A Transforming Field

The Shifting Context and Expanding Role of Emergency Management

Current Trend

In recent years, the role that emergency managers play in their communities has undergone a transformation, extending their responsibilities far beyond the conventional boundaries of responding to natural disasters. Society's modern problems are complex, interconnected, multidisciplined, and multijurisdictional. Furthermore, emergencies are increasingly varied, severe, and frequent.[1] Emergency managers are now asked to tackle challenges around public health coordination, supply chain management, contested information, cybersecurity, and resilient community development in addition to traditional roles tied to response and recovery.
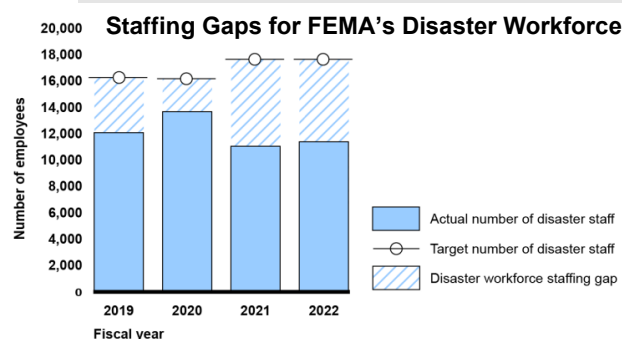
Challenges such as a rising frequency of disasters, increased need for inter-jurisdiction and interagency coordination, and staffing shortages[2] have significantly influenced the expectations and expansion of emergency managers at all levels – federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial. To address these challenges, emergency managers are embracing resourceful and innovative approaches, including developing new coordination roles and offices, cross-training staff, leveraging volunteers and community resources, and harnessing technology for task automation. The escalating frequency of disasters demands greater agility and adaptability from emergency managers. They must develop strategies for managing multiple ongoing emergencies, which necessitates effective resource allocation and prioritization.

Implications

As the role of emergency managers undergoes a profound transformation to meet the complex demands of our

Key Facts

- On average, the frequency of billion-dollar weather and climate disasters in the last 5 years has increased by 130% compared with previous decades.

- Recent experiences like the COVID-19 pandemic, increasingly urgent calls for humanitarian assistance at the southern border, and winter storms and heat waves of unprecedented severity have expanded the purview of emergency managers nation-wide.

- The risks to U.S. national security interests are increasing as the effects of climate change intersect with geopolitical tension and vulnerabilities of global systems.

- Between 2019 and 2022, FEMA's staffing gap fluctuated between approximately 19% understaffed and 38% understaffed.

Staffing Gaps for FEMA's Disaster Workforce

Legend:
- Actual number of disaster staff
- Target number of disaster staff
- Disaster workforce staffing gap

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[1] Billion-Dollar Weather and Climate Disasters | National Centers for Environmental Information (NCEI) (noaa.gov)

[2] Graphic: GAO-23-105663, FEMA DISASTER WORKFORCE: Actions Needed to Improve Hiring Data and Address Staffing Gaps

Key Facts State Policy Considerations for Disaster Risk and Resilience (ncsl.org); GAO-23-106840, FEMA: Opportunities to Strengthen Management and Address Increasing Challenges; 2024 Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community (odni.gov)

interconnected world, a host of implications emerge that resonate throughout the realms of disaster management, resilience building, and community well-being. These implications underscore the need for innovative approaches, adaptive strategies, and collaborative endeavors.

Novel Coordination and Planning Demands

Federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial emergency management leaders are facing increasing coordination pressure as disasters grow more complex and interconnected. Available federal funding for cross-cutting mitigation and recovery initiatives increased dramatically with the passage of the Disaster Recovery Reform Act (DRRA) in 2018. In 2021 and 2022 respectively, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act and the Inflation Reduction Act created additional avenues for federal funding to support developing resilient infrastructure and implementing climate-mitigation projects.[3] This influx in resources has presented new opportunities to pursue the multidisciplinary, multijurisdictional initiatives required by a resilience framing to emergency management. Executing such initiatives demands coordination far beyond what emergency managers have historically held responsibility over. Jurisdictions are establishing new roles, such as Chief Resilience Officer (CRO), and new resilience offices to oversee coordination portfolios, requiring staff to develop new skillsets or recruit expertise. While such developments are promising, extensive resource and capacity challenges remain in ensuring that jurisdictions improve or achieve resilience, on the ground, through these dedicated positions and offices.

A 2022 study of local government level CROs highlighted a disconnect between the comprehensive emergency management framework and the work portfolios of local emergency management programs and personnel.[4] While emergency management thought-leaders describe the field as encompassing preparedness, response, mitigation, and recovery, practitioners at the local level may not always aim to achieve this breadth due to a variety of reasons from resource constraints to mission overlap. CRO interviewees reflected that local emergency managers' lines of effort are closely aligned with preparedness and response and often do not include mitigation or recovery. Furthermore, many local emergency management offices are housed in first responder institutions (e.g., fire houses and police stations) and personnel often come from first responder backgrounds. Along with capacity limitations, this context and training frames the daily operations of local emergency managers. Transitioning local on-the-ground emergency management to encompass mitigation and recovery along with preparedness and response will require substantially increased resources to address current infrastructure and experience limitations.

The increasing intersectionality of national security and homeland security further amplifies the need for a cross-cutting approach to emergency management. The 2024 Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community highlights intense and unpredictable transnational tensions, accelerating strategic competition among global powers, fragilities in the public health sector, and

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[3] State Policy Considerations for Disaster Risk and Resilience (ncsl.org)

[4] Local emergency management and comprehensive emergency management | International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction

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increasingly severe and cascading impacts of climate change.[5] These challenges present new opportunities for collective action, with state and non-state actors alike, as broader networks, expertise, and capacity are required to mitigate the shifting threat landscape.

Increased Staff Support Needs

The changing climate, increased breadth of emergencies, and dramatic broadening of the emergency management portfolio have also led to more urgent demands on our workforce. As emergency managers take on multifaceted roles, the strain on financial, personnel, and equipment resources will intensify. Ongoing professional development becomes crucial to equip teams with the skills, equipment, and infrastructure necessary to fulfill these new responsibilities effectively. While the expertise required by the field broadens, many experienced emergency management professionals are departing the workforce. The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) reporting attributes retention challenges, in part, to growing demands on staff associated with the high intensity, year-round pace of the growing emergency management portfolio.[2] These concurrent challenges raise an urgent need to transform the emergency management field into a more appealing career choice for new talent. Capturing the generational knowledge that has been accumulated and onboarding the next generation into the field must be simultaneously prioritized. There will be high upfront costs associated with training new personnel and expanding the workforce to fill in the gaps. Fostering norms around rest and recuperation may increase internal resilience. Additionally, workforce recruitment and retention will require further highlighting the field's importance and social impact, showcasing opportunities for career growth, and investing in professional development and training to successfully attract, recruit, and retain talent to the field of emergency management.

Unprecedented Technological Opportunities and Challenges

Innovations in technology create both opportunities and challenges for the field of emergency management. Among the emerging technologies that hold significant potential are artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning, which are force multipliers for analyzing vast datasets and predicting emergency scenarios. Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and drones have also rapidly emerged as tools that have the potential to greatly enhance aerial assessments, search and rescue missions, and supply deliveries to remote or inaccessible areas. As disasters become increasingly frequent and severe, these tools may allow emergency managers to address community needs without unachievable demands on staff capacity. Technological advances may also allow for increasingly swift, wide-ranging, and accessible communication with the public when disasters hit. This capacity will be invaluable in unprecedented disaster scenarios requiring rapid and widespread information dissemination to ensure community safety.

While such technological advances hold immense promise, it is crucial for emergency management professionals to stay vigilant about potential challenges and vulnerabilities in today's cybersecurity environment. This type of vulnerability is known all-too-well by other businesses and public

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[5] 2024 Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community (odni.gov)

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infrastructure, demonstrated by the many data breaches of 2018 that affected hundreds of millions of accounts, including the cyberattacks of Marriott Starwood[6] and the Port of San Diego. Such security breaches could lead to the broadcasting of misinformation, putting communities at risk, and eroding public trust in emergency management institutions. Cyber threats are amplified by cross-national tensions, as forces across the globe continue to leverage technology for ransomware, surveillance, and political gain.[7] Robust security measures and guidance, such as the 2023 Planning Considerations for Cyber Incidents Guide and the Shields Ready Campaign developed by FEMA and the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), are essential to safeguard against cyber threats and ensure the seamless integration of technological advances into existing emergency management practices.[8]

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[6] The Marriott data breach | Consumer Advice (ftc.gov)
[7] 2024 Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community (odni.gov)
[8] Planning Considerations for Cyber Incidents (fema.gov)

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Signals of Change

Pressure builds for FEMA to declare deadly heat events as disasters

https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2023/06/29/fema-heat-waves-disasters/

As Climate Shocks Worsen, U.S. Disaster Agency Tries a New Approach to Aid

https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/19/climate/fema-disaster-aid-climate.html

FEMA Stretched Beyond Climate Response as Disasters Balloon

https://about.bgov.com/news/fema-stretched-beyond-climate-response-as-disasters-balloon/

FEMA Is Losing Employees at an Alarming Rate

https://www.govexec.com/workforce/2023/05/fema-has-shed-staff-alarming-rate/386092/

Generative AI is set to transform crisis management

https://www.nextgov.com/ideas/2023/10/generative-ai-set-transform-crisis-management/391264/

Online posts spread misinformation about FEMA aid following Maui wildfires

https://apnews.com/article/maui-wildfires-hawaii-fema-misinformation-8562e2e81e03626acc5be30700d73120

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