

*Emergency planning for municipalities:
Emergency Planning 101*

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It's been said that it's not the plan that's important but the planning process. Be that as it may, when dealing with a number of multidepartment municipalities that vary in size and have no emergency preparedness experience, the plan itself may in fact be more valuable than the process in the face of a potential major disaster. How, then, to prepare a multitude of communities for an incident of critical significance that requires a coordinated and effective response in order to save lives, minimize damage, and provide a basis for long-term community recovery and mitigation activities?

At this point in the mandate of deliverables for eligibility for federal disaster grants/funding, counties and states are required to have disaster mitigation plans and, in accordance with Homeland Security Presidential Directive/HSPD-5, adopt the provisions of the National Incident Management System. Inseparably linked to these requirements by the *National Response Plan's* framework for interaction among all levels of government is the need for compatible emergency operations plans (EOPs) that provide uniformity and transparency at all levels, federal through local. Herein lies the challenge; while experts in their field, most municipal officials have neither the time nor the inclination to decipher the complexities of state and federal contingency planning. The issue becomes one of county emergency managers communicating their expertise to overworked municipal officials in a fashion that lends itself to the development of well-coordinated local plans.

In anticipation of an incident of critical significance, county planners in Chatham County (Savannah, Georgia) developed a generic EOP that mirrors both state EOPs and the *National Response*

Plan. This generic plan was distributed to the county's seven municipalities in a fill-in-the-blanks template format. It reduced the scope and abbreviated the organization of the county EOP to a plan more suited to municipal needs. While the purpose of the plan remained essentially the same as that of its county model, the size of the available staff was reduced and designed for an average municipal organization with a mayor; a city administrator; and police, fire/EMS, maintenance, finance, purchasing, human resources, and zoning departments. It was recognized that not all municipalities were organized or structured the same; however, organizational flexibility did not need to be sacrificed in order to maintain a common direction and compatibility with the county plan. For example, the county plan calls for the Department of Public Works to accomplish specific functions, but it makes no difference if the municipal department accomplishing parallel or complementary duties is called Public Works, Maintenance, Landscaping, or Engineering. As long as both the municipality and the department recognize the department's responsibility for accomplishing specific tasks, and as long as the department in question is capable of fulfilling its mandate, the name is irrelevant; the municipality can call it whatever it chooses.

As in any disaster, priorities remained, such as saving lives and property, securing affected areas, protecting resources, and restoring infrastructure. Responsibilities were defined in general terms, and the 15 federally specified emergency support functions (ESFs) were explained in detail in order to maintain compatibility with county, state, and federal plans. Like county, state, and federal plans,

one primary agency was made responsible for coordinating each ESF. However, the multitudes of ESF support agencies found at higher levels were reduced to those departments and agencies that could be expected to be available to a municipality. For example, the 16 county agencies supporting ESF #8, Public Health and Medical Services, were reduced to two at the municipal level (fire/EMS and locally available volunteer organizations). Finally, the ESFs were reduced in scope to those functions that apply at the municipal level.

Because it's essential that the municipal template complement the county plan, the template is fundamentally an extensively abbreviated version of the county plan. By considerably reducing the scope and detail of the county plan, the municipal template is surprisingly easy to develop.

At the county level, plans to respond to specific high-risk threats are promulgated as Incident Annexes to the EOP. Although for decades it's been spared, one of the many threats facing the Eastern seaboard is the strike of a major hurricane. The 2005 Florida hurricanes and the havoc resulting from Katrina and Rita have shown coastal communities how vulnerable they are and how devastating these storms can be. As a result of its specialized application to the East Coast, an EOP Incident Annex was developed to facilitate local hurricane planning. Like the basic EOP, this Annex complements county planning. It consists of brief Introduction, Purpose, Implementation, and Responsibility paragraphs, followed by a more detailed Concept of Operations section that addresses the following points, dedicating one or two paragraphs to each:

- direction and control responsibilities;
- application of the incident command system;
- location of direction and control functions (command post);
- emergency communications;
- public information; and
- emergency protective ordinances.

With the same sense of brevity, the Evacuation section focuses on:

- authorities and responsibilities;
- levels and types of evacuation (partial, full, voluntary, mandatory);
- routes and destinations; and
- traffic control points.

The Critical Workforce Sheltering section provides criteria for the use of such shelters and identifies assignments for essential staff.

The Recovery and Reentry section discusses:

- authority, responsibilities, and coordination;
- post-storm regrouping;
- post-storm reentry;
- damage/needs assessment; and
- debris management.

Appendix A contains response timelines that are compatible with the county plan, and Appendix B identifies priorities for road clearing.

Once the template was completed it was distributed as a CD to the municipalities, and the County Emergency Management Agency conducted a brief training orientation. The plan's template indicated "City of _____," so that the "replace" function could be used to insert the name of the targeted municipality throughout the plan. Review by a municipal official confirmed or denied the names of local departments, ensuring that the proper titles were used. Following distribution and review, municipal planning meetings were held to coordinate tasks and responsibilities. Some assignments were modified, but the meetings were generally used to coordinate responsibilities and to identify mutual support areas where departments could assist one another. After

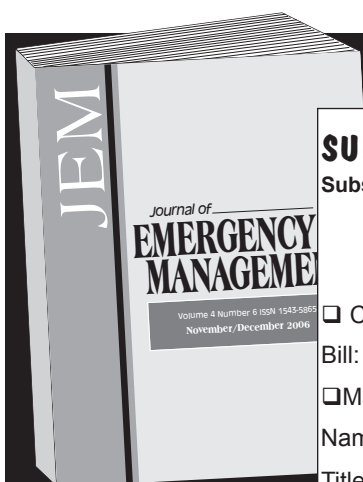
the review and coordination were complete, the county hosted a tabletop exercise utilizing a scenario designed to rehearse responses to a variety of potential events. Once satisfied that the needs of the community would be met, municipal officials formally adopted the emergency plan.

Although most local departments involved with public safety are acquainted with county emergency procedures, having a detailed guide to help them construct and coordinate community plans is a tremendous asset. The County Emergency Management Agency accomplishes its goal of ensuring its municipalities have workable, compatible contingency plans, and the municipalities obtain plans that meet the unique needs of their communities while

seamlessly interfacing with the county for mutual aid and supplemental resources. The benefits are an immediate win-win.

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