A Seat at the Table for Nondisaster Organizations

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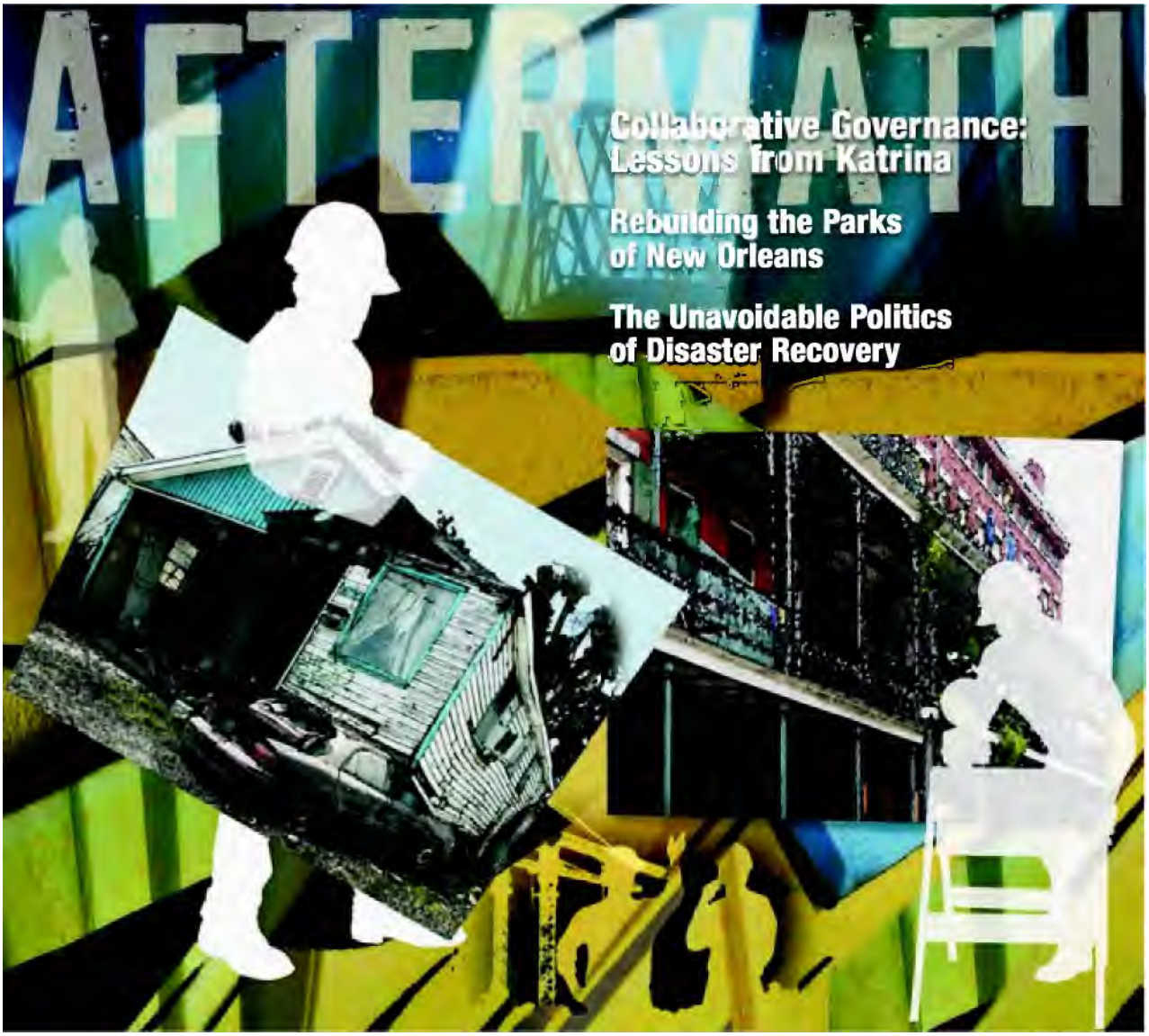

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from leadership to transform. However, the real work will be done at the managerial level as the changes are discussed and implemented. Public managers in disaster response are leaders and must be involved.Without their involvement, the call to transform and initiate actions post-Katrina will remain buried in reports, and the next disaster will find us less prepared than needed and without having learned and applied the lessons so clearly written on the shores of the Gulf Coast.

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Forum:
Post-Katrina Emergency Management

Revitalizing Emergency Management after Katrina

by R. Steven Daniels

A recent survey of emergency managers urges improved response, planning, and leadership and a reinvigorated FEMA—the federal government has responded by making most of the recommended changes.

In the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the federal government and the State of Mississippi issued several reports criticizing and recommending improvements to federal and state disaster response. Common themes included the following:

- Accurate forecasts prevented further loss of life.
- All levels of government understood the potential consequences of a large-scale hurricane on the Gulf Coast.
- All levels of government were unprepared for a disaster so large.
- The state and local infrastructure—including flood protection, law enforcement, human services, emergency response, and medical care—was inadequate for the scope of the disaster.
- Response plans at all levels of government were inadequate for the scope of the disaster.
- All levels of government failed to execute existing response plans effectively.
- Massive communications failures undermined coordination.
- Lack of training, communication, and situational awareness undermined command and control.
- Military assistance was invaluable, but uncoordinated.

In general, the federal reports recommended a stronger focus on comprehensive emergency management; improved coordination through a national emergency operations center (EOC), regional strike teams, and interagency planning; better communications interoperability; greater commitment at all levels to the national emergency management system; better training and professional development at all levels; more comprehensive community preparedness; and more thorough planning for catastrophic disasters.The Mississippi report also emphasized smart growth and recognition of the long-term consequences of economic development decisions.

Did the events of August and September 2005 lead the emergency management community to reexamine the way it thought about and planned for catastrophic disaster? The author devised an online survey, the International Association of Emergency Managers (IAEM)—National Emergency Management Association (NEMA) Emergency Management Survey, to examine these questions.

IAEM-NEMA Survey

The survey examined "catastrophic disasters" from the perspective of local and state emergency managers.A catastrophic disaster is an "event having unprecedented levels of damage, casualties, dislocation, and disruption that would have nationwide consequences and jeopardize national security."The survey asked emergency managers to explore four themes: the most likely catastrophic disasters in their political jurisdictions, the effectiveness of their political jurisdiction's emergency operations plan (EOP), the causes of the policy failures of Hurricane Katrina, and suggested improvements for the director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

The author administered the survey to IAEM members and fifty-four state and territorial emergency management directors in early 2006. Despite a low response rate (3 percent), the survey reached all ten FEMA regions, thirty-five states and territories (65 percent), eighty-five counties (3 percent), and four Canadian provinces and one Australian state.The political jurisdictions (states and counties) in the survey represented 26 percent of the U.S. population.

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Catastrophic Disasters

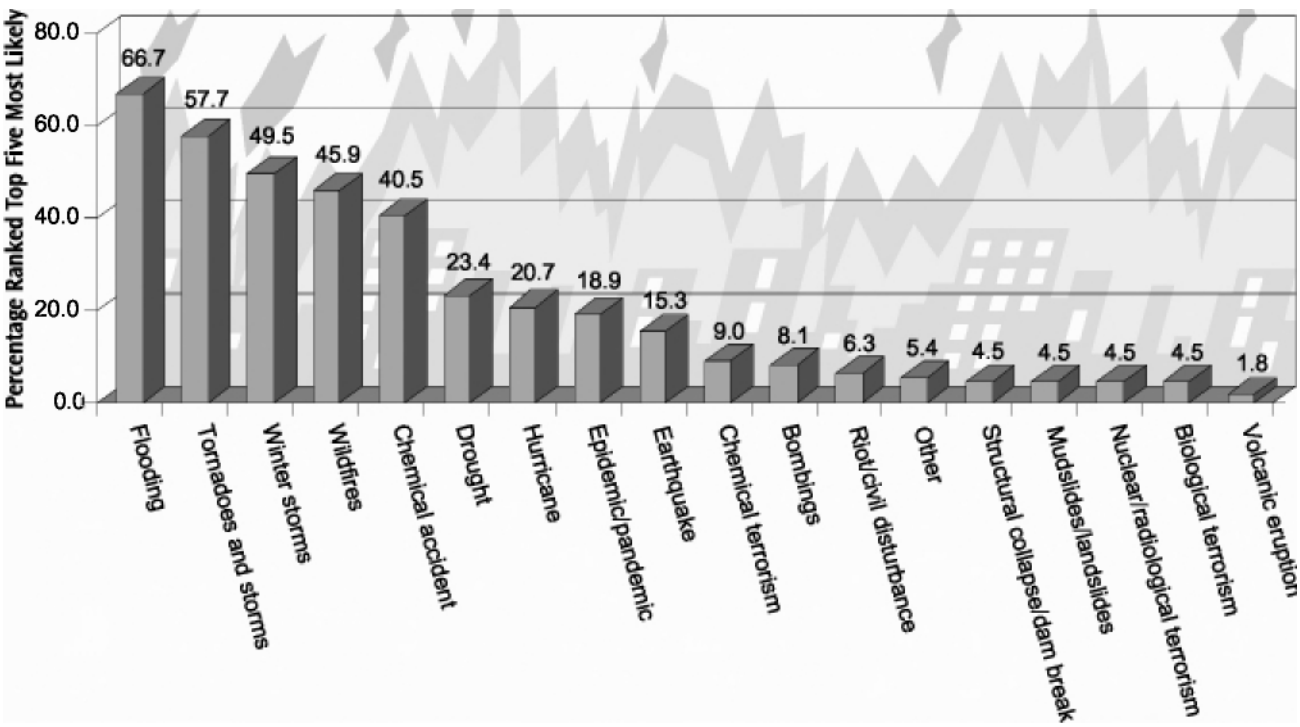
Since September 11,2001, terrorism and homeland security have largely overshadowed disaster assistance in federal emergency management. Although comprehensive emergency management includes homeland security and national preparedness, national security issues have dominated priorities and resources for disaster assistance throughout FEMA's history. In contrast, the state and local emergency managers in the survey clearly do not rate terrorism as the most likely type of catastrophic disaster to confront their political jurisdiction (Figure 1). The disasters ranked as most likely were flooding (67 percent listed flooding as first to fifth most likely), tornadoes and associated storms (58 percent), winter storms (50 percent), wildfires (46 percent), and chemical accidents (41 percent) .The different forms of terrorism only received 5 to 9 percent of the responses.

In addition, the relative rankings of likely catastrophic disasters across the ten FEMA regions varied greatly. Flooding influenced every region.Winter storms rated highly in New England and the Mid-Atlantic; tornadoes in four Midwestern and Southern regions; hurricanes in the Southeast and the Caribbean; terrorism and riots/civil disturbances in the DC region; and wildfires and earthquakes in the West.

Local and State Preparation

The survey also examined the thoroughness and clarity of local and state EOPs and the vulnerability of local and state EOCs. Using standards developed by David Alexander, they assessed four dimensions of their jurisdiction's EOP in sixteen areas: clarity, simplicity, and professional development (three); completeness (ten); vulnerability of the EOC (one); and the presence of a sufficient

Figure 1. Ratings of Disaster likelihood



number of personnel in local and state emergency management agencies (two). In general, state and local emergency managers believed their local plans were clear, simple, and professionally developed ('72 percent). They were less confident in the completeness of the plans (60 percent) .Their greatest concerns involved the adequacy of resources for catastrophic disasters, existence of an adequate mass evacuation plan, and use of a full resource audit to prepare the plan. More than half believed their EOC to be vulnerable to catastrophic disaster. Nearly 80 percent believed their local and state agencies to be understaffed.

Effectiveness of Katrina Response

Survey respondents also evaluated the effectiveness of the government response to Hurricane Katrina. The survey asked respondents to agree or disagree on a five-point scale with ten statements on four dimensions: flawed mitigation procedures and economic development decisions (four); inadequate state and local leadership and response (two); inadequate FEMA leadership and response (two); and a dimension combining respondents who believed that the response was effective with those who believed the scope of the disaster was too large for effective response (two). State and local emergency managers largely blamed poor economic development and mitigation decisions by local and state governments (68 percent) and inadequate state and local leadership and response (66 percent). Fewer respondents criticized inadequate FEMA leadership and response (33 percent) or believed that the response was effective or the disaster too large for adequate response (18 percent).

The survey also allowed respondents to answer freely. The most commonly cited causes of the ineffective governmental response were inadequate response, recovery, execution, and communication (44 percent); inadequate planning, mitigation, and preparedness (42 percent); poor leadership at all levels of government (30 percent); and poor intergovernmental coordination (21 percent). Several state, local, and private emergency management professionals cited one or more of these factors in their analysis of the adequacy or inadequacy of governmental response. At least one official placed the blame directly on a failure to educate the public about the responsibilities of emergency management.

Revitalizing Federal Emergency Management

What solutions did emergency managers suggest to revitalize federal emergency management? The survey

asked state and local emergency managers to agree or disagree on a five-point scale with fourteen potential changes in federal emergency management organization and policy that made up five dimensions: refocusing FEMA on comprehensive emergency management and restoring the direct link to the president (five); refocusing emergency management responsibility on state and local government (two); recognizing the limitations of government response (one); centralizing federal emergency management (four); and abolishing FEMA and separating the four emergency management functions (two).

The majority of respondents recommended refocusing FEMA on comprehensive emergency management and reestablishing the direct link to the president (87 percent) or refocusing emergency management responsibility on state and local government (59 percent). Few respondents said government could do little to manage catastrophic disasters (34 percent), the federal government should centralize emergency management (19 percent), or FEMA should be abolished and its functions separated (14 percent).

To identify specific recommendations, the survey asked respondents to place themselves in the role of FEMA director and note the key changes they would make to improve agency performance and achieve the agency's goals. At least 20 percent of respondents made six broad recommendations:

- Separate emergency management and homeland security: 33.3 percent
- Recruit expertise and experience: 32.1 percent
- Restructure and re-fund FEMA: 27.4 percent
- Improve intergovernmental coordination: 23.8 percent
- Focus on comprehensive emergency management: 23.8 percent
- Improve preparedness and training: 21.4 percent.

Recommendations

State, local, nonprofit, and private emergency management professionals identified several key issues and made several implicit and explicit recommendations for the improvement of federal emergency management throughout the survey:

- Recognize and develop comprehensive emergency management plans for the most likely types of catastrophic disasters: flooding, tornadoes, winter storms, fires, and chemical accidents.
- Recognize and implement plans for clear regional variations in likely catastrophes.
- Improve EOPs to ensure adequate resources for catastrophic disaster, regular mechanisms for auditing those resources, and comprehensive mass evacuation plans.
- Evaluate EOCs for vulnerability to catastrophe.
- Foster local and state economic development policies that manage effectively vulnerability to catastrophic disasters.
- Reestablish close linkages between the elected political leadership and emergency management administrators and professionals.
- Improve catastrophic disaster planning, communication, coordination, and execution at all levels of government.
- Make FEMA independent of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), recruit experience and expertise, improve coordination, shift focus back to comprehensive emergency management, and improve preparedness and training.

Aftermath

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, emergency management officials and elected politicians issued many recommendations for the improvement of federal emergency management. Most mirror the recommendations and policy changes identified by the respondents to the IAEM-NEMA survey. Several elected politicians sponsored or supported legislation to make FEMA independent of DHS, establish a direct reporting line to the president, or both. IAEM and NEMA lobbied extensively to strengthen FEMA's emergency management authority, bring preparedness back into FEMA as part of the comprehensive emergency management model, and increase funding for and maintain the natural disaster components of emergency management performance grants.

After considerable debate, President Bush signed the DHS appropriation.TitleVI of The Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006 sought to restructure federal emergency management generally, and FEMA specifically.To answer the criticisms arising from the failures of governmental performance during Hurricane Katrina, the act does the following:

- Transfers preparedness functions back into a restructured FEMA.

- Requires FEMA "to lead and support efforts to reduce the loss of life and property and protect the nation from all hazards through a risk-based system that focuses on expanded [comprehensive emergency management] CEM components." The expanded concept of CEM includes "protection."
- Grants FEMA independent status within DHS, similar to the Coast Guard and Secret Service.
- Prohibits the secretary of DHS from separating or transferring FEMA functions or resources and requires the secretary to follow statutory appropriations requirements when allocating funding to FEMA.
- Gives the FEMA administrator (formerly director) the rank of Deputy Secretary of DHS, reporting directly to the president, Homeland Security Council, and Secretary of DHS; possibly receiving cabinet position status during a national emergency; and requiring emergency management or homeland security experience (although the White House has contested the limitation on presidential appointment power).
- Allows FEMA up to four deputy administrators appointed by the president and confirmed by the Senate.
- Requires FEMA to develop and maintain robust regional operations headed by regional administrators who have extensive emergency management and homeland security experience.
- Gives, for disaster response, the administrator greater authority to preposition resources or unilaterally provide assistance without a state request.
- Requires appointment of a national advisory council and ten regional advisory councils to provide state, local, nonprofit, and private expertise to FEMA and its regional offices. Creates regional strike teams to provide assistance during disasters.
- Creates a disability coordinator, a chief medical officer, and a small state and rural advocate. The administrator appoints the first, the president (with the advice of the Senate) chooses the second, and the president selects the third.
- Makes changes to ensure greater flexibility in the delivery of services and assistance during the response and recovery phases of a declared disaster.

FEMA has begun to implement these initiatives through the creation of a National Preparedness Directorate and development of a Catastrophic Disaster Planning Initiative. In addition, in its fiscal year 2008 budget request, it has begun the process of converting its short-term response employees into permanent employees.

A comparison of the policy recommendations of the five federal and state Hurricane Katrina reports, respondents to the IAEM-NEMA 2006 survey, and actions taken by Congress and the president suggests that the president and Congress have listened. The Post-Katrina Act has strengthened FEMA, reestablished the direct linkage between the FEMA administrator and the president, refocused the agency on comprehensive emergency management, and recognized the importance of regional differences in catastrophic disasters. The only federal recommendation not implemented was the separation of FEMA from DHS. The actions taken to increase the status of FEMA within DHS and reestablish direct reporting lines to the president have achieved much of the advantages associated with independence.

However, the Post-Katrina Act does little to ensure that state and local jurisdictions make their EOPs more comprehensive, retrofit their E0Cs, and make economic development decisions that promote comprehensive vulnerability management. These actions will require a greater commitment from state and local elected officials with support from the state and local emergency management community.

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