

Eye-opening disaster exercise for community leaders

It was an eye opener for the 270 delegates attending the Disaster Recovery exercise at the Community Board Conference 09 in Christchurch last week.

The delegates were faced with hundreds of casualties, no communications, infrastructure collapse, trapped and missing people and no help in sight in the initial hours of the simulated earthquake scenario at Wigram.

Leaders of the community from all over New Zealand had to face the daunting task of gathering intelligence, searching and rescuing the injured, getting them to safety and looking after them in a set of exercises observed by the Minister of Civil Defence, Hon. John Carter and Christchurch Mayor Bob Parker.

Volunteer casualties and civil defence personnel put the delegates through their paces in the three-hour exercise that left many shaken with the scope of activities.

"The exercise brought to their attention the need for community leaders to be well versed in disaster recovery," says Helen Shrewsbury of Conference Innovators, Event Managers for CBC09. Given the structured way disaster recovery is handled by professionals, the community board members and community workers knew there was a lot for them to learn in getting it right, says Ms Shrewsbury.

At the end of the exercise, Minister Carter summed up the civil defence issues facing community leaders by saying civil defence officials may not be on the spot at the event of a disaster and the leaders had to look after those who fell under their care. Everyone thinks that someone else will save them but 48 to 72 hours could pass before this could happen, the Minister said. "It will be the individuals in the communities that will be there for the emergency, not the officials," the Minister said.

The Disaster Recovery Exercise was one of the major highlights of the CBC09, held at the Christchurch Convention Centre from March 19 to 21. The Prime Minister John Key attended the 20th Anniversary Celebratory Conference Dinner, incorporating The Best Practice Awards evening on Saturday, praising board members for their leadership and pride in their communities. The Best Practice Awards were presented to community boards which had made significant contributions to the process of achieving excellence in local government.

"I felt that it was great to see so many of the rural or smaller community boards winning the best practice awards," says Yvonne Palmer, the outgoing chair of the NZ Community Boards' Executive Committee.

"The number of entries were the largest we have had and the awards have been shared between North and South, where in other years the South Island has scooped 75 percent of the awards," says Ms Palmer.

As the new chairperson of the Shirley/Papanui Community Board, she was delighted the Community Board won the NZ Police Safety Award. The Shirley-Papanui Community Board has been working in partnership with the Papanui Police for a safer community as well as with other agencies to improve alcohol responsibility.

Ms Palmer also offered a new individual award at CBC09: the Yvonne Palmer Leadership Award which went to Peter Dow for his 20 years of service to Community Boards.

Four of Manukau's Community Boards Clevedon, Howick, Mangere and Otara jointly own the Supreme Award for their Community Advocacy Plans for providing a robust framework to focus and steer the work programmes for the four participating Boards.

The next CBC will be at Rotorua in 2011.

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