



Role of the Ombudsman in a Crisis or Disaster

Disaster Preparedness

Disasters can strike quickly and without warning. They can force families to evacuate from their neighborhoods or be confined to their homes. Local officials and relief workers will be on the scene after a disaster, but they cannot reach everyone right away. Ombudsmen can help command families prepare for a disaster by:

- Publishing short articles about the need for disaster preparation or providing tips on disaster preparedness (e.g., making a plan, building a disaster supply kit) in the ombudsman newsletter and periodically listing web sites which provide links to many readiness resources like the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) sponsored disaster preparedness page (www.ready.gov) or the American Red Cross (www.redcross.org) that provide guidance for family disaster readiness.
- Using email or the phone tree to provide notice of impending crises and command or installation guidance. Include command instructions/reporting phone number if evacuation is advised. Provide out of state or cell phone number for ombudsmen.
- Distributing print materials (e.g., Emergency Supply List, Family Emergency Plan, and Child Emergency Contacts Card) about disaster preparedness at spouses' club meetings and at the command.
- Providing notices to remind CG members to prepare their homes and families for disaster, and asking the XO to include the notices in the Plan of the Week or address at All Hands.

Additional ombudsman efforts to prepare families for potential disasters may include:

- Helping families who are new to the area become familiar with the types of disasters most likely to occur in their locale and how to best prepare for them.
- Suggesting families develop an emergency communication plan.
- Providing lists of items to include in a disaster supply kit.
- Publicizing evacuation routes, emergency public shelters, caring for animals, and information specific to people with disabilities before disasters occur and when a disaster is imminent.

Ombudsman's Role in Disaster Response

Ombudsmen are often called upon to provide information to command families during a command crisis. Ombudsmen may also have specific roles in command disaster preparedness drills. They should check with their POC to discuss their role during a command crisis.

Ombudsman's Role in Disaster Response (Cont'd)

Regardless of the kind and extent of the command emergency, the ombudsman is never to act independently or without explicit guidance from the command. The ombudsman should be thoroughly aware of the commanding officer's policies and expectations in the event of a crisis or natural disaster occurring where the command families live.

Roles ombudsmen have taken on during a command crisis include:

- Initiating the phone tree to inform family members of an incident.
- Coordinating meal delivery for a grieving family.
- Representing command families with local and national media.
- Arranging a group meeting of family members to provide information and support.
- Arranging transportation and accommodations for out-of-town guests.
- Sending flowers to a funeral on behalf of the command.
- Arranging emergency childcare.
- Keeping families abreast and providing updates on the situation as much as reasonably possible.

During a major crisis such as a hurricane or terrorist attack, ombudsmen may be asked to:

- Serve as the POC for evacuated families to get information about the crisis, and for CG members to get information about the status of their families.
- Staff family assistance or community support centers, facilities set up by the command to provide information and support services (e.g., food, clothing, and child care) to those impacted by a major crisis.
- Coordinate food and clothing drives.
- Answer 1-800 lines established by the CG for families from out of the area to get information.
- Take telephone calls from family members.

Ombudsmen are not immune to crisis. They cannot provide comfort to others when they are in need themselves. It is not reasonable for them, to try to be a helper when they are a victim. In situations such as these ombudsmen from other commands or W-L staff can:

- Respond to calls and emails from command family members.
- Update families on the situation via the phone tree or email.
- Respond to requests for interviews by media.
- Help the command ombudsman coordinate their own personal needs such as childcare and work requirements.
- Work with CG and community resources to ensure the ombudsman and command families receive needed support.