



CASE STUDY

Colorado United Recovery Symposium

FACILITATING CONNECTIONS AMONG PEER COMMUNITIES

Learning Objective: Analyze the methods used by the State of Colorado to manage disaster recovery and unite local leaders after the 2013 flood event.

Keywords: Recovery, Major Disaster Declaration, State, Federal Support, Recovery Planning, Capacity Building, Community Engagement, Identifying and Leveraging Resources



Figure 1. Colorado United logo with partner organizations.

PART ONE

Background

It was September 2013, and the Colorado Division of Local Government watched a major flood disaster unfold while still in the midst of managing a recovery effort from wildfires that had ravaged Colorado’s hillsides a year before. In the span of just five days, over 17 inches of water fell across the state, approaching the state’s total annual precipitation level. The extensive flooding and subsequent mudslides resulted in 10 fatalities and forced evacuations of over 18,000 residents. More than 17,800 homes and 2,250 non-residential structures were damaged or destroyed across 24 counties in northeastern Colorado. Nearly 500 miles of roads and 30 bridges were destroyed, with an additional 20 bridges requiring significant repairs.

After the Presidential Disaster Declaration was requested by the Governor and approved, FEMA quickly activated five Recovery Support Functions (RSF) to assist the state in recovery: (1) Community Planning and Capacity Building (CPCB); (2) Economic Recovery; (3) Housing; (4) Infrastructure Systems; and (5) Natural and Cultural Resources. Each of these was led by a federal agency with the expertise and resources to provide assistance to Colorado.

Symposium Key Partners

The following worked together as the planning committee for the event:

- Colorado Department of Local Affairs, Division of Local Government
- FEMA – Community Planning and Capacity Building Recovery Support Function (RSF)
- Colorado Chapter of the American Planning Association
- University of Colorado – Denver

The Colorado Department of Local Affairs (DOLA) Division of Local Government found themselves tasked with leading Colorado’s Economic and Community Recovery Support Function. Fortunately, the Division had pre-existing working relationships with federal and local partners that were essential for the flood recovery efforts as a result of recent efforts to establish and implement Colorado’s Disaster Recovery Plan. This plan outlines the roles and responsibilities of a State Disaster Recovery Manager and the 14 State Recovery Support Functions.

Early discussions between the Division of Local Government and other state partners led to a plan for a recovery symposium, with technical assistance from the CPCB RSF. The planning committee set the date for November 22, just two months after the incident.

The Colorado United Recovery Symposium’s goal was to assist the flood-affected communities by providing a forum to share lessons learned, build local partnerships, identify resources and bring together community leaders who have first-hand experience in navigating long-term disaster recovery.

PART TWO

Actions

The symposium targeted key stakeholders at local, city, county, and state levels. Representatives of eighteen counties designated to receive FEMA Individual Assistance & Public Assistance support were invited as well as every municipality in the five most affected counties. In total, 144 people attended. The symposium’s objectives were to:

- Assist local government officials in understanding the process of post-disaster long term recovery planning for community and economic recovery;
- Learn from other local long-term recovery efforts both in Colorado and in nearby states;
- Facilitate a discussion on watershed recovery issues that enables participants to develop a take on a strategic approach to these decisions; and
- Define future training and technical assistance needs.

Peer mentors from Waterbury, VT, Joplin, MO, Greensburg, KS, and Windsor, CO shared their own recovery lessons learned and best practices. They also discussed what real community recovery could look like with participants. Panel discussions such as “Vision for Recovery” provided specific information and valuable tools for long-term recovery planning. Local subject matter experts, including representatives from the Colorado Water Conservation Board, discussed the water issues affected communities were facing during recovery planning in the “Stream Recovery Forum.”



Figure 2. Panelists speaking to community leaders at the Symposium. Left to right: Jane Cage, Rebecca Ellis, Kelly Arnold, and Bob Dixon.

Results

The symposium’s participants noted it provided opportunities to:

- Build and leverage relationships with new and existing partners;
- Create buy-in for the recovery process among stakeholders;
- Provide a central forum for multiple stakeholders to benefit from subject-matter experts;
- Facilitate peer-to-peer connections, enabling local leaders to learn how others have navigated the challenges of disaster recovery;
- Provide state, tribal, local, and non-governmental partners access to unrealized resources.

DOLA held follow up events including a funding workshop, grant skills workshop, Watershed Symposium, and a Resiliency and Sustainability Summit due to the success of this event. Continued collaboration between federal, state, and non-governmental partners led to the development of the Colorado Resiliency Framework which has helped localities become more resilient to the hazards they face.

“The symposium was very beneficial to show that there were agencies that were working to bring affected communities and partner agencies together to work on recovery together, and that no one was in this alone.”

- Colorado Department of Local Affairs,
Division of Local Government

Lessons Learned

The symposium achieved its objectives due to five key factors:

1. Colorado's adoption of a Recovery Support Function structure allowed the state and the CPCB RSF to identify each other as partners on a parallel mission.
2. A strong pre-disaster partnership between the state and the federal RSFs cultivated trust and a clear understanding of each other's roles and resources in recovery.
3. Bi-weekly meetings between the planning partners kept all parties on the same page and accountable for their share of the planning.
4. Many local, state, and federal officials attended, which allowed participants to learn about varied resources.
5. Panel events and networking fostered dialogue between peer communities and helped keep communities in the lead for developing recovery strategies.

Additional Resources

- [Colorado Office of Emergency Management: Colorado Community Recovery Symposium](#)
- [APA – Colorado Chapter: Colorado Community Recovery Symposium](#)
- [Colorado Recovery Plans and Guidance](#)