



FEMA

Interagency Recovery Coordination

CASE STUDY – Teaching Note

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

Instructor's Introduction

This teaching note is intended to prepare an instructor to use this case study in a classroom (live or virtually). The note expands on the lessons learned from this case study, which has been written to help students learn from a real-world disaster recovery experience. Selection of learning objectives, discussion questions, and activities can be customized based on audience and time allowance. The remainder of the guide provides suggestions of key concepts to explore as you teach the case. It is suggested that you require students to read the Background and Challenges sections, pause to discuss the scenario, and then move on to read the remainder of the case.

After experiencing catastrophic floods in September 2013, Colorado relied on its Disaster Recovery Plan, which outlined roles and recovery support functions. This case study highlights how the Colorado Department of Local Affairs (DOLA), in partnership with FEMA, hosted a recovery symposium for community leaders to share lessons learned, build partnerships, and identify resources that would aid local leaders in beginning the recovery process.

To become more familiar with the case content before teaching the case, please review the following:

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

Student Learning Outcomes:

- Consider methods that can be utilized by state governments early-on in a disaster recovery to build buy-in among community leaders for recovery strategy development and execution.
- Recognize the benefits that can come from state-led pre-disaster recovery planning and post-disaster community engagement.

Key Takeaways:

- The symposium supported community-driven recovery strategies by connecting local recovery managers with peers from both within Colorado sharing a similar experience and across the country, who were able to speak from lessons learned through recovery experience.
- The symposium planning committee included representatives from state and federal agencies, who met bi-weekly in order to arrange the workshop that brought local officials together just two months after the incident, providing technical assistance and peer advice at a crucial moment in the recovery timeframe.
- Colorado's adoption of the Recovery Support Function structure and pre-disaster recovery planning practices enabled the state to be ready to successfully lead its communities through the recovery process.

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.

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.



Figure 1. Colorado United logo with partner organizations.

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

Part One Discussion Activities

Discussion Questions:

1. If you were on the planning committee for the community recovery symposium after such a major disaster, with an opportunity to share information among hundreds of local government leaders just beginning their recoveries, what information would you want covered at the event? What type of people would you bring in as panelists? What types of lessons learned would you hope to achieve?
2. What do you think are some of the most common challenges experienced by local governments as they begin to plan for recovery from a major disaster? *Teaching Note: commonly identified challenges include competing priorities with ongoing response and short-term needs; identifying and leveraging financial resources; ramping up staffing requirements, especially grants management personnel; public communications; managing procurement requirements for federal and state programs; and building resilience into housing and infrastructure restoration.*

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.



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

“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

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.”

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.

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.

Part Two Discussion Activities

Activity 1: Analyze Event Takeaways for Participants

Setup: Pull up a brief (3 min 31 sec) video from FEMA on the Colorado United Symposium, <https://www.fema.gov/media-library/assets/videos/92984>. You may want to have this loaded before beginning the case.

Instructions: Play the video for the class, then discuss your impressions of what participants were able to take away from the event.

Discussion Questions:

1. Have you seen or experienced a similar symposium post-disaster? Describe the event and share some of its takeaways with classmates. How was it comparable to or different from the Colorado United Recovery Symposium? Did it assist in coordinating the disaster recovery processes of peer communities?

Follow up with the FEMA Guidance Development Office

The Guidance Development Office (GDO) develops and distributes FEMA's Interagency Recovery Coordination (IRC) case studies. Our team would appreciate your feedback on these case studies and accompanying teaching notes. Please let us know how you have used this case study for a learning experience and your thoughts on what went well or could have been improved. To get in contact with our team, please email FEMA-RECOVERY-ICD-GDO@fema.dhs.gov. Thank you.