

How Can Orange County Learn from the 2011 Japan Earthquake and Tsunami?

As County Health Officer, Dr. Eric Handler has unique responsibilities during any disaster that would impact Orange County. That's why he was invited to participate in a Federally sponsored trip to Japan to see first-hand the devastation caused by the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami.

Touring the areas heavily damaged by the earthquake and resulting tsunami and talking to emergency responders left Dr. Handler inspired by how the Japanese people pulled together to begin the recovery effort. "There was no looting. In fact, people were generous to a fault. They provided care and material resources to the tens of thousands of people left homeless who sought temporary shelter."

While visiting the Miyagi Prefecture (state), Dr. Handler spoke with a remarkable young woman, a mother of two small children, who waited in line for three hours to get food and milk for her children. When she got to the front of the line and received her supply, she gave the milk to an elderly couple who were also waiting because she felt they needed it more than her children. At one location, he walked through an area covered with debris, seeing children's toys, dishes and other possession representing normalcy that changed in an instant with this catastrophe.

The sights and stories led Dr. Handler to understand that we can all learn from the resiliency demonstrated by the Japanese people. He attributes much of their response to a common philosophy of "Now – Here – Self." Simply put, "This is the way things are now, this is where you are and you have to deal with it yourself." By focusing on what each individual can do about the situation, they are able to minimize feelings of helplessness and start the recovery process.

In more concrete terms, Dr. Handler says his experience has reinforced his belief that everyone who lives in Southern California should be prepared to take care of their own needs for a seven day period in the event of an earthquake or other major disaster. He also learned the critical importance of communications in the coordination of resources. Finally, he saw that you can't do it alone and must rely on partners for support and help in the days following a disaster. In Japan, support from around the world in the form of search and rescue teams, food and water, and technical assistance played an important role in the immediate response to the disaster. Among the first to help were sailors based on U.S. Navy ships in and around Japan.

The sacrifice of first responders was also evident during his tour. Dr. Handler related the story of a young woman who was broadcasting the tsunami warning from her area's Emergency Operations Center (EOC). While all of the other emergency workers evacuated to the roof of the EOC and survived, this lone emergency worker remained at her post until the very end and died while trying to save others. He also met several firefighters from Tokyo who were deployed to the Fukushima nuclear power plant to pump cooling water to the damaged reactors and heard stories of their willingness to perform this dangerous duty.

The Information, Collection, Analysis and Dissemination Team on which Dr. Handler served will be producing a "lessons learned" report that will help local emergency managers improve their preparedness in critical areas like evacuation, mass population care and shelter, and disaster recovery.