

A “Whole Community” Approach to Emergency Management

The Reality of Today’s Crises

As the effects of natural and man-made disasters become more rapid, far-reaching, and wide-spread, government at all levels must grapple with the limitations of its capabilities. The simple reality is that in small and medium sized disasters, government can expand its reach and deliver services more efficiently and cost effectively by partnering with institutions, groups and individuals already active in the impacted communities. And in large scale disasters, the needs of survivors will outweigh the collective resources and capabilities that government at all levels can bring to bear. Government can no longer assume that it can solve disaster management challenges on its own, and how effectively government at every level engages with and leverages the resources of other segments of society will determine how successful the nation’s response is, as a whole.

At the same time, experience has taught us that we must do a better job of providing services for the entire community, regardless of their background, demographics, or challenges. This means planning for the actual makeup of a community, making sure we meet the needs of every disaster survivor regardless of age, economics, or accessibility requirements.

Addressing these related concerns cannot be achieved by simply improving on what we have always done – we must fundamentally change how we go about disaster preparedness, response, recovery and mitigation, involving the communities we serve directly in these efforts. We must look beyond the traditional, “government-centric” approach to emergency management and embrace a philosophy and operational posture that leverages, and serves, the Whole Community.

FEMA’s Approach

FEMA recognizes that it takes all aspects of a community (volunteer, faith and community-based organizations, the private sector, and the public, including survivors themselves) – not just the government – to effectively prepare for, protect against, respond to, recover from, and mitigate against any disaster. It is critical that we work together to enable communities to develop collective, mutually supporting local capabilities to withstand the potential initial impacts of these events, respond quickly, and recover in a way that sustains or improves the community’s overall well-being. How communities achieve this collective capacity calls for innovative approaches from across the full spectrum of community actors to expand and enhance existing practices, institutions, and organizations that help make local communities successful every day, under normal conditions, and leverage this social infrastructure to help meet community needs when an incident occurs.

Building community resilience in this manner requires emergency managers to engage effectively with and holistically plan for the needs of the whole community, realign emergency management practices to support local needs, and work to strengthen the institutions, assets, and networks that work well in communities on a daily basis. We can do this by greatly expanding the traditional emergency management team to include the full fabric of the community, increasing the capacity of all team members, broadening participation in all aspects of emergency management, and strengthening underlying economic, social, and environmental conditions. A Whole Community approach to emergency management encompasses three key concepts:

- *Understanding and meeting the true needs of the entire affected community.*
- *Engaging all aspects of the community (public, private, and civic) in both defining those needs and devising ways to meet them.*
- *Strengthening the assets, institutions, and social processes that work well in communities on a daily basis to improve resilience and emergency management outcomes.*

Creating a National Dialogue

As a key part of its approach, FEMA is conducting an outreach campaign with communities around the country to solicit input, and ideas on how to encourage sustained community participation and involvement in preparedness and resilience activities – both at the local and national levels. This effort involves workshops and listening sessions in which discussions are focused on how communities are motivated and engaged, how they understand risk, and their experiences with resilience following a disaster.

Working with New Partners to Better Prepare

Central to the Whole Community approach is the idea of expanding the Emergency Management team, working with groups outside of the federal family to better understand and plan for the needs of a community before, during, and after a disaster strikes. To accomplish this goal, FEMA has been aggressively increasing its overall outreach efforts, establishing relationships with new partners and reinvigorating and reframing relationships with the more traditional members of the team.

Reshaping Planning and Preparedness

Being prepared as a nation means moving beyond a federal or government-centric approach to emergency management. As a team, we need to implement solutions that serve the entire community while also leveraging the resources that the entire community brings to the table. But how do we implement this Whole Community concept into the work that FEMA and our partners do every day? FEMA has begun driving this concept into its operations, starting with a catastrophic planning initiative known as the *Maximum of Maximums*: planning and preparing for a catastrophe where extraordinary levels of mass casualties, damage, and disruption overwhelm our traditional, and well established, response and recovery plans and procedures. Though the Whole Community approach will eventually be applied to all of our core missions, this *Maximum of Maximums* effort is an important first step in making concrete changes in the way we conduct our operations.

Getting Involved

Through the activities discussed above, FEMA seeks to spark dramatic expansion and transformation of current community engagement strategies to promote approaches that position local residents in leadership roles in planning, organizing, and sharing accountability for the success of local disaster management efforts. We believe that Whole Community Emergency Management is a philosophy that should be applied to everything we do, as an agency, and as a field of practice. To that end, FEMA will support the development of guidance, tools, training, and educational programs that effectively engage and integrate the entire community into local emergency management activities to strengthen resilience and improve outcomes.

As one of our partners, we would appreciate your insight and guidance on the following:

1. How do we most effectively engage the whole community in emergency management to include a wide breadth of community members (e.g. local and state community representatives, academia, faith-based and community-based organizations, private sector, etc.)?
2. How might we solicit creative assistance in broadening the team to include new partners and develop innovative solutions?
3. How else might we continue to refine this whole community approach?
4. Have you seen greater resilience in places where communities have been engaged in emergency management activities? Please share examples, practices, and strategies.

Please send your thoughts and feedback to: FEMA-Community-Engagement@dhs.gov