Using Established Systems on Evolving Hazards and Facing a New Political Climate

By Heather Perkins

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In the world of state emergency management and homeland security, 2017 has been a year of new faces, continuous threats and opportunities for innovation. Much like 2016, 2017 is on track to equal or perhaps surpass the challenges it may pose to state emergency management professionals. It began with the Trump administration tapping a retired military general for the top job at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, and a former State Emergency Management Director to head the Federal Emergency Management Agency, not to mention 2017 has already had 25 presidential and emergency disaster declarations. State emergency management professionals used virtual disaster assistance and training, introducing a new wave of technology to combat the increasing challenges of disaster management. The challenge in 2018 will be to protect investments and still move forward with creative problem solving while state and federal budgets continue to become tighter and tighter.

Looking Back

Professionals in emergency management often talk about two factors when judging a year: the number of disasters that occurred in the year and the amount of devastation and destruction caused by the disasters. By those metrics, 2016 was one for the record books.

There were 45 presidential and emergency disaster declarations, the most since 2013. In addition to the federally declared events, 47,778 events occurred at the state and local levels but did not reach the level of a major declaration.¹ It started off with a massive winter storm, named Winter Storm Jonas, that left the northeast United States covered in extensive snowfall. From Jan. 23-24, 2016, Jonas broke records for snowfall in places along the East Coast, with some areas recording as much as 29 inches.

The year also brought several devastating wildfires that overwhelmed many states, including California, which lost more than half a million acres to the fires, many of which came as a result of the state’s lingering drought. Wildfires also spread to Gatlinburg, Tennessee, causing the deaths of 14
In 2016, 19 significant floods took place, the most in one single year since records began in 1980. Louisiana, Texas, West Virginia and numerous other states were impacted by flooding and storm surge bringing the fourth-highest payout of the National Flood Insurance Program, or NFIP, which totaled $4 billion. Louisiana saw tremendous downpours in August, with some regions receiving more than 20 inches of rain over a 72-hour span.

Following the peak of hurricane season, the United States felt the full force of Hurricane Matthew as it impacted the shores of several states across the East Coast. Matthew impacted Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Virginia with high-speed winds, storm surges and extreme rainfall. As the strongest storm seen in the Atlantic since Hurricane Felix in 2007, Hurricane Matthew caused more than 44 estimated deaths.

Overall, 2016 represented a range of hazards that required an unprecedented amount of emergency management professionalism and preparedness. With the new year and new administration underway, emergency management has seen increasing pressure to reduce disaster costs at a time when disasters are more frequent. The proposed reduction of state and local grant funding in the president’s preliminary 2018 budget proposal will undoubtedly have harsh impacts on the emergency management system. In times of economic uncertainty, innovative ideas are always needed to assure the emergency management community is always moving forward and incorporating new strategies that best serve communities around the country.

The Critical Role of Emergency Management
Regardless of whether a disaster is natural or manmade, state emergency management acts as the central coordination point for all resources and assistance provided during the event. When a disaster strikes, emergency management remains one of the most crucial functions of state government. It also has the overarching responsibility of saving lives, protecting property, and helping people recover once a disaster has occurred. Emergency management comes to the forefront once an event has taken place, but much of the work takes place before a disaster has occurred—in the form of disaster drills and exercises, plans and programs, public warning tests, and preparedness education.

Emergency management includes four main parts, referred to as the Four Pillars:

- **Mitigation**—Activities that reduce or eliminate the degree of risk to human life and property;
- **Preparedness**—Activities that take place before a disaster to develop and maintain a capability to respond rapidly and effectively to emergencies and disasters;
- **Response**—Activities to assess and contain the immediate effects of disasters, provide life support to victims and deliver emergency services; and
- **Recovery**—Activities to restore damaged facilities and equipment, and support the economic and social revitalization of affected areas to their pre-emergency status.

On the state level, these four elements encompass many different aspects, from planning and implementation to training and exercises. A state emergency manager will interact with all sectors of the population, including other state agencies, elected officials, local jurisdictions, all public safety personnel, the private sector, volunteer organizations, and the public.

State Emergency Management Organizational Structure, Budgets and Staff
States use a variety of structures when it comes to the emergency management function. In 16 states, the emergency management office is located within the state military department under the
auspices of the adjutant general. Fifteen states have emergency management in the public safety department. In eight states, it is housed in the governor’s office and in eight states emergency management is in a combined emergency management/homeland security agency. In two states, the office is located within the state police department. The remaining states use other organizational structures. Regardless of how an agency’s daily operations are organized, most governors make the final decision on who serves as the state emergency management director. The governor appoints the state emergency management director in 31 states.

The majority of states—30 to be exact—combine their emergency management and homeland security full-time equivalent positions. The total number of full-time equivalents for these states is 3,756 and averages 125 staff per state. For those states that have a stand-alone emergency management office, full-time equivalent positions total 2,295, averaging about 104 per state. Agency operating budgets for the 2016 fiscal year range up to $174 million, with the average state agency budget at approximately $11 million, while the median is about $3 million.

State Homeland Security Funding and Responsibilities
The Homeland Security Grant Program is a central federal source that supports and sustains state and local government homeland security capabilities. Thirteen states rely solely on those federal grants to fund their homeland security offices. This represents a decrease from 2016, when 15 states depended totally on federal grants. Twenty-seven states receive at least 60 percent of their funding for their state homeland security office from federal sources, down from 39 percent in 2016. On average, states rely on 76.1 percent federal funding, 21.3 percent state appropriations, and 3.9 percent from other sources to pay for their homeland security function.

When it comes to the state homeland security offices, responsibilities and organizational structures vary from state to state. In some cases, state homeland security directors manage grants and budgets; in others, they have very limited roles. In 13 states, a combined emergency management/homeland security office oversees daily operations of the homeland security function. Fourteen states keep the homeland security function in their public safety department and eight states have it in the adjutant general/military affairs department. Nine states run homeland security out of the governor’s office. The rest of the states have other organizational structures for their homeland security function.

EMAC—Sustaining a Nationwide Capability
Since 1996, the Emergency Management Assistance Compact, or EMAC, has served as the leading state-to-state mutual aid agreement, providing well-established mechanisms for states to help each other when a disaster occurs. State-to-state mutual aid often allows for more timely and cost effective disaster response than the use of federal resources. Further, EMAC is evolving to include virtual missions that can be carried out by personnel working in their home states rather than deploying into the disaster area. Examples of virtual EMAC missions include GIS and cyber and social media monitoring. Virtual mutual aid reduces mission costs and provides additional training for personnel without leaving their offices.

With the current political climate and the uncertainties of future federal budgets, more states will continue to use EMAC as a vehicle to leverage regional resources. As EMAC continues to evolve, state emergency management will continue to identify additional areas where states can fill the gap in federal resources.

Building Capacity with EMPG
In addition to leveraging EMAC for resources during disaster response, states and locals also build
capacity and enhance their capability to respond to disasters when they use the Emergency Management Performance Grants, or EMPG. EMPG is essential for the building and sustainment of critical capabilities for disaster preparedness, response, recovery and mitigation across the country. The program is the only source of federal funding directed to state and local governments for planning, training, exercises, and key professional expertise for all-hazard emergency preparedness.

Recipients of this grant continue demonstrating a strong commitment; for every dollar of federal funds invested, at least that much is matched by both grantees and sub-grantees. Through this program, state and local governments maintain the personnel and capabilities necessary to build and sustain an effective emergency management system. Capabilities such as conducting risk and hazard assessments, supporting emergency operations centers—which are the coordination hubs for all disaster response— continuing public education and outreach, and enhancing interoperable communications capabilities are a few of the many uses of the program.

Critical Investments and Reforms in Mitigation
The best way to reduce the cost of disasters and, more importantly, build resiliency is to design and harden the built environment to match the threat environment. The ideal approach places a more robust mitigation program at the beginning, before a disaster takes place, to reduce the loss of life and property by lessening the impact of the disaster. Effective mitigation requires an understanding of risk and investment in long-term community well-being. One of the many programs administrated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s, or FEMA’s Federal Insurance and Mitigation Administration is the National Flood Insurance Program, or NFIP.

Congress established the NFIP with the passage of the National Flood Insurance Act of 1968. Property owners in participating communities purchase insurance as a protection against flood losses in exchange for state and community floodplain management regulations. For years, however, policy costs have not reflected true actuarial rates. Worsening the situation, FEMA has updated flood maps to provide a more accurate picture, but some of these have been redrawn because of political pressures. Additionally, enrollment in the program has declined by nearly 10 percent over the last several years as rate changes designed to shore up the program have resulted in policy holders dropping their coverage. The program is over $23 billion in debt, making debt settlement even more unlikely. The NFIP is slated for reauthorization by Congress this year and the program’s insolvency must be addressed to ensure the program can meet the flood recovery needs of the country.

Emerging Hazards and Evolving Threats

Cybersecurity
Cybersecurity and cyber response capabilities continually rate very low in FEMA’s annual National Preparedness Report and often identifying the capability gaps and needs is a difficult task for state and local government. The skill, speed and adaptability of these threats test the nation’s defense in new and challenging ways. As society makes unprecedented advancements in innovation, it becomes more and more reliant on information technology and increasingly vulnerable to devices that are developed and distributed with minimal security requirements.

As the ranges of threat actors, methods of attack, and targeted systems expand, the biggest challenge from an emergency management perspective is addressing the physical damage to infrastructure or to a community from a major cyberattack. Management of the response and recovery phases, types of federal assistance available to states, and jurisdictional challenges are important issues that must be addressed if emergency management is to be an active and fully engaged partner.
**Aging Infrastructure**

There is a growing sense of urgency and concern for the fragility of critical infrastructure in the face of the rising number of catastrophic events, both natural and human-made. The ever-changing range of threats, along with the infrastructures’ interconnected reliability, adds to the complexity of making informed decisions that reduce risk within an environment where limited resources are subject to multiple demands and priorities. Aging infrastructure that leaves communities vulnerable and has the potential to disrupt timely emergency response and add significant costs to long-term disaster recovery must be addressed. Understanding the complex interdependencies of the national systems and the need for a resilient infrastructure is paramount, particularly for the movement of goods, services and people.

**Non-Stafford Act Events**

The Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act was signed into law Nov. 23, 1988. This law was designed to bring a systemic means of federal disaster assistance, especially as it pertains to FEMA, for state and local governments in carrying out their responsibilities to aid citizens.

The disasters or emergencies that strike communities and do not rise to the level of, or receive a, Presidential Stafford Act declaration are often referred to as “non-Stafford Act” events. These events are not rare. As mentioned before, in 2016 alone, state and local emergency management professionals managed 47,778 events that did reach the level of a major or emergency declaration. Examples of these events include severe droughts, wildfires, Zika outbreaks, oil and chemical spills, mass shootings, and water emergencies. These events are increasing in frequency and require states to be prepared and have a strategic plan for disasters that are not covered by the Stafford Act. As uncertainty in future budgets grows, emergency managers will continue to rely on state-to-state mutual aid, through EMAC, to provide the necessary resources to manage non-Stafford Act events.

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**Notes**


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