Information Sharing Among Public Safety Agencies

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Abstract

During the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and the 2005 Hurricane Katrina disaster failures in communications and information sharing occurred among public safety agencies. These communication problems led to the loss of lives, the destruction of property, and the delay of timely medical assistance.

Results indicated that while standard operating procedures have changed since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and the 2005 Hurricane Katrina disaster, there is still a need for greater emphasis in regards to training, interoperability, and shared resources among public safety agencies.

Problem

A decade after September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks the public is still at risk because several public safety agencies are experiencing factors that block communications and information sharing across jurisdictional lines (Krauss, 2007; Relyea, 2004). Public safety agencies experience problems in disseminating and communicating critical information, and this problem currently results in the needless loss of lives and destruction of property associated with tornados, floods, and fires.

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to investigate information sharing barriers among public safety personnel assigned to Georgia Region Seven Emergency Management Agency of Homeland Security during the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack and the 2005 Hurricane Katrina disaster. Emphasis on information sharing highlights the deficiency of interoperability among first responders. If law enforcement agencies cannot communicate and share information with emergency management personnel before or on the scene, it can result in a loss of lives and destruction of property. Other challenges to inoperability are poor coordination and difficult partnerships. These partnership problems include territorial issues associated with management and control of radio systems.

Relevant Literature

The conceptual framework foundation of the study was based upon the general system theory (Von Bertalaffty 1968, p. 11).The basic premise of the systems theory is that a change that occurs in one area of the system will cause a reactionary change elsewhere within the system (Denhardt, Denhardt, & Aristigueta, 2009). Literature points out how all systems are comprised of input and output (Denhardt et al., 2009).
➢Researchers (Alavosius et al., 2005; Krauss, 2007; Relyea, 2004) have determined that information sharing among public safety agencies poses unique challenges. None of the cited researchers, however, focused on the federal, state, or local first responders in the state of Georgia. Significant weaknesses in the public safety agency environment have resulted from the lack of interoperability and the unwillingness of public safety agencies to share information and communicate across jurisdictional lines (Relyea, 2004).

Research Questions

RQ 1. What did Georgia Regional Seven Management Agency Homeland Security view as communications and information sharing gaps that impeded information sharing among public safety agencies during the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack and the 2005 Hurricane Katrina disaster?

RQ 2. What are the benefits of information sharing among government agencies, private sectors, citizens, federal, state, and local public safety agencies during a disaster ?

RQ 3. How can government-wide policies and procedures improve the exchange of information in Georgia Regional Seven Emergency Management Agency Homeland Security and reduce distrust that appears to be inherent in the relationships among first responders?

Procedures

➢Qualitative data was collected through 12 participants who were solicited through the auspices of the Georgia Region Seven Emergency Management Agency of Homeland Security. The list included first responders who met two basic criteria for inclusion.
➢First, they must have been first responders during both the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and Hurricane Katrina in 2005.
➢Second, at the time of the study they must have been employed in federal, state, or local agencies identified as first responding agencies.
➢ Data were collected through a semi-structured interview protocol with open-ended questions. The interviews were conducted in a public library conference room. This setting was not near the participant's job location. A time was set to meet with each participant that was mutually convenient. Each participant was warned about the time commitment.

Data Analysis

➢ Data were transcribe electronically into NVivo 10 software to identify word phrases, sentences, and paragraphs of information that was uttered by the participants during the interview and to looked for overlap, patterns, and redundancy.
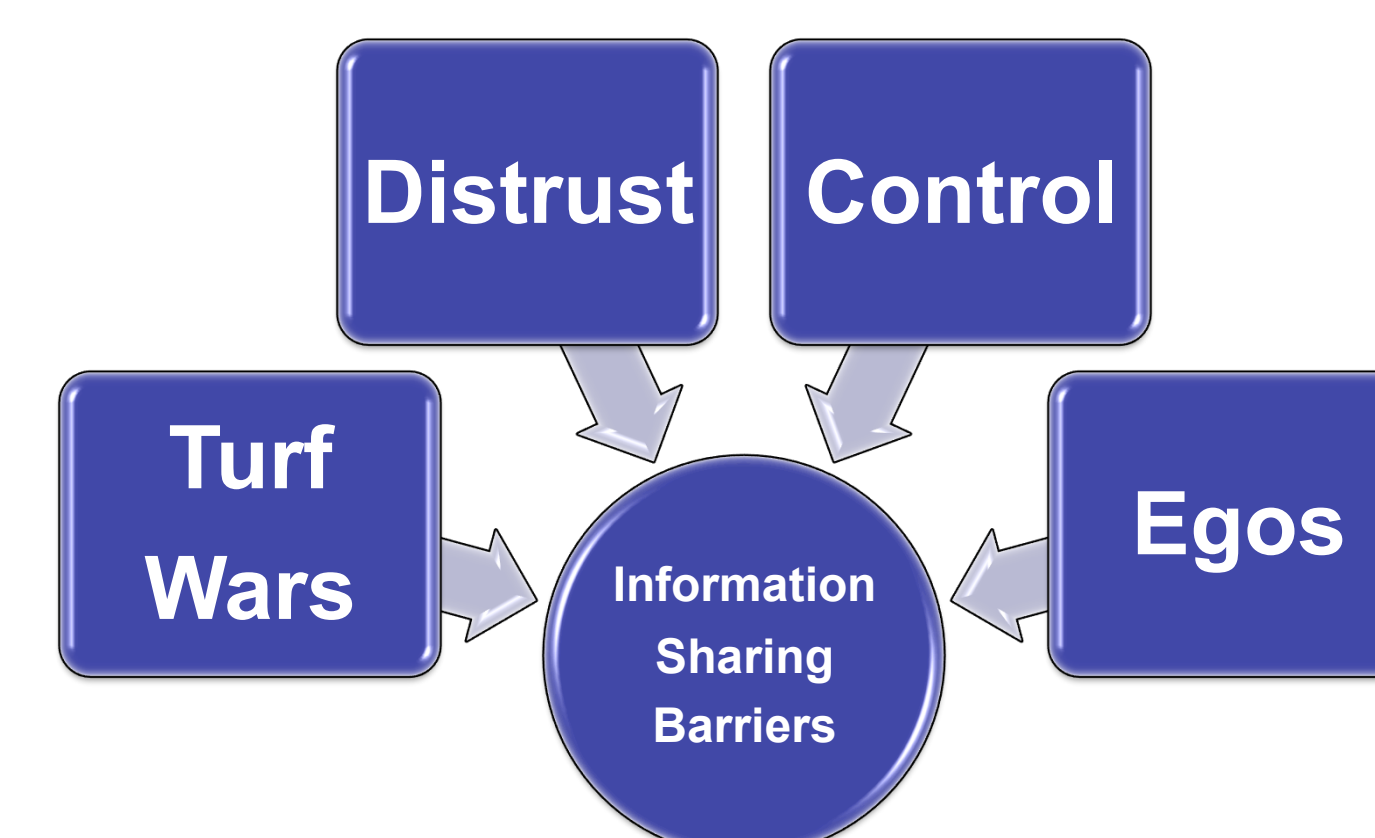
Findings

This study revealed the following findings:
➢ First, public safety agencies and policymakers should look to private market solutions to help fill the interoperability gap that exist in the public safety communications infrastructure.
➢ Second, public safety agencies should promote a cultural of information sharing among their counterparts through training. Training provides awareness,
➢ Third, strong governance must be developed and maintain. In other words, government should seek more partnerships with private stakeholders,

Limitations

➢ This study was limited to first responders who were working in Georgia Regional Seven Homeland Security at the time of this study.
➢ The opinions from this study were obtained solely from the viewpoint of first responders in Georgia Regional Seven Homeland Security.
➢ The participants were asked to recall past events. The memories of what happened during the two events and how it impacted Georgia Regional Seven Homeland Security may have diminished.
➢ This study used a small sample size.
➢ The study did exclude international information sharing among public safety agencies because the focus of the study was not on communication and information sharing from a global perspective

Conclusions

This study focused on first responders in Georgia Region Seven Emergency Management Agency of Homeland Security. This study used a small sample size. The results of this study can provide valuable information sharing techniques to improve interagency Communication among public safety agencies.
It is recommended that future research studies on public safety agencies involved more public safety agencies in different states over a longer time frame be used to develop a deeper understanding of information sharing among public safety agencies.

Social Change Implications

The results of this study highlighted how creating an information sharing environment among public safety agencies in Georgia could cultivate positive social change and affect the spectrum of communication and information sharing in the public interest. Improving interoperability and information sharing can save lives, increase funding, and cultivate the safety of first responders and citizens. This study demonstrated how information cannot remain isolated from individuals who need it. Public safety agencies need to shift the mindset to a sharing environment among all agencies.