



National Center for  
Disaster Preparedness

Mailman School of Public Health  
Columbia University

## Community Tabletop Exercises: A Feasibility Study Final Report, August 2012

### Introduction and Background

The National Center for Disaster Preparedness (NCDP) at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health was engaged by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to conduct a feasibility study of community preparedness that tested system coordination and integration among formal first response and emergency management organizations and a number of other formal and informal community institutions. The objective of this "Community Tabletop" was to evaluate the responsiveness of the system to evolving public concerns and actions during an emergency, and assess how well schools are integrated into emergency response systems.

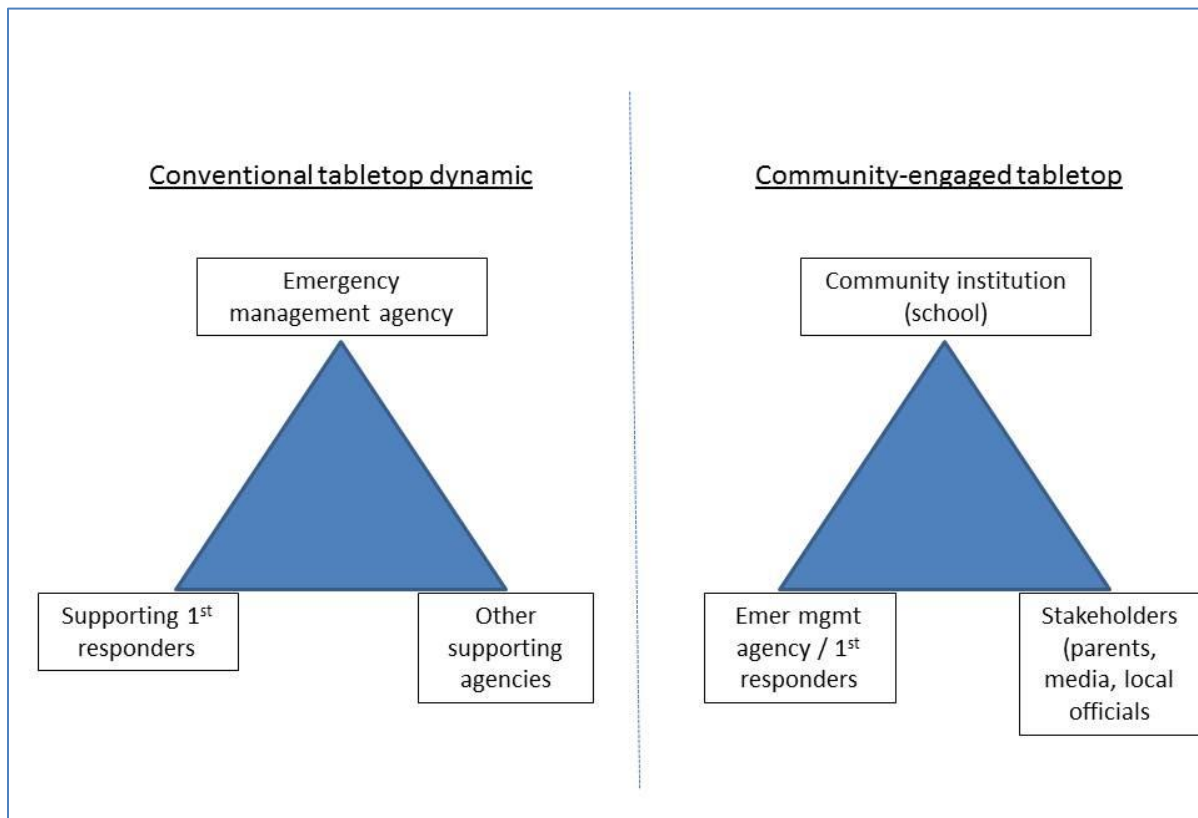
This pilot exercise was conducted to formalize the methodology of conducting an HSEEP-compliant, discussion-based exercise with non-traditional stakeholders, identifying areas of improvement with community preparedness and resilience following a community-wide disaster, and serve as a standard method of evaluating community preparedness which can be replicated with different types of community entities such as schools, child congregate facilities, hospitals, nursing facilities, elder care centers, or any other type of non-traditionally engaged community institution.

Conventional tabletop exercises are designed to test specific capabilities related to the knowledge of, adherence to, and effectiveness of emergency management protocols. As illustrated in the graphic below, the primary focus of such exercises are generally the central emergency management organizations and their supporting first response and public partners. *This **Community-Engaged Tabletop** adopted a different perspective, in which a central community institution was the focus of the exercise (in this case, a school), and that institution's "stakeholders" – for example, parents, media, and local officials – became key players in the tabletop exercise as well.*

As described in this report, the Community Tabletop identified local players within each of the three domains (community institution, emergency response, and community stakeholders) and guided them through the scenario in a combination of joint and independent discussion sessions. This "three-way" Community Tabletop thus allowed a test of: (1) the coordination of



the community institution's emergency response with EOC decision-making; (2) the capabilities of the school to manage information flow and coordinated activities with their potential stakeholders, principally parents and media; (3) the potential public response; and (4) the responsiveness of the formal and informal emergency response structure to public actions.



## **Methodology and Selection of Partners and Sites**

Following engagement of the FEMA Region II office and discussion of potential sites and locations, it was determined that a community in northern New York State would be selected for participation in this exercise. The County Department of Emergency Management was contacted and asked to select a school district and specific school to conduct this exercise with. After consultation with elected officials, and the Superintendent's Office, an elementary school was selected as the school site. The County Department of Emergency Management as well as the Elementary School were the principal planning partners for this exercise.

## **Exercise Planning and Design Process**

Consistent with US Department of Homeland Security Exercise and Evaluation Program (HSEEP) guidance, an exercise planning team was formed, convened and led by Dr. Michael



Reilly, Director of Planning and Response at the National Center for Disaster Preparedness along with the Administrator of the County Department of Emergency Management. The committee was comprised of NCDP staff, senior-level County Emergency Response coordinators, the County Sherriff's Office and the principal of the elementary school along with key members of the school's safety team.

### Exercise Purpose and Design

The purpose of this exercise was to engage three groups of related stakeholders (school officials, County emergency response agencies, and parents and community leaders) in the simulated response to a disaster. The exercise focused on the school district and County-level response to a potential disaster impacting the school. The interaction between the school district, emergency response agencies, and the community was evaluated.

### Scope

The exercise emphasized the actions of the school in response to a community-wide natural disaster with direct impact on the facility, and the interaction with emergency response officials, parents, community leaders and the media, during the response phase of the event.

### Exercise Objectives, Capabilities and Activities

The National Planning Scenarios and establishment of the National Preparedness Priorities have steered the focus of homeland security toward a capabilities-based planning approach. Capabilities-based planning focuses on planning under uncertainty because the next danger or disaster can never be forecast with complete accuracy. Therefore, capabilities-based planning takes an all-hazards approach to planning and preparation that builds capabilities that can be applied to a wide variety of incidents. States and urban areas use capabilities-based planning to identify a baseline assessment of their homeland security efforts by comparing their current capabilities against the Target Capabilities List (TCL) and the critical tasks of the Universal Task List (UTL). This approach identifies gaps in current capabilities and focuses efforts on identifying and developing priority capabilities and tasks for the jurisdiction.

The capabilities listed here were selected by the Exercise Planning Team based on the specific planning elements to be tested with this tabletop exercise (TTX). These capabilities provided the foundation for development of the exercise design objectives and scenario. The purpose of this exercise was to measure and validate performance of these capabilities and their associated critical tasks. The selected target capabilities are:

- [Citizen] Evacuation and Shelter-in-Place
- Emergency Public Information and Warning



Exercise design objectives focus on improving understanding of a response concept, identifying opportunities or problems, and achieving a change in attitude. This exercise focused on the following design objectives selected by the Exercise Planning Team:

1. **Ability to Shelter (Shelter-in-Place).** Determine strengths and weaknesses in the current plan to safely take protective actions, assemble and account for staff and students, and initiate procedures to secure the facility in the event of an impending external threat.
2. **Evacuation.** Determine ability to make the decision to adapt to an evolving emergent situation, assess situational awareness, and move staff and students from an unsafe area to an area of refuge when faced with complex incident challenges or dangerous conditions.
3. **External Communication.** Appreciate the importance of providing updates on the decisions made by school leadership to external agencies and stakeholders (including emergency response agencies, district officials, community leaders, and parents), and the consequences of the type and kind of communication provided to these groups on incident management.

### **Exercise Conduct and Evaluation**

This discussion-based exercise was a facilitated discussion. Players participated in three modules:

- Module 1: Alert and Key Decision Making
- Module 2: Situational Awareness and Protective Actions
- Module 3: Communication and Reunification

Each module began with a multimedia update that summarized key events that occurred within a specified time period. After updates, participants reviewed the situation and engaged in functional group discussions of appropriate response issues, moderated by subject matter experts.

For the purposes of this tabletop exercise (TTX), the players were organized into three groups:

- **School Group:** Elementary School and Junior High School Personnel
- **Emergency Response Group:** Local and County Emergency Management, Public Safety, Mental Hygiene, and Emergency Response Agencies
- **Community Group:** Parents, Community Leaders, School District Personnel and Media

After these moderated group discussions, participants engaged in a facilitated caucus discussion in which the spokesperson from each group presented a synopsis of the group's actions based on the scenario to the exercise lead facilitator.



## **After Action Reporting and Lessons Learned**

An After Action Report meeting was scheduled and held at the Elementary School with key members of the exercise planning team from the school district, County Department of Emergency Management, and Sheriff's Office. After finalization of the After Action Report, the County Department of Emergency Management agreed to provide technical assistance to the School District, and the Elementary School along with the School Resource Officers from the Sheriff's Office to ensure that emergency and safety plans are revised, personnel retrained and additional steps are taken to improve the school's overall readiness for a community-wide disaster.

The overall conclusion about the exercise was that it was successful in many areas. It brought together over 35 participants from 13 local, county and state agencies to participate in an exercise evaluating the interaction of the school with county agencies, parents and the media during a plausible weather emergency in the County.

The major strengths acknowledged by evaluators included the engagement of community stakeholders, the initiative on behalf of the Elementary School, and the County Sheriff's Office to undertake planning for a variety of disasters and other emergencies, and the involvement of the PTA with school administration.

Some considerations for the local agencies moving forward included the identification of which agency should be considered the key source of actionable information on austere weather or other community-based events directly impacting school safety. Developing activation triggers for initiating protective actions, and enhancing communication between school district offices, Jr. High School and area emergency services. A comprehensive assessment of the public information function should also be performed and policies developed to enhance the school's ability to externally disseminate information to parents and the media, before, during and following a major incident. Additional planning should be on-going and county governmental and non-governmental stakeholders continuously engaged in order to enhance the overall emergency preparedness of the Elementary School.

## **Key Outcomes and Strategies for Future Development**

1. Future community-engaged exercises should focus on testing the preparedness of a community institution (such as a school, community health center, hospital, or shopping mall), rather than simply testing the capabilities of the emergency response community (the more conventional tabletop exercise). By testing the community institution, emergency management and emergency response will similarly be exercised in the course of the exercise.



2. In addition, three “stakeholder” groups should be involved in any community-engaged exercise:
  - a. Public stakeholders of the community institution (such as parents, when schools are involved)
  - b. Media
  - c. Local elected officials
3. The exercise should purposefully promote interactions among the three stakeholders, the community institution, and the emergency management/first response agencies. These may be organized around the following themes –
  - a. Expectations: what the community stakeholders (including media and local officials) anticipate as the actions of the emergency response community, and a consideration of how realistic are such expectations
  - b. Community actions: a consideration of the actions and behaviors of the public stakeholders, media, and local officials in response to the particular event. These may serve as “injects” for the emergency management/first group and the targeted community institution, and also serve as items to consider for future planning
  - c. External Communications and Public Information: the targeted institution should be prepared to provide information to local media on the scene of the event, and public information officers for all involved agencies should be prepared to brief the media. The public stakeholders (such as parents) should be polled after the media briefing to evaluate the effectiveness of the message (comprehensive, clear, actionable, etc.).
4. Future/follow-on project: Develop template further (considering above points); test in multiple regions of the country; develop training, exercise, and evaluation manual; consider development of on-line resource to support.

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