

“In need” includes information as well as supplies. After the crisis passed, one advocacy group filed a civil rights complaint against the state because officials did not provide simultaneous translation of press conferences in American Sign Language. Responders in a crisis will be challenged to meet the expectations of varied populations, none of whom will want to feel that they were put at unnecessary risk.

McGough also said that the City also needed to have a better understanding of all of the resources available in advance, such as how many trucks would be available to deliver supplies and from where they would come. It was reported, for example, that the National Guard picked up 11 truckloads of bottled water directly from one company’s warehouse. Advance knowledge of all of the resources available to be deployed will speed a future response.

Some Panic May be Inevitable

New Englanders see their fair share of difficult circumstances. In the face of a blizzard, for example, there is almost a buoyancy in the air as people gird for the snowy onslaught. “We don’t see a lot of ‘no notice’ events,” according to McGough and there was ample evidence that many members of the public went to the “emotional basement” in the face of this threat. This trip to the “basement” is triggered when the hindbrain activates a basic survival instinct – the “fight, flight, or flee” response – the face of a threat. Strategic, reasoned thinking is not possible until this descent is overcome.

Even though ample water was available through the tap (simply in need of boiling), there were reports
that many local stores were sold out of bottled water and people waiting in lines for hours to receive bottled water were reported. Such actions are not rational given that there was a ready supply of water and an easy way for most people to render it safe to drink.

This reaction is an example of the concept of “emotional immunity”: enough people in the Boston area are resilient in the face of events frequently experienced, such as blizzards, yet that same immunity did not exist for the water main break even though it was a lesser threat for most people. Novel events are more likely to cause a descent into the “emotional basement” because there is a lack of emotional immunity.

However, McGough did report that “people took care of each other” and that this incident made the population more resilient in his opinion. He is planning to use this incident in future public awareness campaigns for preparedness to help build societal resilience.

Know Your Limits; Plan for Handoffs
MEMA and the Massachusetts National Guard (MNG) have worked closely since the ice storm of ’08 to coordinate and make best use of resources that both respective agencies bring. MEMA has the capability to rapidly activate, mobilize, and respond, while the MNG takes longer to engage, compile a "fighting force" in terms of numbers, it can then sustain for a protracted period of time. MEMA on the other hand, once running, has many options that can – and are – exercised to sustain the element of command and control at the SEOC. Through a pre-existing agreement, Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC), MEMA can request resources from the MNG, a regional (local) Incident management Assistance Team (IMAT), a Federal IMAT, or resources from other state emergency management agencies.

Communication, Communication, and More Communication
As noted above, Boyce and McGough coordinated immediately to ensure that their respective bosses, the governor and the mayor, were consistent in what they were telling and asking of the public.

McGough learned that the media doesn’t always follow and that in future responses they will approach work with the media “more as a partnership.”

Coordination was also needed with the emergency directors of each of the affected communities and all of
the primary agencies. Regular conference calls were held to disseminate information and answer questions.

Minor breakdowns in coordination of water deliveries between MEMA and the National Guard were reported as their logistics systems were not fully integrated. A truck that was expected at Point A at 2 pm by MEMA might actually have been directed to Point B by the National Guard because it was more efficient yet it left those expecting water at 2 waiting for several hours for another truck to arrive. Boyce reported that both organizations learned lessons that will be incorporated into future plans.

**Key Take-Aways**

- Never waste a crisis. Although the water main break was relatively benign in the end, it did provide an excellent chance to discover bugs and gaps in the system that could have far greater consequences in a future event. Look to non-emergency, major events – in Boston they are typically the Boston Marathon and the Fourth of July celebration on the Esplanade – that can serve as live tests.

- The emergency response and the political response will each take on lives of their own as an event unfolds. Collaborate early and often to keep key players aligned.

- Work ahead of time to understand the true needs of the population (some segments may not be easily visible) and the resources you’ll have on hand to serve them.
About the National Preparedness Leadership Initiative
The NPLI, a joint program of the Harvard School of Public Health and Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, was established in 2004 to help ensure that public officials are prepared to meet the challenge of mass casualty terrorist attacks through training and research. The initiative is supported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

About Meta-Leadership
The meta-leadership framework and practice method is part of the initiative’s curricula and was developed by Drs. Leonard Marcus and Barry Dorn, co-director and associate director of the NPLI, respectively; Colonel (Ret.) Isaac Ashkenazi, formerly Surgeon General of the Israel Defense Forces Home Front Command; and Joseph Henderson, formerly director of the CDC Office of Terrorism Preparedness and Emergency Response.

“Graduates of the NPLI executive education program report that this framework has made a significant difference when applied in their real world,” said Marcus. “For example, several related that what they learned through the NPLI had informed their response to Hurricane Gustav and preparations for the Obama inauguration. They reached out to each other and coordinated their actions more pro-actively than they otherwise would have. This sort of meta-leadership in a crisis or other major event has important public health impact insofar as agencies are better able to serve the population and reduce the loss of life.”

The Meta-leadership framework has five dimensions to teach leadership skills:

1) personal self-knowledge and awareness;
2) diagnosis of the situation;
3) leading one’s organizational base;
4) leading up, or understanding and delivering on the expectations of one’s superiors; and
5) leading connectivity among people and organizations over which the leader does not have direct control.

The meta-leadership framework and vocabulary have become common across a swath of the government preparedness and public health communities. Marcus and Dorn have led more than 400 training sessions including efforts with the leadership at the CDC, DHHS, and the National Security Council of the White House. A national series of seminars for business, non-profit, philanthropic, and public leaders — the Meta-Leadership Summits for Preparedness sponsored by the CDC Foundation and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation — is also under way.

This case history was written by:

Dr. Leonard J. Marcus
Founding Co-Director
National Preparedness Leadership Initiative
Harvard School of Public Health
8 Story Street
Cambridge, MA 02138

Eric J. McNulty
Senior Editorial Associate

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