Super Bowl Risk Management Is Not Limited to the Field

By Howard Apsan, Ph.D., University Director of Environmental Health and Safety and Risk Management (EHSRM) for the City University of New York

Introduction
A mega-event like the Super Bowl is filled with enough risk to cause a spike in antacid industry stock prices. Most of the risks, though, focus on the game itself: will the game be exciting and injury free; will the stadium be able to handle the incredible infrastructure demands; will the fans get in and out safely; will the half-time show be incident free; and, in the case of this year’s Super Bowl at Met Life Stadium in the New Jersey Meadowlands, will the weather hold?

In previous Super Bowls, which I watched on TV along with 100 million other football fans, I focused on the game and the commercials like everyone else. This year, as the risk manager of The City University of New York (CUNY), headquartered a few short blocks from the center of Super Bowl Boulevard (a.k.a., Broadway at Times Square), I had a crash course in the unseen risks of the broader Super Bowl celebration.

CUNY is the largest urban university system and the third largest university system in the United States, with 24 colleges, graduate schools, and professional schools and approximately 540,000 matriculated and non-matriculated students. It also has 35,000 faculty members and other employees and more than 23 million square feet of space in almost 300 buildings located throughout New York City’s five boroughs.

Keeping a population of around 600,000 (including visitors, passersby, and the occasional trespasser) safe under normal circumstances is no small feat, but of course the Super Bowl is no normal circumstance. And with three CUNY campuses and one major administrative building within two blocks of Super Bowl Boulevard, the security checkpoints, road closures, and increased vehicular and pedestrian traffic presented unique continuity of operations challenges. While Mother Nature treated the players and fans to dry, above-freezing weather at game time, she was less gracious to New Yorkers in the preceding two weeks, clogging the already packed city with snow storms and "polar vortex" temperatures. Between the festivities, the security, the weather, and the traffic impeding the necessities of New York City life - transportation, deliveries, and sanitation, to name a few - simply getting to CUNY's midtown buildings presented a challenge.

Managing Risk Management at CUNY
At CUNY, as at other universities, risk management and business continuity are widely shared responsibilities. As was noted in a 2008 URMIJ article, the integrated structure of the university fosters reliance on local campus leadership. That said, the day-to-day responsibility of coordinating the university’s risk management and business continuity efforts falls to CUNY’s Office of Environmental, Health, Safety and Risk Management (EHSRM), established in 2006, shortly after the horrific active-shooter incident at Virginia Tech, by adding the risk management function to the existing CUNY Office of Environmental, Health and Safety (EHS). Just as EHS worked to integrate environmental, health, and safety through standard setting, auditing, training, and communication - and using technology as well as monthly meetings of the Environmental, Health and Safety Council to reinforce the message - EHSRM tried to replicate previous successes by developing equivalent risk management tools. These included a CUNY Risk Management website, campus risk assessment plans and templates, and monthly Risk Management Council meetings that include designees from each campus and representatives of each of the University's functional divisions.

Today, EHSRM plays a key role in the university’s continuity of operations and Emergency Preparedness Task Force. Continuity of operations plans and templates have been developed, and monthly meetings of a dedicated Emergency Preparedness Task Force, whose members are predominantly senior CUNY executives, are held to address significant incidents that occurred and prepare for anticipated future events. EHSRM is also tasked with
developing crisis-specific plans. These have included routine threats, such as snow storms, power outages, and transit disruptions, as well as extraordinary threats, such as pandemic flu, student unrest, coastal storms, and now Super Bowl festivities.

A New York City Partnership in Preparedness
As a world capital, New York City has its share of emergencies, and its lead preparedness agency is the New York City Office of Emergency Management (OEM). OEM, by extension, has had a lot of practice in disaster preparedness and recovery. In fact, the experiences associated with the 9/11 attack established OEM as a national leader in disaster planning and coordination. CUNY is not a New York City agency, but it is of the city and, therefore, like a good neighbor, is often called on to lend a hand. The CUNY seat at the OEM Emergency Operations Center is always filled during an emergency, and the relationship has evolved into a genuine partnership.

Some incidents come suddenly, without warning; many do not. When there is advance notice, as in the Super Bowl case, state and local emergency agencies are informed, and the information is then shared with others. In New York City, OEM establishes an incident command center and begins initial communication through e-mails and web-based alerts. As the event approaches and it becomes apparent that there will be some impact, OEM begins to conduct city-wide agency conference calls. These calls include most city agencies, as well as other participating institutions, such as CUNY, the Red Cross, Con Edison, the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA), and various governmental, corporate, and not-for-profit organizations that have a response or recovery role. In this case, OEM had a city-wide Super Bowl conference call each day at 11:00AM, up to and including the Sunday of the game. The calls allow OEM to share information widely and enable the participants to share updates and concerns. And while there can be dozens of participants, OEM call leaders have developed a knack for keeping the calls short and sweet.

Once OEM begins its regular alerts and conference calls, CUNY and other key participants begin a similar internal procedure. For CUNY, this is the opportunity to share and update information among campus officials.

Broadway and Off-Broadway
While Super Bowl Boulevard and its environs received most of the attention, there were many “Off-Broadway” Super Bowl events. CUNY hosted two major performances as part of VH1’s Super Bowl Blitz concert series. On January 27, rapper J. Cole performed at Queens College’s Kupferberg Center for the Arts. The following day, R&B artist Janelle Monae performed at Lehman College’s Center for the Performing Arts. Both venues have a seating capacity of more than 2100, and both concerts were packed with enthusiastic fans. While I was more concerned with logistics and security - and was impressed by the professional collaboration among our campus teams and the VH1 and NFL officials - I did enjoy both performances, although, as with the Super Bowl, I watched them on TV.

Thankfully, everything went off without incident, but our risk management plans always include contingencies. Had there been an incident that required evacuation and emergency sheltering, CUNY had four geographically dispersed campuses designated to serve as emergency shelters. The size and location of these campuses, coupled with our training and experience with coastal storm sheltering during Hurricane Irene and Hurricane Sandy, made CUNY a logical choice. Had there been an incident with mass casualties, another CUNY campus was designated as a Family Assistance Center (FAC) to assist the New York Office of Emergency Management, New York American Red Cross, and the New York City Office of the Chief Medical Examiner with providing information, support, translation, and emergency social services to survivors and families of victims.

Although we know how disruptive these efforts can be to our core educational mission, New Yorkers have learned through tragic experience that we must pull together in times of emergency. We’re also very happy that it wasn’t necessary in this case.

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