

Response from Eva Cohen

Elliot Lake Roundtable 1:

Issues relating to the conduct and management of an emergency response:

I would like to answer the questions posed in a more general way. These questions assume the current approach which I would like to see changed. I believe that the new concept would in itself provide the answers to many of these questions.

I believe a fresh approach to emergency management and response in Canada is needed; this approach is based on a concept which has worked extremely well for more than 60 years in Germany, a federation, like Canada's.

The German Federal Agency for Technical Relief (THW) is based on 99% volunteer members drawn from communities across the country. It has proven to be a very effective instrument at all three levels of jurisdiction. It is a federal agency, yet within Germany, its response is local and units can only be deployed at the request of the local authorities. As well, the THW is Germany's first response organisation for international disasters, with experience of over 2000 missions in more than 130 countries.

The federal government's role is fund, equip and maintain a unified country-wide structure that guarantees uniform professional standards at a national level. This system enables states (provinces) and municipalities to provide their own help instantly and without bureaucratic obstacles in an emergency. It makes a fast and efficient local response possible. It shows leadership by providing true community resilience, and it provides an on-the-spot vehicle for quick recovery, something which does not exist in Canada at the moment.

As equipment and training is centralised and standardised at the national level, local detachments across the country can work seamlessly together in case of a large scale disaster, and units and resources can easily be moved to wherever they are needed.

In case of the Elliot Lake Mall collapse, local first responders would have requested support from the local volunteer unit. Members of this unit, made up of friends and neighbours, would have responded quickly and effectively to this local tragedy. A member of the unit, trained in media relations, would have been able to communicate the ongoing rescue efforts to a concerned community. As the community would be helping itself, there would be far less criticism and hostility because people would personally know and trust unit members who in turn would be aware of community sensitivities, resources and useful capabilities.

If there was not already a structural engineer in the local team, one could be immediately identified by using a national directory and the closest individual could be quickly deployed and ready to work as a member of the team - already fully familiar with its structure and its capabilities.

Although the THW is a Federal Agency, the concept is grounded on "bottom-up response" in order to achieve the quickest, most efficient and cost effective results. It brings together in one organisation, all

the components of Emergency Management, from prevention, mitigation, preparedness and response and recovery.

In my view, such an organisation in Canada could be an umbrella for SAR and H/USAR units which should be an integral part of a bigger entity rather than operating as single individual assets.

In the THW there is one HUSAR team which is mostly used for international missions, but all 700 local stations have USAR capabilities amongst their many other tasks. Their capability is comparable to medium USAR teams in Canada. The 16 German states are formed into 8 regional associations which can support the local stations with more specialized equipment if needed.

Our federal government of Canada has shown considerable interest in the THW concept. I am confident that once provinces and municipalities in Canada become aware of the benefits of this approach, many of the current difficulties and shortfalls in our current system of emergency management and disaster response could be overcome in order to meet the challenge of increasing natural and man-made disasters.