Is Your Port Prepared for Maritime Mass Rescue Operations?

Rick Janelle
17th Coast Guard District
Juneau, Alaska, USA
rick.n.janelle@uscg.mil
1-907-463-2808

Each maritime mass rescue operation (MRO) is fearfully unique, but also shares a commonality. Similar to a wild land fire, flood, earthquake, hurricane, tornado, or train derailment, each maritime MRO forces people to move from “danger zones” to temporary safe locations – often with little warning or time to prepare.

The safe locations become “rest stops” for the survivors until they can be returned home or relocated. This may be a matter of hours or days. During maritime disasters this rest stop is often the nearest port community. Similar to survivors of the emergency, these ports also have little warning, but must be prepared to act quickly to receive, treat, and support not only the survivors, but emergency responders as well. But how many port communities know what to expect during an MRO? How many are part of a comprehensive planning effort?

A mass rescue operation is civil search and rescue activity characterized by the need for immediate assistance to a large number of persons in distress, such that the capabilities normally available to search and rescue authorities are inadequate. MROs are infrequent events and developing a response foundation based upon on-the-job experience will not be possible. Pre-planned guidance, training, and exercising are required. Unfortunately, search and rescue authorities, the maritime industry and port communities have generally failed to properly plan, train and exercise the coordinated actions required for successful conclusion to a MRO disaster.

Is a port MRO plan needed? Some of the most complicated maritime MRO work starts after survivors are landed ashore. In fact, this portion of the response may last much longer than the on-scene rescue, but most MRO Plans adequately address only on water actions. So a port specific MRO Response Plan, along with a corresponding training and exercising program, is definitely required if port level responders AND their industry AND SAR agency partners cannot agree on responses to the five items listed below:

1. List all MRO functional actions required for successful conclusion of the response.
2. List all MRO response partners and contact information.
3. Detail how the local shore side response organization will be structured to “fit” into the larger response organization.
4. Identify the type and location of shore side MRO facilities and how they will be managed.
5. Describe the MRO accountability process.
A MRO response will not just be “bigger”, it will be different. Maritime MROs cross normal jurisdictional boundaries and trigger the mobilization of new partners (unfamiliar faces) with different means of doing business. Existing procedures, facilities, and response equipment may not be adequate to meet the demands of the response. As a consequence for the port, the normal procedures for emergency response will likely need to be amended to coordinate effectively with this new and larger organization.

**What to Expect.** Following is a short list of actions ports should be prepared to initiate during a MRO.

- Participate in the larger command and control organization. If using the incident command system (ICS), provide representative to the Unified Command.
- Provide an incident command post (ICP) location.
- Identify, establish and operate safe landing sites where evacuees are landed ashore.
- Provide shore side security and scene control.
- Provide emergency medical services (EMS) & coordinate long term medical care.
- Identify, establish and operate reception centers until centers can be fully staffed by volunteer, industry, or other personnel. Often reception centers are schools or other public building, especially in smaller ports.
- Manage evacuee transport from the landing sites to the reception center.
- Initiate shore side evacuee accountability.
- Provide critical information updates to unified response organization.
- Support marine fire-fighting (air, foam, water) as resources and training permit
- Participate in the Joint Information Center (JIC).

![Figure 1: MRO Functional Actions](image-url)
Coordination. No single company or agency has all the response assets required for mass rescue success. Coordination with multiple local, state, regional, or international response partners will be required, not only for the challenging on-water SAR operation, but also for security, pollution/salvage, investigative, medical, shore side shelter and support, transportation, and other functional actions that are simultaneously undertaken.

Response support and assistance will be dispatched, but may be slow in arriving due to location, weather, logistical limitations or demands elsewhere. Survivors of the incident may arrive at the dock before your help arrives in town. Local communities must be prepared to respond alone, at least initially.

Figure 2 illustrates how communities may organize under a Shore Side Support Branch that can easily connect local shore side actions into the larger unified response organization. The community determines which agency/organization is best positioned to fill each position. Existing local emergency response procedures and facilities will be used to manage each unit and address MRO specific demands.

Drawing the diagram is easy, making sure all participants understand the flow of the response takes planning, training, and exercising.

Figure 2: Sample Shore Side Support Branch Organization
Along with a MRO Plan, another tool to help with coordination is a simple joint quick start guide listing the response expectations and key actions of major response partners. The U.S. Coast Guard “Multi-Agency Quick Start Guide for Passenger Vessel Emergencies” is a good example and can be viewed on their Passenger Vessel Safety Homepage at http://www.uscg.mil/pvs/Handouts.asp.

What Now?  Hopefully, the main “take away” from this discussion is the need to focus energy and efforts to initiate or improve your port level mass rescue plans. Critically evaluate your situation. If MRO Plans exist – are they useful, do they include all your response partners, is a command organization identified, does everyone have clear expectations and directions, can you efficiently exchange information, do you have an accountability process? If starting a plan, make sure to engage your response partners. Do not plan in a vacuum. If you do, plan to be surprised.

Final Word.  On the day it happens in your town – your response organization will be judged by what they are at that moment. There will be no second chance. There is no guarantee of success for any MRO event. However, all emergency response professionals have an obligation to invest in “planning” for success.

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