

ARE YOU READY?

Are you ready? Preparedness should start at home

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While there are a multitude of lessons to be learned from the disasters of 2005, one thing is clear: Each and every household must take an increased level of responsibility to provide for itself.

In public safety, we are often caught up in the immediate preparation and implementation of our department's emergency plans and are sometimes guilty of forgetting those we leave at home. When we report for duty, we spend the first few hours checking our protective clothing, breathing apparatus, tools and equipment, and a bumper-to-bumper check of the vehicle. We realize the importance of making sure every aspect is in proper working order, and we can then declare ourselves "ready for duty." Recent experience has taught us that this preparedness exercise needs to start at home, as well.

In 2005, the United States faced an escalating number of disasters that are increasing in frequency and magnitude. During the year, there were 48 major disasters (not just Katrina and Rita), 68 emergency declarations, and 39 fire management assistance declarations. That adds up to one every 2.5 days somewhere in the country. While a majority of citizens

feel that their safety and security is a fundamental responsibility of their government, there have been, and continue to be, situations in which the ability of government at all levels to provide the basic needs will be delayed or nonexistent.

Already in 2006, there has been a major, prolonged drought affecting large portions of the southern and southwest United States. From January 1 until March 13, 2006, 13,000 wildland fires damaged more than 930,000 acres. The five-year average for the same period was 6,363 fires with 98,476 acres burned.

Tornado activity for 2006 is also noteworthy—in the two-week period from April 2 to April 16, 217 tornadoes were reported in Iowa, Illinois and the Tennessee Valley, resulting in 33 fatalities and millions of dollars worth of damage.

The National Weather Service has just released its 2006 Atlantic Hurricane Season Outlook. The 2006 prediction is an above-normal season with 13 to 16 storms. Eight to ten of these are predicted to become hurricanes, and four to six of those hurricanes could become major storms with Category 3 strengths or higher. The north Atlantic seaboard is a very likely target for landfall. View the entire report at www.nhc.noaa.gov.

A disaster can be initiated in a variety of means: severe weather, terrorism, a pandemic virus, or an earthquake, to name a few. In some cases, we can have days, hours, or minutes of advance notice. In other cases, we have no warning at all. But no matter the

cause, we all must take steps to better address our basic needs and be able to sustain them for several days. This message is not new. Both FEMA and the National Hurricane Center have been preaching this message for years.

A number of agencies have produced guidance documents on creating a plan for your family and what items need to be included in your disaster supply kit. A good example is from the State of Mississippi's Department of Health (www.msdh.state.ms.us) and from the National Hurricane Center listed in its Hurricane Preparedness Section (www.nhc.noaa.gov). See the sidebar accompanying this article, "How to prepare your family for a disaster."

Congratulations if you have already created a disaster kit. If you have not, we encourage you to get started and include your family and friends as well.

Sidebar: How to prepare your family for a disaster

Create a family plan:

- Identify the emergency types your family may face.
- Designate places your family can meet—at your residence, in your community and beyond.
- Designate a point of contact for family members to call if they become separated.
- Keep an updated list of all emergency contact numbers for your family and your municipality.
- Don't forget to include a plan for your pets, if you have any.
- Review your insurance coverage.
- Document your possessions; use pictures, video and lists—whatever works for you.
- Gather all important family documents and store them in a waterproof container.
- Every six months, replace the water, food and batteries in your emergency kit.
- ask your physician or pharmacist about the quantity and storage of prescription medications.

Prepare an emergency kit:

- Water: one gallon per person per day for five days.
- Nonperishable food, non-electric can opener, plastic utensils, paper plates.
- Blankets and pillows.
- Extra clothing and sturdy shoes.
- Personal hygiene items.
- First aid kit, nonprescription medications, whistle, utility knife, plastic sheathing.
- Tool kit with assorted screwdrivers, pliers, wrenches, hammer, etc.
- Flashlights, radio, extra batteries.
- Cash, travelers checks.
- Special items for infants and elderly.
- Liquid soap, bleach, disinfectant, plastic bucket with lid.
- Good supply of plastic bags in various sizes.
- Toys, books, games.
- Consider creating a smaller version of the emergency kit for your car.