Elections, Greater Federal Grant Scrutiny and Ongoing Disasters Continue to Test Management System

By Beverly Bell [1]
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Almost 60 years of federal record-keeping passed before this country reached its highest number of major disaster declarations, 81 in 2010. It took only one more year to shatter that record, with 99 in 2011. State emergency management handled the growing number of events even as the average operating budget slid for the second year in a row. While Congressional scrutiny over federal spending persisted in Washington, D.C., state emergency management showed the initiative and proposed a substantial restructuring of related federal grants, one that promotes flexibility and accountability. The backdrop to all of this is national elections, which can turn every issue—including better preparation for the next disaster in order to save lives and protect property—into a political football.

One Record After Another
As experts continue to debate the causes and frequency of disasters, the economic impact of disasters is on the rise. Citing research from the World Bank and The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, The Economist gives several reasons for the increase: development in previously uninhabited regions, elimination of natural barriers, which means more exposed property, and repeated rebuilding even though areas have been devastated over and over again. The result? Five of the world’s costliest disasters from a financial perspective have occurred in the past four years. Without significant policy change and dedicating more resources to prevention, there’s nothing to indicate that the trend will reverse.

For its part, the United States experienced more than its share of disasters in 2011. Devastating tornadoes ripped through Alabama and Joplin, Mo., killing an estimated 400 people. Hurricane Irene and Tropical Storm Lee caused serious flooding all along the East Coast. A 5.8 magnitude earthquake struck Virginia, Washington, D.C., and several eastern seaboard states; record winter snowstorms hit Alaska and massive wildfires ravaged Texas. In fact, 2011 marked the largest
number of fire management assistance declarations at 114. Texas accounted for most of these with 55. The total is almost 33 percent higher than the previous record of 86 in 2006, when fire ravaged the western United States, the Southwest and the Great Plains.

The decade from 2001–2010 had the most presidential declarations since the Federal Emergency Management Agency started tracking the numbers in 1953, averaging almost 60 a year. A presidential declaration is the highest designation a disaster can receive from the federal government. It indicates the severity and destruction of an event and makes available the greatest amount of federal assistance.

The record-setting pace continued at the state level as well. In the National Emergency Management Association 2012 Biennial Report, states reported 250 gubernatorial emergencies in the 2011 fiscal year, a 39 percent increase over the 180 gubernatorial emergencies in the 2009 fiscal year, when the last update was published. The number of events that required a significant commitment of state resources, but did not result in a declared state of emergency, also jumped. In the 2011 fiscal year, there were 258 events, compared to 122 events in 2009, which represents a 111 percent increase. Given the rising number of events, it’s not surprising that states requested federal disaster or emergency declarations 242 times in the 2011 fiscal year, which is almost 2.5 times the 97 requested in 2009.

**The Role of Emergency Management**

Emergency management manages all these disasters at the state level. It is one of the most crucial functions of state government when a disaster strikes, acting 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 once a disaster has occurred. Typically, emergency management comes to the forefront once an event has taken place. In reality, much of the work comes before—in the form of disaster drills and exercises, hazard mitigation 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—Pre-disaster activities 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 exercising. 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 and the general public.

**State Emergency Management Organizational Structures/Budgets**

2011 ushered in one of the largest class of new governors in this country, with 27 never having held the top state executive spot. This resulted in 17 newly appointed emergency management directors. Some state emergency management agencies also experienced reorganization. Currently, the emergency management agency is located within the department of public safety in 12 states; within the military department under the auspices of the adjutant general in 18 states; and within the governor’s office in nine states. Eight states have it in a combined emergency management/homeland security agency.
Regardless of agencies’ organizational structure for daily operations, emergency management ranks high among governors’ priorities. While the state emergency management director is an appointed position in all 50 states, the director is appointed by the governor in 33—or nearly two-thirds—of states.

Even though state emergency management is handling more disasters and emergencies, their budgets remain relatively flat. Agency operating budgets for the 2012 fiscal year range up to about $47 million. Twenty states saw their emergency management budgets shrink from the 2011 fiscal year. The average 2012 budget is $5,987,294 and the median is $2,826,624, which are both down from the previous year.

State Homeland Security Offices Also Evolving
Like emergency management, the state homeland security function has seen organizational changes. There is no one common structure, however, and responsibilities also vary. In some cases, state homeland security directors manage grants and budgets; in other cases, they have very limited roles.

In 18 states, a combined emergency management/homeland security office oversees daily operations of the homeland security function. Four states have the day-to-day operations in a homeland security agency or office. Five states run it out of the governor’s office. Ten states have it in the adjutant general/military affairs department and 12 states keep the homeland security function in their public safety department.

All states have a designated homeland security point of contact to the federal government and this position has become a critical component of a governor’s staff. Currently, 14 states assign the homeland security responsibility to their homeland security director. In another 21 states, either the emergency management director or a combined emergency management/homeland security director is the primary point of contact. Seven states have the adjutant general serving in this capacity. Only two public safety secretaries/commissioners are in this role. The remaining states have other arrangements.

To fund their homeland security function, states rely on federal grants, state appropriations, a combination of the two and other sources. Fifteen states receive 100 percent of funding for their state homeland security office from federal grants. Only New Hampshire uses 100 percent state money for this function. Forty states receive at least 60 percent of funding from the federal government. This is only a slight increase from last year, when it was 39 states. On average, states rely on almost 76 percent federal funding to pay for their homeland security function, 18 percent state appropriations and 6 percent from other sources.

The Next Iteration of Grant Funding
Given the federal government’s current economic environment with continued concern over the debt and deficit spending, Congress is still closely scrutinizing all outlays. State homeland security and emergency management grants are part of this analysis. To tackle the uncertain future of grant funding, a group of emergency management and homeland security professionals from across the country put forward a proposal in 2012—even before that of the president or Congress—suggesting a comprehensive restructuring of these grants while providing grantees with increased flexibility and Congress with more accountability on how the funds are spent. Previous grants were
reorganized into three allocations from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security: a new homeland
security cadre grant, a project-based investment and innovation grant and Emergency Management
Performance Grants (EMPG).

**EMPG’S Impact Quantified**

EMPG is a core state emergency management funding mechanism and the lifeblood of emergency
management throughout the United States. It’s the only source of federal money directed to state
and local governments for planning, training, exercises and personnel for all-hazards emergency
preparedness.

In 2011, the emergency management community issued a report on EMPG, outlining the impact of
the grant at the state and local levels. This report was updated and provided to Congress in early
quantifies the thousands of local and state warnings systems, operational, special needs and
evacuation plans, training and educational classes, full-scale exercises, mutual aid agreements and
outreach campaigns that are possible in this country because of EMPG dollars. What is also
significant about EMPG is that while the initial 2011 fiscal year federal investment was $340 million,
state and local government contributed at least another $340 million because of the 50-50 match
required by the program. Even as budgets have faced serious challenges in recent years and some
have supported the federal government providing a higher portion, state government has stood
behind the match, believing that every level of government has a responsibility in building
emergency management capacity nationwide.

The fear is that if EMPG is cut, states will not be able to provide the match and would lose
irreplaceable dollars. Investments made thus far in terrorism-preparedness programs, response
equipment, planning efforts and training will be jeopardized without adequate money to sustain
them. States already have seen ramifications at the local emergency management level. Because
local emergency management programs can’t provide their EMPG cost share, they’re turning down
grant funding, which puts local agencies across the country at risk and seriously compromises that
vital first rung of response capability.

**More Deliverables for PPD-8**

Last year, President Barack Obama signed Presidential Policy Directive-8, known as PPD-8, National
Preparedness, which provided a broad outline for the nation to prevent, protect, mitigate, respond
and recover from the most significant threats to the country. Replacing Homeland Security
Presidential Directive 8, known as HSPD-8, under President George W. Bush, it also represented the
first time the federal government worked to develop a National Preparedness Goal as called for in

Since then, several milestones related to PPD-8 have been reached, including the release of the goal,
which spells out the necessary capabilities, a description of a National Preparedness System with
required resources and tools, a status report on national preparedness and an outline with specifics
on roles and responsibilities in reaching a state of preparedness.

Many PPD-8 components are having a real effect on states because these elements partially
determine how states can invest certain federal grants and report their actions/results related to
those grant expenditures. This approach is part of the administration’s overall pursuit of
performance metrics, requiring specific outcomes based on investment and programmatic goals.

**Nation’s Mutual Aid System**

The Emergency Management Assistance Compact, known as EMAC, a mutual aid agreement that
allows support across state lines when a disaster occurs, continues to demonstrate its importance to
the nation’s disaster management system. Many states experienced severe flooding after Hurricane Irene and Tropical Storm Lee roared up the east coast in August 2011. As a result, 1,126 personnel from 25 states were deployed under EMAC to New York, New Jersey, Virginia, Maryland, Massachusetts, Delaware, Connecticut, Vermont and Pennsylvania. This included 86 missions in a seven-week period and more than $13 million in estimated costs for requested resources. Earlier in the year, almost 950 personnel were deployed under the compact in response to the floods and tornados in Missouri, North Dakota, Nebraska, South Dakota, Mississippi, Alabama and Tennessee.

As part of its normal procedure for a larger event, EMAC conducted an after-action review and issued a report on the August disasters. It focused on four main operational components of the process: activation; the request and offer; response-mobilization, deployment and de-mobilization; and reimbursement. The document identified what worked well and those areas that need improvement. These recommendations will become part of EMAC’s long-term work plan.

Impact of Elections
In national election years, all issues can become political. This is certainly a consideration for 2012, when elections for president, all 435 seats in the U.S. House of Representatives, 33 U.S. Senate seats and governor in 11 states as well as two territories will be held. New faces in Washington and in the governor’s mansions could result in more changes for emergency management and homeland security as national and state leaders revise current strategies or develop new ones.

To encourage a productive discussion about emergency management and homeland security before the November elections, the National Emergency Management Association—which represents state emergency management directors in all 50 states, the District of Columbia and the territories—is meeting with presidential campaign representatives. The purpose is to learn candidates’ positions regarding all hazards, emergency preparedness and homeland security.

Possible Changes to Declaration Process
Under current federal law, only a governor has the authority after a disaster to request either an emergency or major declaration from the president, which, if granted, allows federal assistance. In 2011, however, FEMA announced its support to allow a tribal government, if it chooses, to make a separate declaration request directly to the president without going through the state. The modification requires an amendment to the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Relief Act (42 U.S.C. 5121 et seq.), which is the legislation that guides the declaration process. The proposal also raises a number of issues related to the cost-share requirements; population guidelines and overall criteria.

Besides the tribal proposition, another possible change is underway. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has issued a suggested rule that would allow a county to initiate a declaration of an agriculture-related disaster directly to the USDA, removing the governor from the process. There are concerns that both of these changes could erode a governor’s authority.

Notes:
1 NEMA 2012 Biennial Report, National Emergency Management Association, March 2012. 2 In this section, “states” refer to two territories, the District of Columbia, and 48 states that responded a National Emergency Management Association 2012 survey about emergency management organizations, funding and other issues. 3 FY11 refers to the federal fiscal year, which is October 1, 2010 through September 30, 2011.