



MySafe:LA Podcast

Fire and Life Safety Education

Our mission: providing children, families, and seniors in Los Angeles with life-saving education, resources, and benefits.

Episode 6

Retired LAFD AC Frank W. Borden

Announcer: You're listening to a special edition of MySafe:LA's Fire & Life Safety Podcast, remembering the Northridge earthquake, 20 years later.

David: Hello everyone. This is David Barrett with MySafe:LA. This is another one of our Fire & Life Safety podcasts, our special edition on memories of the Northridge earthquake from 1994. Today, a very special treat, we have Frank Borden, retired Assistant Chief for the Los Angeles City Fire Department. In addition to having a storied career with LA city, Frank is essentially known as the father of community emergency response teams, or CERT. Frank, as it is the anniversary week of Northridge and CERT played such a role, as did you, you must have been 1 busy guy.

Frank: Yes, I was, and I appreciate the introduction, David. This has been quite a week. Of course, 20 years ago, it doesn't seem like that long to me, as quite a memory of all the things that happened that day. I know I was awakened at home with the shaking. I lived in South Bay area then and went immediately to work. I had several assignments on that day and for several days after that.

David: Tell me a little bit about the first couple of hours.

Frank: Yeah, the first couple of hours were pretty hectic. My first assignment was to go to our headquarters building in downtown LA and make sure our emergency operations center was being activated. It was being activated, just getting started. My next job was actually to be the plans chief for our department command. Department command oversees all the operations of the fire department and coordinates with the other city agencies.

That was a difficult assignment because, as you recall, all the power was out. That was the first time in the history of LA that we've lost all the power in the entire city. With that, it was very difficult to get good information on what was going on and to develop a response plan without information is very difficult. Fortunately, our fire companies were out, as per our plan, and surveying their districts, and communicating back to what they have seen.

We knew pretty early on that we had a pretty big problem, but it was mainly focused in the San Fernando Valley. That was very helpful for us to know, because we could bring our own resources from other parts of the city out to the Valley and also request mutual aid to assist us and focus our energies, if you will, in the Valley area. That was the first ... The first couple hours started there.

From there, I actually went out to the command post and fire station 88 in the San Fernando Valley, and coordinated and managed the [USAR 00:02:59] response by the mutual aid resources that were coming from, actually, all parts of the state, which was a very interesting job assignment for that day. Then I was able, later in the afternoon, to actually go out and survey some of the major sites that we had in rescue operations and other situations that I was able to observe.

It was a very interesting morning, afternoon, and even into the evening, where we had ... really had a lot of control of the emergency by evening time. It's hard to imagine that that was the case, but by evening time, we were pretty well off, if I might say that.

David: Tell me about the challenges of communications and how you overcame that.

Frank: There was a problem and that is a problem that occurs in many large scale disasters, as you know. Fortunately for us, we do have a earthquake response plan that was developed actually from lessons learned after the 1971 Sylmar earthquake. It calls for our companies to use their radio communications to report in and get assignments for response.

Beyond that, and before the earthquake in '94, we developed a emergency management plan for the city. You mentioned Division 1 was at Dodger Stadium. Each of the 3 divisions actually become their own, if you will, dispatch center and management center in case the operations control division, or dispatch section, is not operable. That system actually worked very well. It was very difficult to operate that way, but it actually worked very well.

Again, those come from lessons learned as time has gone on and we've experienced all these difficulties and we've found solutions to the difficulties. But the communication system was obviously critical to, not only the fire department, but all the city agencies. Unfortunately, we did have that early communication problem, but we did have a backup plan. It worked relatively well.

David: One of the important things about a big city is oftentimes people will assume that when something significant happens, everything will fall

apart, but not because of the event, because of poor planning. 1 thing that the Los Angeles Fire Department has been pretty good at has been planning and preparing for a worst case scenario. In an earthquake, people often think about the damage being just from the shaking, but in this case and in many other cases, following the earthquake, there was a substantial amount of fire. Tell me a little bit about the fire threat and mitigation.

Frank: That could have been, I'll put it that way, a really big problem for us. We did have approximately 8 large fires that we had to deal with. One of them was a fire out in the Valley, in a mobile home park. Several mobile home parks had fires and those were from leaks in the natural gas system in the mobile home parks. If you think about where the fire managers, if you will, had to deploy resources, certainly resources had to be sent to where these fires were occurring. That was one of the larger fires that we had.

We had an unusual fire at Cal State Northridge, what was in a laboratory, that had hazardous chemicals and biological hazards. That was a very difficult fire for our resources to handle because of that situation where entry was a problem for our firefighters' safety. We had a large commitment there.

If you think about what happened in past earthquakes, let's take for example 1906 in San Francisco. The major problem there was the fire that followed the earthquake. That's what destroyed most of the city, was the fire. Same thing with Kobe, Japan. They had many structural collapses, but in fact the fire destroyed large areas of the city. That was mainly because they had a lot ... Both cities had many wooden structures and ignition sources, and once that happens, [why 00:07:16] you have large scale conflagrations.

If you take a earthquake like we had in Northridge and you put it in a Santa Ana wind condition, the day that it happened, you can imagine the chaos and the amount of fire that would occur from that type of a situation. Fortunately, on Northridge earthquake day, on the 17th, that did not happen, but weather plays a very important factor and the types of structures that are built into the city. Those are a couple of major factors, and of course the ability of the fire department to respond to those kinds of incidents.

My point was, is if we're responding to extinguish these fires, then there's not a lot of resources to handle the other types of emergencies, like rescuing people from collapsed structures. It's a difficult decision to make for the fire commanders, the incident commanders, to take on the fire or rescue people in buildings. Fortunately we were able to do most

things simultaneously because we moved our resources into the right spots and called for mutual aid on an early time.

The other factor though I do want to mention was that our water system in the Valley was very much compromised. Many of the water mains were broken, so our fire companies had to use existing water supplies in the swimming pools, for instance, and we brought in water tenders, tanker trucks, to assist with the firefighting operations, because you're not going to extinguish a lot of fire without a good water supply. That was an important factor also.

David: To make all of this work, it's really important to understand how to delegate responsibility and for those you delegate to, to understand their jobs. That's where the incident command system, or ICS, comes into play. Los Angeles is really a leader in ICS. How well did it work on the 17th of January, 1994?

Frank: It worked very, very well. Again, if we go back a little ways in time, we started working on developing a system called the incident command system and multi-agency coordination system, back in 1971, that far back. Through time, it's evolved, and now of course, it's a national system.

We had implemented that system a long time before the Northridge earthquake, and as a matter of fact, we've used it for several incidents, large incidents, prior to that. The add-on to our system was that the multi-division management system, where we have the 3 divisions turn into their own command elements. The system worked well from the ground up, from the individual fire company to the larger area command and up to the division or area command concept. That's what we call it, the area command concept. It worked extremely well. Again, that's one of the factors that worked very well for us.

David: Another factor, and you mentioned it just a few moments ago, is the ability to respond when there are multiple simultaneous emergencies. Not only will you have resources to respond to those, but you'll have to then play the ouija board game of moving other resources to make sure that there's some level of coverage. At some point in time, when you've got 1 firefighter for every 4,000 residents, as Los Angeles does, you're going to run out of resources.

The community needs to become a part of the solution. The community emergency response teams, CERT, is something that you were really a guiding hand in developing, and in fact, developed it around an earthquake situation. Tell me a little bit about the creation of CERT.

Frank: You led right into that, because obviously the government response ... The government is there to serve and protect the public, but there's only so many government responders, if you will. Fire, police, paramedics, public works, and so on. For a scenario like an earthquake, cannot possibly respond to every incident, either simultaneously or even later in the incident.

I really had a great opportunity to, in 1985, to go to Japan with the city team and observe in Tokyo the earthquake preparedness events that took place there, and looked and saw the preparation that was being done with neighborhoods. Neighborhood teams were developed, like a medical team, and a fire extinguishing team. It was very impressive to see how they've organized neighborhoods to actually be responders.

The following month, this was September '85, the following month, October, I was able to go to Mexico City on behalf of the City of LA with a multi-department team, I actually led the team in Mexico City, to make observations on a large scale earthquake in a large city. Anything that would help us learn how to better respond or prepare for an earthquake in Los Angeles, that was our mission. There I found that people who maybe had no training, and matter of fact most of the people did not have training, became volunteer responders. They came in the hundreds to help those people in need.

That was very impressive, because the fire department there in reality was a very small fire department. Could not possibly handle all the emergencies that occurred that day. Here we had people from all walks of life, including construction people with equipment who volunteered themselves, and many were actually injured and killed in the aftershocks that occurred, but they were there, volunteering to help.

When I came back, I thought, "Wow. What an idea, to develop actually a program where we could train our citizens and business people to actually be responders, to assist the fire department, be an adjunct to the fire department and the other emergency services, and be actually the first responders, with some training." People want to volunteer. People can be trained to have skills. With that, you have a community response program.

I really enjoyed doing all this. Like I said, I had the opportunity to do it. I wrote this concept paper in 1985 after my observations. 1986, we formed it, we did the training, almost the same training as is being done today. We had a response team made of almost 30 people, and we went out to different areas and did exercises. We went to a couple of huge earthquake conferences and displayed the team. Everybody was very impressed. "Gee, this is a great idea." These were multi-function, citizen response teams.

Multi-function, I say that because they had all these different skills, to extinguish small fires and do emergency medical, including triage, which was a big thing at that time, search and rescue, and many other things, team management. When the '87 earth- ... Whittier earthquake hit in 1987, Councilman Bernson called Chief Manning and Mayor Bradley and said, "Let's put this program in effect."

This was the most amazing thing for me in city government for so long, that in 1 month, the city council and the mayor approved a budget and I was in a brand new assignment in 1 month to develop, implement, not only this program, but a disaster preparedness division. 32 people, half of which were involved in the CERT training program.

Of course, today, there are thousands of people trained in the city and in the Northridge earthquake, there were a couple of thousand CERT responders who did great work to save people's lives and mitigate injuries and property loss and so on. They did what they were trained to do and that was the real proof that this program was a viable program. Of course, now, it's an international program. It's grown from a concept all the way to a national and international program, and a very viable one, because certain people can do many things in assisting government.

David: Tell me a little bit about the CERT reaction and activities during the Northridge earthquake.

Frank: That was most interesting, for the earthquake occurred at 4:31 in the morning. Most people were home. These CERT volunteers actually worked mainly in their own neighborhoods, they didn't have to travel far, and mainly in the San Fernando Valley. That's where most of the damage was. They did neighborhood surveys. Where gas was leaking, they shut the gas off, which they were trained to do. They extinguished small fires. They took care of injuries. They did many, many things.

I think one of the most interesting things that we learned, that the CERT responders did, was they were able to take other volunteers who were not CERT-trained and form them into their own teams and work with the CERT-trained volunteers. The ratio, I believe, was 1 CERT volunteer to 10 other volunteers. In other words, they magnified what they could do by using these other people who volunteered to help. That was the most amazing thing.

When we teach these classes, we say, "If you have that vest and helmet on, you're basically in charge of your neighborhood. There's no fire, police, paramedics, nobody else around, you're it. When people see that, they'll come to you and say, 'Hey, I'd like to help.'" They do what we call on-the-job training. The CERT volunteers can train other people quickly to be able to do some lifting, carry patients to a safe location,

and do many things. That was, to me, one of the most interesting things that we learned from the CERT response.

David: The CERT response, of course, is the community helping itself, but there's also the concept of mutual aid. There is a California master mutual aid agreement and there are 6, I believe, aid regions in the state. LA County is region 1, I believe. Is that correct?

Frank: Yes, that is. Uh-huh (affirmative).

David: There are region 1 and then areas A through G. Area A is LA, Beverly Hills, Culver City, Santa Monica. All of these people designed to help each other but many of them affected by the earthquake itself. How did mutual aid work on the 17th of January?

Frank: Good question. Matter of fact we needed, as I had mentioned before, quite a bit of mutual aid to help us. First, we brought our own resources from the unimpacted areas of the city, down in the southern part of the city, and brought them out to the Valley. But of course, immediately we called for mutual aid resources, in fire engine resources, water tenders to help us with the water situation, and urban search and rescue resources, which were very much needed for finding and rescuing the trapped people.

We had a urban search and rescue task force and engines from different regions, from LA County Fire Department. We had a urban search and rescue from Orange County. They were not impacted by the earthquake. We had an urban search and rescue task force from Riverside. Again, you're looking, reaching out.

Now, when you do that though, of course, it's going to take time for these responders to arrive. Again, that can be a problem, especially in an earthquake that may someday hit Los Angeles that's bigger than the Northridge earthquake. Now we're talking about a regional disaster which goes far beyond the boundaries of the City of LA. Those resources may not be readily available. They will come. We have a great mutual aid system in California.

David: As we look forward, you mentioned fires following earthquake that consumed cities such as Kobe and San Francisco.

Frank: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

David: We still have probably 80% of the non-commercial buildings in Los Angeles city are still a wood frame construction. The fire department has a plan. The city itself needs a plan. Currently I think everyone agrees that the city is just not ready. We're not ready because

earthquakes, they just don't occur the way that an annual tornado season or rainy season does. We need to get ready.

The mayor, Garcetti, and Dr. Lucy Jones and others have committed towards helping to make Los Angeles ready, in terms of improving building quality and the structure and reinforcement. It's actually much simpler than that. It just starts with every person making a decision that they want to be ready. Or am I missing something?

Frank: That's very true. If you think about the ability of any city to respond to a major disaster, it would be very difficult for the fire department to respond to the number of fires that could occur. Most of the fires, I'll have to say, most of the fires start small and they grow big if they're not taken care of. Most people with some ability and some training and knowledge should be able to put, extinguish, a small fire around or in their home. That's an important factor.

Again, building codes are a very, very important factor, matter of fact. Those were again things that we've learned from the 1971 earthquake and even the '94 earthquake, is how important building codes are, not only from a collapse standpoint, but from a fire standpoint. Building separation, non-combustible roofs, the type of siding that's on the building. Of course, new building codes, it's much better. We've learned so much about how buildings react in these kinds of situations.

One of the things though, and I got to mention this, is that our fire department, because of city budget restrictions, was really cut back quite a bit here, not too long ago. I know Mayor Garcetti is very interested in bringing back our fire department to the status it was a year or so ago, because we lost 300 some firefighters and closed several fire companies.

This is the second largest city in the United States and we have one of the smallest per capita fire departments in the United States. We try to do the best we can, but we do actually need more firefighters to help in these kinds of situations. The day-to-day, but we have to also be ready for larger types of emergencies.

David: What would you tell people about getting ready?

Frank: You know what I think, David, is that people tend to ... I don't want to say forget, but tend to not make preparedness a high priority after the earthquake goes away. The earthquake was 20 years ago, and that's the last big one, of course, we had. There are smaller earthquakes that get people's attention, but people ought to think about, "Am I really ready for another big earthquake?" or "I'm new to the city. What do I need to

do?" I haven't lived here, I wasn't here 20 years ago, what do I need to do?

There's many resources available for people like the Red Cross, MySafe:LA, city fire departments, emergency management agencies, and so on, FEMA, to get information on being prepared. People tend to put that low on the priority as the disaster time goes by, but people have to continually be reminded that something like that or another type of disaster can happen at any time. Being self-prepared and prepared with your own family is actually very critical.

There's so many things to consider, not only your water and food supply, but a first aid kit, and your emergency go bag. What are you going to need if you're evacuated or removed from your home? What are you going to take with you? What if the power is out and the ATM machine doesn't work and you only have a dollar bill in your purse or your wallet? You have to think about all these things because when it does happen, that's too late if you haven't already prepared. It's way too late.

David: If you properly prepare and if you practice that preparation, then you're going to have less of a chance of panic, so part of the preparation is making sure that you and your family practice what you prepare for.

[Frank has 00:24:31] not only been a critical leader within the components of building community safety, but after his retirement, played a big role in the creation of the one of the most important historical collections in the United States related to the fire service. The Los Angeles Fire Department Historical Society is in Hollywood. You can visit them at the website that they have, www.lafdmuseum.org, and they're open every Saturday.

Chief Borden is often there, so you can hear his stories in person. Just be sure that you have a chair to sit in because he could tell you a lot. We're so glad that you were with us today, Frank.

Frank: Thank you so much, David.

David: Thank you very, very much.

Frank: You're doing a very ... a great public service, and I hope many people take advantage of the podcast because it's important. It's very important that people know what to do and how to prepare. I really appreciate it myself. Thank you very much.

Announcer: You've been listening to a MySafe:LA Fire & Life Safety Podcast. MySafe:LA is the public education partner of the Los Angeles Fire Department. Visit us at mysafela.org and lafd.org.