

Planning against disaster

BY JACK J. GALLT

Floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, random shootings, acts of terrorism and, of course, the Y2K computer problem have made headlines with alarming frequency. Many are reassessing disaster preparedness as a result. Government is no exception. State and local agencies have enhanced their emergency management capabilities in the event of a wide range of natural and man-made disasters.

State governments play an essential role in preparing for, mitigating against, responding to and recovering from disasters. State spending on emergency management has increased steadily over the last decade and in fiscal 1997 amounted to \$2.77 billion, an average of \$61.56 million per state. Pre-disaster activities have witnessed the largest growth and account for nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of that spending. It is clear that states are focusing more of their efforts and resources on prevention, or at least on better preparedness.

The bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in April 1995 was a wake-up call for many in the public sector, particularly those responsible for designing, constructing, operating and maintaining government facilities. The vulnerability of state capitols, government offices and other public buildings is complicated by the fact that these facilities belong to the people. The concept of an open and accessible government remains an important principle, but must be balanced by the safety and security of personnel and facilities. In response, states have taken a variety of preventive measures such as constructing access barriers, implementing employee identification systems, and increasing employee training and awareness programs.

Reducing the risk of disaster is an important first step in developing an effective emergency management program. Yet no amount of prevention can eliminate the possibility of a disaster. States also must have comprehensive response and recovery plans that can be implemented during or immediately following an emergency situation.

The Washington State Department of General Administration recently has developed such a plan for the 33 buildings and 4.2 million square feet that comprise the state Capitol campus in Olympia and satellite campuses in Tumwater and Lacey. The plan covers all emergencies

and ensures no interruption of vital government services. The goal is to protect people and property and provide a framework for response and recovery efforts. An earthquake in the Puget Sound area in July 1999, just a few days before the plan's final draft was approved, was a gentle reminder of the need to be prepared.

A month later, Salt Lake City was the unlikely scene of a tornado that tore through the heart of downtown during the lunch hour. Trees and cars near the state Capitol suffered the heaviest damage. The Utah Division of Facilities and Construction Management responded quickly to aid people, clear damage and repair nearby buildings. Within an hour of the tornado, contractors with trucks and supplies such as plywood were on the scene. By 5 p.m., a preliminary assessment of damage and a status of repairs were delivered to the governor. Call it good fortune or good disaster preparedness, but the division had just conducted a disaster drill the week prior to the



States are stepping up their efforts to reduce the damages caused by disasters.

tornado.

Coordination of activities and developing partnerships to maximize limited resources is essential to any successful emergency response and recovery effort. State and local agencies must be able to work together and understand their respective roles and responsibilities. Many disasters, however, can severely strain existing state and local resources and require additional outside assistance.

Nowhere was this more evident than in North Carolina when Hurricane Floyd made landfall in September 1999 and left 48 people dead, affected thousands of people and caused an estimated \$5.5 billion in damage. Despite the heroic efforts of state, local and federal agencies, additional assistance was necessary to deal with the sheer magnitude of the storm and the 20 inches of rain it brought. The state turned to the Emergency Management Assistance Compact, a mutual aid agreement ratified by 27 states and one territory. Fourteen states from as far away as Montana provided assistance, including more than 300 disaster specialists, donation managers, helicopter rescue units, crisis counselors, veterinarians and public safety personnel.

Lessons learned from recent events have better prepared states. Investments made now to protect people and property will pay off the next time disaster strikes.

Jack J. Gallt is the director of the CSG Center for State Administration and Technology.