

Building an Emergency Management Baseline: Four Non-Negotiables

By W. Craig Fugate, Senior Advisor to the CEO at Cadmus,
Past FEMA Administrator (2008-2017), Past Florida Emergency Management Director (2001-2009)

Planning for catastrophic disasters is one of our greatest challenges. In some ways, it goes against our nature. We tend to plan and exercise for what we are capable of handling and hope we can scale up. We look to our immediate past history for future risk. I have heard from many disaster survivors and local officials, “I have lived here all my life, and I never knew it could be this bad.”

Not planning for catastrophic risk is a recipe for failure. It is what happened with Hurricane Katrina. We prepared for what we were capable of, and hoped we could scale up. You cannot just “scale up.” That mistake cost us dramatically.

Four Things Every Entity Should Do to Ensure Some Level of Success

Based on my experience as an emergency manager, there are four things every organization – every country – should do to ensure some level of success if an incident occurs:

- Plan for what can happen, not just past events.
- Plan for the maximum impacts, not just what you can handle.
- Build a team, not just government, but the whole of the community.
- Exercise the team and your plans against the community, state, or national catastrophic risk.

These four elements should be the foundation for every emergency manager.

Plan for What Can Happen

Past history is not always a good indicator of the maximum risk each level of government faces. One school of thought is to plan for what will most likely will happen, and hope it is not any worse. This approach works most of the time, until it fails. Our plans must be based on the level of the government’s worst case credible risk.

Plan for Maximum Impacts

MOM, or maximums of maximums, is a way of looking at risk. From hurricane storm surge to geomagnetic storms, plan for the maximum predicted impacts. Research and collect modeling hazard impacts from credible sources such as the United States Geological Survey or the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Then apply the results of these hazard models to your vulnerabilities.

Caution: Don’t try to make the model data fit your capabilities or disregard results you think are unlikely. Use those maximums to ask yourself what you would do if that happened. By not making the disaster fit your capabilities, it forces the team to look at alternatives such as mutual aid. More important, it forces the team to look for solutions that are not merely scaling up current systems or practices.

Build a team

In most disasters, government based responses work well and are

more easily controlled. However, the bigger the disaster, the more likely that government agencies alone will not have the ability to provide needed resources or capabilities.

- Engaging volunteer and faith-based organizations is the first step that most emergency managers have taken.

- Adding the private sector to the team is the next step. Do you have a place in your emergency management program, from planning to exercising, for businesses that provide on a day-to-day basis most of the goods and services you’ll need?

- The last key member of your team is the public – not just with regard to being prepared, but as a resource in a disaster. We often think of the public as a liability, not a resource. But in most cases, the first responder is often a neighbor. We must move past the message of preparedness only to one of engagement of the public in a crisis.

Exercise the Team

Exercises are where we prepare the team to operate in catastrophic events. Exercises are part training, part familiarization, and part testing. Testing your team does not happen if exercises do not stress the plan and capabilities.

The coaching adage, “We play like we practice,” applies to exercises as well. Design your exercises to test your team against the MOM, not just those events they can handle with the usual impacts.



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Conclusion

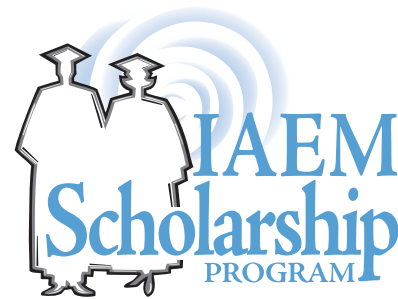
We can learn a lot from history. Look at Hurricane Katrina. We prepared for what we were capable of, and we were hopeful for a best-case scenario. That did not happen.

On a broader scale, look at Fukushima. We understood earthquakes and tsunamis, and we understood reactor incidents. But we did not understand how the interaction would create a situation that had not been planned for. We could not manage effectively.

The lesson is not to plan and exercise for success, but plan and exercise for what could happen. If you are not willing to exercise against what might happen, you will fail when your city, state or country needs you the most. ▲

About the Author: W. Craig Fugate is currently Senior Advisor to the CEO at Cadmus, a strategy and analysis company serving the homeland security, energy, and environmental communities. Previously, Mr. Fugate served as the Administrator of the U.S. Federal

Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) from May 2008 to January 2017. Prior to his tenure at FEMA, Mr. Fugate served as the State of Florida's emergency management director from 2001 through 2009. In 2016, he received the IAEM-USA National Security Award. That same year, he received the National Emergency Management Association (NEMA) Lacy E. Suiter Award for lifetime achievements and contributions in the field of emergency management.



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