From the Expert: Number of Disasters Growing Across U.S.

By Beverly Bell [1]
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The Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill in the Gulf of Mexico is not only the worst environmental accident the U.S. has ever experienced, it’s also a harsh reminder of how—without any warning—one disaster can impact a state’s priorities, budget, elected officials and very future. Adding to the uncertainty for all states is the growing number of disasters across the country.

These two factors underscore the importance of having a professional and experienced state emergency management team in place to protect people and property when an area experiences anything from a tornado to a terrorist attack.

Data in a new report from the National Emergency Management Association indicate a clear trend in the rising number of disasters. NEMA is an affiliate of The Council of State Governments. Last year, 59 major disasters were declared in the U.S; in 1984, that number stood at 34, the 2010 Biennial Report found. According to the Federal Emergency Management Agency, or FEMA, the president declared more disasters from 2000 to 2009 than in any other decade in more than 50 years, with an average of 56 per year. This is double the average from 1980 to 1989, when there were almost 24 a year, and 10 more than the 1990s with 46 per year.

Outside major disasters, states declared 180 gubernatorial emergencies in the 2009 fiscal year. There were also 122 events that required a significant commitment of state resources, but did not result in a declared state of emergency. All of these demanded state emergency management expertise.

The increase in declarations raises one question: Are there more events that warrant a major declaration, or are political pressures and societal expectations prompting the increase?

The answer isn’t clear; what is known is that every additional declaration means expanded responsibilities for state emergency management. With gubernatorial elections slated this fall in 37 states and two territories, it’s essential all new governors understand these responsibilities and the state’s emergency management program.

Emergency management is one of the most critical functions of state government. It serves as the central coordination point for all resources and assistance provided during disasters and emergencies, including acts of terrorism. It also has the overarching responsibility of saving lives, protecting property and helping citizens recover when a disaster strikes. Typically, emergency management comes to the forefront after a disaster. But in reality, much of the work is accomplished beforehand. This includes developing emergency operation plans and procedures; conducting training, drills and exercises; and interfacing with the private sector and business community to protect its
infrastructure, facilities and employees.

During a disaster, state emergency management personnel coordinate response efforts for local governments when events exceed their capabilities; manage transportation and evacuation; oversee the emergency operations center and take the lead in incident management; help direct public information and warnings; and activate mutual aid agreements. State emergency management also assists the governor's office by providing accurate and realistic information for crisis communication.

As the response phase transitions to recovery, emergency management provides damage assessments and estimates; manages the application for eligible federal assistance to help citizens, businesses, local governments and some private non-profit groups; and facilitates sheltering and mass care.

Given the integral part emergency management plays in an administration, newly elected governors should make it a priority to meet with the state emergency management director as quickly as possible. Since disasters can hit at any time, the state's chief executive must be well-versed in this life-saving function and familiar with the staff who run the emergency management agency.

The report also found that of the 47 states where the state emergency management director is appointed, the governor in 32 of those states—or 68 percent—makes the appointment. As a side note, in seven of the 10 states with the most disaster declarations since 1953, the emergency management director reports directly to the governor.

Additional information can be found in the NEMA 2010 Biennial Report, which was released this month. Based on in-depth surveying of state emergency management directors, the report represents the most comprehensive compilation of state emergency management data and information available. Copies are available through most state emergency management offices as well as for sale on the NEMA website.

Resources

- National Emergency Management Association
- Purchase NEMA 2010 Biennial Report

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