

June 2, 2006**THE CITY**

Preparing for an Emergency

Emergency response planners in New York City — or anywhere, for that matter — face the difficult challenge of persuading people to prepare now for a disaster that may not happen soon, or even at all. But the need for readiness is clear. Beyond the possibility of terrorist attacks, there are other risks — contagious diseases, chemical accidents or severe hurricanes — that could endanger or severely disrupt daily life.

The state of preparedness among the city's emergency responders has never been better. But the same cannot be said about New Yorkers at large, many of whom could be caught off guard.

A study last month by the Center for Catastrophe Preparedness and Response at New York University and the American Red Cross in Greater New York showed that most New Yorkers would not have enough food or water in their homes to last three days. Even more astonishing, 53 percent said they would rely on cars or taxis to evacuate. This is an absurd idea, and could cause its own disaster, as we saw when gridlock plagued the Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina.

The NYU-Red Cross survey, based on phone interviews with 1,000 New Yorkers, did show that more households are better prepared than they were a year ago. But more needs to be done. It isn't that the city hasn't tried; the Office Emergency Management has devised a campaign called Ready New York, which anticipates an impressive list of potential emergencies, with clear, helpful, multilingual directions on how to prepare and respond. It can be found online at www.nyc.gov/html/oem/html/readynewyork/home.html. The office has also hired an ad agency to get out the word, which is good, because otherwise it could require an actual emergency to get busy New Yorkers to focus.

This being hurricane season, the possibility of a strong storm hitting the area — the first one in two decades — should prompt some general alertness. The Ready New York plan calls for a limited evacuation, prudently designating low-lying areas of the five boroughs. About 2.5 million people could be told to seek shelter on higher ground with friends or relatives, and as a last resort, go to designated shelters.

Hurricanes, charted in ever-more sophisticated ways, usually allow the luxury of hours, if not days, to move people out of harm's way. The city would have that time to use broadcasts and other means to inform the public.

Other emergency situations will require that people know what to do ahead of time. The attack on the World Trade Center and the blackout of August 2003 demonstrated how resilient, resourceful and generously helpful city residents can be. Still, the potential for a sustained event — a hurricane,

a contagion or worse — could pose new tests, and that is when New Yorkers' comfort, safety and perhaps even survival will depend on knowing what to do. It's up to everyone to pay attention and prepare.

[Copyright 2006 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [XML](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)
