

Problems in Local Emergency Management

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ABSTRACT / Local governments (county and city) take the most active role in responding to natural and manmade disasters, yet very lit-

tle is understood about the role of the emergency manager—the administrator who organizes and coordinates the emergency response of a community. This article describes the more common organizational niches that emergency managers are placed into, and it examines some of the political, institutional, and budgetary constraints that hinder the emergency manager's operations. Finally, it suggests strategies for solving these problems and identifies areas for further research.

Government agencies at all levels take part in disaster activities—preparedness, mitigation, response, and recovery—and each has a proper role to play in comprehensive emergency management, yet it is local government that plays the most active role in emergency operations. With the exception of such agencies as the State Highway Patrol or highway departments, state governments normally can provide only resource support and information to supplement response and recovery efforts at the local level. The federal government, of course, is even farther removed from active operations. County and city governments most directly confront—and solve—the real, physical problems of protection of life and property, feeding and shelter, care of the injured, disposal of the dead, containment, and recovery during a disaster, yet little effort has been made to understand the role, needs, and problems of the central figure in local emergency operations: the *emergency manager*.

A city or county emergency manager is the chief actor both in the planning and preparation for disaster operations and in the coordination of emergency operations during a disaster. Although elected officials bear the ultimate responsibility for a community's preparedness, it is the emergency manager's skills and knowledge that determine the success or failure of the community's response to a large-scale disaster.

The concept of *emergency management* as a separate function within local government began to take shape in the mid-1970s. Local governments throughout the United States have attempted (with varying degrees of success) to define the role, activities, and scope of authority of an administrator who is concerned primarily with the management of emergency response. During that time, significant research has explored comparisons across the hazard spectrum (Perry 1982, Kreps 1981), the impact of disasters on social systems (Quarantelli 1977 and 1980), and specific disasters (Chenault 1979, Perry and others 1980). Researchers have also investigated the emergency roles of state government (National Governors'

Association 1978) as well as local government's aggregate response to an emergency (Kartez and Kelley 1980). It is equally important to investigate the Emergency Manager's function and to assess the policies that support (or often frustrate) that function.

This study examines the problems that bedevil local emergency managers in planning for and responding to disasters. It is based on nearly ten years of accumulated observations and experience in local emergency planning and operations; it is also based on a distillation of comments, observations, and recommendations by emergency managers in various parts of the country. The study thus reflects objective analysis as well as emergency managers' frustrations at the political, bureaucratic, and budgetary constraints that they have faced in formulating disaster plans and solving operational problems.

The local emergency manager's job consists largely of identifying, organizing, and applying the community's resources to problems created by a disaster. On the one hand, government resources reside in line agencies (police, fire, public works, etc.) that respond to their own needs and priorities. On the other hand, private resources (people and material) are most often provided on a volunteer basis. The emergency manager must combine these disparate—and sometimes antagonistic—resource bases into an effective response. Yet, most emergency managers operate under the vague charter of a local ordinance and must rely on the force of personality to establish legitimacy and trust in the eyes of their peers, that is, other government officials within the jurisdiction.

Operationally, emergency managers function somewhere in the spectrum between making executive decisions and carrying out specific actions defined in the emergency operations plan. The emergency manager's duties and responsibilities are, to be sure, spelled out in the local plan. He or she is often forced to make priority decisions, however, that are properly the responsibility of elected officials simply because the elected officials are absent, not knowledgeable, or (on rare occasions) not willing to address the problem. This vaguely defined role and the obvious institutional restraints combine to frustrate the most useful application of the emergency manager's time and talents.

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Organization

The position of the emergency manager within the local government structure greatly affects the manager's authority, effectiveness, and ability to do the job. Although the positions held by emergency managers vary widely across the country, they can be divided into a few general types.

In the first type, the emergency manager reports directly to the head of government (county commissioner, county executive, mayor, city manager) and functions as one of a number of department heads. The emergency manager enjoys a direct line of communication with the elected officials and can make the problems and needs of his agency known clearly and explicitly. On the other hand, emergency management must compete with all the other line agencies for a limited supply of funds. The emergency manager is viewed by the other department heads more as a competitor than as a coordinator or facilitator of their operations. The emergency manager can spend as much time haggling over budget questions and fighting bureaucratic skirmishes as in developing the emergency organization. This position is a very exposed one, and many managers do not have the skills to operate successfully in it.

Many communities have placed the emergency management function under a line agency, such as police, fire, or public works. Officials hope to save money in this way and also to insulate emergency management from budgetary and political infighting by tucking it away inconspicuously within the budget of a larger agency. The feeling—in smaller jurisdictions especially—is that a line agency will likely take the lead in a disaster anyway, so why fund a separate agency?

This method is not always satisfactory. It isolates elected officials from the particular requirements of emergency management and from the need for planning and organization-building that must take place before a disaster. The emergency manager can easily become a captive of the line agency, especially if he is a police officer or fire fighter taking on the emergency manager's job as an additional duty. The temptation to pull this person back to regular duty is usually difficult to resist, and emergency management suffers. Even if a civilian is hired to fill the position on a full-time basis, he or she cannot avoid taking on the style, perceptions, and limitations of the line agency. The agency's priorities become the emergency manager's priorities, and the larger picture is obscured.

Every disaster has its own characteristics and the emergency manager must be able to use all of the community's resources in coping with it. During a disaster, it would be difficult for an emergency manager to coordinate *all* resources effectively when operating from a line agency that is itself a source of resources.

When the tail begins to wag the dog, coordinated response to an emergency can easily suffer.

Another type of structure that has been adapted successfully in some counties removes the emergency manager from government altogether. An intergovernmental council, composed of the county authorities and the mayors of all the municipalities, approves a budget for emergency services. The council then hires an emergency manager to assist communities in prior planning and to coordinate countywide response in a disaster. The county and the municipalities contribute to the upkeep of the manager's office on a pro-rata share based on population. The municipalities, their operating agencies, and volunteer groups constitute the emergency service resources of the county; the emergency manager's role is to coordinate the use of those resources.

This system has several advantages. The emergency manager gains legitimacy from a broad base of support, yet does not have to compete with operating agencies for funds. No community needs to feel left out of decisions that will effect it, and the county is less likely to adopt a "we lead—you follow" attitude in disposing of a town's resources. The system can be very stable in the absence of a major disagreement. Although the emergency manager serves many masters, he is actually less vulnerable to political gamesmanship. One or two communities can hold the council hostage by refusing to cooperate, but they will no doubt come under heavy group pressure from the other communities.

A system not unlike this one exists where county governments, by state law, are relatively weak when compared with city governments. The county emergency manager is thus forced into a position of coordinating among municipalities that have some resources and may need outside support during a disaster. Where this system exists, it seems to work reasonably well, but the county lacks the authority to enforce a minimum standard of preparedness among the cities. How much better to make the emergency manager's relationship with the various local governments an explicit one through the mechanism of an intergovernmental council?

Budget

Money, of course, is always a problem. Large cities and counties have more money, but the demands on their funds are correspondingly larger. One can reduce the cost of an emergency manager by placing the responsibility on an operating agency, but this is only a partial solution, as we have already seen. This type of institutional schizophrenia may actually cost more in the long run, considering the cost of overtime for the person who has the additional duty.

The costs of not being fully prepared for a disaster, though

difficult to calculate, are nonetheless real. Communities with smaller budgets can only afford to hire a part-time manager, or they are forced to rely on a volunteer to fill the position. A part-time or volunteer manager will find it very difficult to establish legitimacy and credibility with department heads, other local governments, or the private sector. Budget problems preclude all but the largest communities from hiring emergency managers with the requisite experience and skills in *both* emergency operations and management. Most emergency managers are technically qualified in emergency-related areas (radiological defense, search and rescue, police or fire services, and so on), but they are less able to handle the increasingly sophisticated demands of budgeting, personnel management, program development, and administration. Management—no less than emergency planning and response—is an acquired skill. Communities must be willing to pay for both those skills.

Attitudes

The most obvious attitudinal problem that an emergency manager must face is apathy on the part of elected officials, department heads, and the general public. Emergency planning is not a very hot topic, and most people would rather not think about disasters. When a disaster occurs, of course, the emergency manager becomes a very popular person indeed. At that point, it is too late to start planning and developing an emergency organization.

The general public, of course, would prefer not to think about disasters of any kind and, the worse the potential threat, the less they want to deal with it. Raising issues of disaster effects and response more often than not discomfits and threatens people—so much so that emergency managers are often encouraged to downplay the very real problems that the community may face. Planning, they are told, should be low key and kept within the local government organization. This tactic only isolates the emergency organization from the public, prevents building a better awareness of emergency resources among the public, and places heavy reliance on public information generated during an emergency. Such public information may be misleading, incomplete, or absent altogether.

Elected officials, for their part, respond to public concerns about day-to-day fiscal, administrative, and political matters. Tax assessments and zoning ordinances are of much more immediate concern than an earthquake that may never happen. It is very difficult for an emergency manager to capture the attention of elected officials and to get a sustaining commitment of support for emergency planning. Under the circumstances, emergency managers may be forgiven an occasional wish for a

flood—just a small one—now and then to get everyone's attention.

The most important and troublesome attitudinal problems faced by emergency managers involve the particular worldview of the operating agencies, especially the public safety agencies. Every problem is a police (or fire or public works) problem and should be handled accordingly. The core of emergency response is police (or fire, etc.) operations, and all other functions have a supporting role. It is very difficult for an emergency manager to remind department heads that disaster response requires many actors and activities (mass feeding, shelter, etc.); control and coordination of all these activities may exceed both the charter and the capability of any one operating agency.

Operating agency personnel often do not think beyond the largest fire or flood they have ever seen, and they do not plan in advance for multiple, high-threat events. Immediate response is most important. Fire and police plans are full of such phrases as "First responding element will attack the fire. . . ." and "the on-scene commander will control the emergent situation." Public safety agencies tend to overcommit to an immediate problem without waiting to evaluate the relative importance of simultaneous or closely spaced events. Any criticism is shrugged off. After all, things have worked fine so far; existing mutual aid agreements can provide sufficient backup. It is the (often unrewarding) task of the emergency manager to create the awareness of a large-scale disaster that could overtax the resources of all communities in the vicinity and make outside assistance impossible. In that case, priorities will have to be set and hard decisions made that most fire and police chiefs will be happy to turn over to elected officials. Unless a system has been established in advance to gather and evaluate the information necessary for elected officials to make these decisions, emergency response will inevitably suffer.

Command and control (or the euphemistic "direction and control") is a term that will send most department heads leaping to the defense of their agency's operational or administrative prerogatives. *Command*, to a fire chief, is a very specific and concrete matter central to the fighting of fires, and not something to be surrendered easily. Out of necessity, police and fire departments have usually worked out a rough understanding of who is in charge of what at a fire or accident scene. In a disaster of more than minor scale, the government's total, variegated response will require command and control to ensure that scarce resources are used most effectively. Fire and police chiefs may be reluctant to give up what they feel is their proper function (based on daily experience); other agencies may balk at taking orders from someone who is not part of their organization.

Emergency managers must plan for the direction and control of emergency operations without losing the cooperation of agencies that constitute the bulk of the community's response forces. Hence the (sometimes excessive) use of the term *coordination*. The emergency manager coordinates operations and the use of resources; agency heads direct the actions of their agencies. The elected head of government, of course, has overall and ultimate authority. This is no doubt as it should be, but "turf" battles can seriously distort the emergency planning process. Some emergency managers are reluctant to assign specific responsibilities in the emergency operations plan for fear of touching off a squabble among operating agencies. No one wins such a fight, but the emergency manager will certainly lose.

The usual result is a reliance upon an ad hoc, ill-defined process of decision-by-committee that will somehow function during an emergency, or else a deliberate vagueness in the emergency plan. The emergency assignment list is full of functions "to be designated"—presumably while the sky is falling. Such a system may indeed work in practice. If it does not, it's the wrong time to find that out.

Policies for Local Emergency Management

Laws

State laws should be rewritten, as necessary, to give a clear mandate for the establishment of an effective emergency management program in each political jurisdiction throughout the state. The law should spell out the permissible types of emergency organization, state standards for emergency plans, and minimum requirements for compliance. Local variation or adaptation of state guidelines can be permitted within a certain range of possibilities. Finally, sanctions (legal or financial) should be imposed on communities that do not comply. The point here is not to jam a state-designed format down everyone's throats, nor is it to shift control of emergency operations up to the state level. The aim is to enforce a minimum level of emergency preparedness in each state. Communities that fail to prepare in advance will place an added burden on the resources of neighboring jurisdictions that have prepared.

Local ordinances should build upon state law to create an explicit charter for the emergency manager's authorities and responsibilities and to specify the relationship among the community's operating agencies. This will make it easier to solve the problems of command and control discussed above. Local ordinances should also explicitly recognize the hierarchical and operating relationships that exist with neighboring communities and other levels of government.

These policies will create a basic structure for emergency planning throughout the state to serve as a framework for

funding and resource support. States could also establish an emergency or disaster fund; only those communities with approved plans could draw upon the fund. These policies will also allow political questions to be addressed at the appropriate level, and they will help emergency managers to eliminate some of the unknowns in emergency response before the disaster strikes.

Organization

The structure of any local emergency organization owes as much to historical accident and accretionary growth as it does to deliberate design. Also, state laws, local precedent, and the limits of the possible vary from place to place. A single model simply cannot fit all situations. With this caveat in mind, it is nonetheless possible to recommend some solutions to the problems discussed above.

A very stable, credible, and effective organization can be developed through some form of intergovernmental council. This amounts to creating a *special purpose district* within the county solely for emergency management program development. Each jurisdiction has a say in the plans and decisions that will affect it, and the total resources of the county can be used most effectively in responding to an emergency. The emergency manager can then concentrate on the proper task: mobilizing and coordinating the operations of all jurisdictions in the county.

This strategy may not be appropriate for counties with one dominant city that has most of the population and resources. In this case, a joint city-county organization is the best solution. It allows for joint planning and joint coordination of resources among the city, smaller towns, and rural fire districts in the unincorporated areas of the county. This is actually a form of intergovernmental council with a very small set of participants. The dominant jurisdiction may control the position of emergency manager, or a joint office—jointly funded—may be established with a manager who reports to both county and city authorities. Joint planning and coordination can take place under this system, but joint operation most likely cannot; bureaucratic and financial considerations will not permit it. County and city operating agencies will support each other, but each will retain its own command structure. The emergency manager's function will be at once more important and more difficult.

In a town or city, the emergency manager's position should be a dedicated full-time or half-time position, not one borrowed temporarily from an operating agency. A half-time position could be combined with other related functions (safety, training, risk management) to justify a full salary. The emergency manager's position should be as high up in the government structure as possible, preferably within the executive's office

(mayor, city manager). One option is for the emergency manager to work under an operating agency day to day, but to move up to the executive's level during emergency operations. This requires an unambiguous commitment of support from the executive and a very explicit agreement between the emergency manager and the relevant department head. The commitment may erode over a long period of normalcy, however, and the understanding may not be able to withstand the impact of a large disaster.

Attitudes

The most effective emergency managers are those who can act as a resource to other agencies, providing information, materials, and training support that might not otherwise be available. Emergency managers have access (limited but real) to funds for radio equipment, communications vans, hazardous materials response equipment, and so on, that can be used on a communitywide basis. Emergency managers can provide training support on common problems to operating agencies at less cost than if each agency conducted its own training; the emergency manager can also coordinate community access to training offered by state and federal agencies.

The idea is to convince department heads that the emergency manager is a source of aid and not a competitor. The best way to do this is through a series of emergency exercises. By forcing departments to confront multiple, high-threat situations (even in a simulated environment), the emergency manager can demonstrate how easily resources are exhausted and how any one agency cannot hope to deal with an entire disaster. Agency heads will soon begin to rely on these exercises to train their personnel and evaluate their procedures. The emergency manager can use exercises to educate both elected officials and department heads in the complexities of emergency operations. Operating agencies may find themselves more willing to give up some control in return for resource support and a better capability to respond to disasters. In addition, exercises should provide training down through several echelons in the manager's office, in the operating agencies, and in the government administration so that emergency response will not founder in the absence of a few key people.

Much of this effort at changing attitudes still relies on an emergency manager's own force of character and personal qualities. The process, however, should be explicitly mandated through administrative policy (for example, requiring one exercise every six months) or structure (for example, coordinating all operational training through the emergency manager).

Support

This article has focused on local emergency management, and I have said little about the role of state or federal agencies.

The good and bad points of state emergency management agencies or of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) would require a separate study in themselves. They do, however, directly affect emergency management at the local level.

State agencies and the FEMA often work at cross purposes, creating a bewildering range of bureaucratic requirements and channels that local emergency managers are required to negotiate in order to secure funding or operational support. The state often seems to be more interested in program papers than in the effectiveness of actual programs. Emergency managers have expressed frustration that educational and public awareness materials have arrived too late to be useful. Both the FEMA and the states have—through policy reversals, poor public relations, and administrative problems—embarrassed local emergency managers and affected their credibility with local officials.

Both the FEMA and state emergency management agencies should realize that the local governments are where emergency operations actually occur; they should concentrate on supporting the local emergency manager. The FEMA and the states can best provide this support through national and regional public awareness programs (video tapes, pamphlets, public relations materials) that can be used by local managers, through training programs in all types of emergency operations, and through general source materials. All of these will help the local emergency manager function as a resource for operating agencies and for the community at large. In any case, the FEMA and state policies, funds, and guidance should be oriented toward enhancing the quality and reliability of local emergency operations.

Opportunities for Further Research

The conclusions drawn in this article have been necessarily impressionistic, and they are certainly not exhaustive. They are based on experience, observation, and comment; they have not been drawn from the rigorous testing of hypotheses. What is now necessary is careful, detailed, and systematic research focused on the local emergency manager in a variety of environments. How do emergency managers function? With whom do they deal most directly? How much (or how little) support comes from elected officials? Are large-scale emergency operations different from dealing with everyday fires and accidents? How do they differ? What lessons are transferrable? What laws, ordinances, policies, and structures hinder the most effective response to disasters? What information do emergency managers and elected officials need most (and most urgently) in order to make decisions during a disaster?

The different types of state-local relationships should also

be investigated to determine the most effective ways that state government can assist local emergency managers in planning for and carrying out emergency operations. State and FEMA funding and guidance policies should be analyzed to find the best way of translating federal and state assistance into reality based operational planning and effective disaster response.

Any further research must include listening carefully to what emergency managers have to say: their successes and failures, their needs and frustrations, their recommendations. Emergency managers are on the firing line every day—we have much to learn from them.

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