THE WHITE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

To the editor:

The phrase “elephant in the room” refers to an evident issue which the majority of members are aware of but has been a topic that’s generally avoided or ignored by policy makers. The elephant is white because of recent focus on race in the US and worldwide. To support equity in emergency management, this letter discusses three different solutions for change.

With “black lives matter” protests and the “me too” movements progressing the last few years, now is the time for the US Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and state and local emergency management agencies to actively prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion in policies, procedures, and practices.

The FEMA mission “to help people before, during, and after disasters,” and as referenced in the 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, FEMA maintains a key role to play in mirroring the heterogeneity of the communities it serves. The first and foremost strategic goal states that the agency must “…understand our local and community risks, reflect the diversity of those we serve, and foster partnerships that allow us to connect with a diverse nation.” Traditionally, this language isn’t reflected in facts. FEMA’s policies are drafted to provide resources to those who usually have more access to resources already: Caucasian homeowners and business owners with middle class or above wealth.

Now is the time to put words about the need for change into actions, starting from how employees and contractors are hired, to creating organizational design to better ensure those with the most resource needs are able to recover from a disaster. We start with FEMA, as it sets the standard for state and local agencies. With a budget authority of over $28 billion and more than 13,000 employees, FEMA has the capability to hire and retain employees and programs which better reflect and assist the communities served in our nation.

A look at the data

A lack of equity at the federal level isn’t hearsay. Reviewing some of FEMA’s demographics (race, gender) and existing barriers for equal opportunity (ability for a minority to be promoted), it’s been shown that executive leadership have been aware of its issues for multiple years but solutions haven’t been acted upon in a timely manner. An overview of FEMA’s 2020 employee race and gender data by Best Places to Work from fedscope.opm.gov displays the majority of staffing are White (68.2 percent) and male (59.1 percent). The US Government Accountability Office (the “government watchdog”) was aware of internal issues as stated in its 2019 report, where multiple obstacles were identified. Many of these issues exist throughout the agency that oversees FEMA—The Department of Homeland Security (DHS). The agencies identified failures in Equal Employment Opportunity programs and a lack of policies and procedures for developing action plans to resolve the problems. For example, challenges with supervision/management and lack of advancement opportunities cause more white females and several ethnic and racial groups to quit than is normal. DHS and FEMA are losing its diverse staff and haven’t implemented mitigation strategies.

Why is this important? Hiring a diverse staff has secondary effects: to both mirror the populations they are designed to serve by employing those staff, and employing people who advocate on their behalf and can enact policy and procedural changes that are more equitable. Hiring and retaining minority groups is necessary to represent these populations, as research suggests African Americans and Latinos...
have a higher risk of disaster exposure and are disproportionately affected by them.\textsuperscript{7} As such, these groups are more likely to experience physical hardships and trauma during and after a disaster, including personal loss, damage to property, and delay in restoration of utilities like electricity and water, and other basic resources including food, shelter, and income. Some investigative research exposes that disaster loan assistance has stark contrasts: The US Small Business Administration (SBA) disaster loan approval rates for zip codes with >90 percent White were 52 percent approved, in comparison with zip codes with >50 percent Black which were 28 percent approved.\textsuperscript{8} 

Data at the state-level didn’t differ much: the 10 states with the highest percentage of Whites received 55 percent approvals; the 10 states with the largest percentage of Black residents at 37 percent. Some may argue that home and business owners receive more financial support after a disaster and they tend to be White, but it could also be argued that updating policy to provide more support to employees and renters would change that.\textsuperscript{9} 

Representation of women in emergency management and in positions of leadership is just as crucial as representation of people of color. Globally, women are disproportionately impacted by disasters in some regions. Female fatalities were estimated at 60 percent after the 2008 cyclone in Myanmar, 70 percent after the 2004 tsunami in Indonesia, and 91 percent after the 1991 cyclone in Bangladesh.\textsuperscript{10} In the US, research doesn’t currently show direct impact to women and girls but it may have indirect impact. One example is that after 2005’s Hurricane Katrina, violence against women in Mississippi increased and didn’t return to normal rates when looked at 2 years later.\textsuperscript{11} Another example looks at how women are four times more likely to drop out of the labor force in a major emergency such as the COVID-19 pandemic.\textsuperscript{12} 

To support diversity and equity in emergency management, three solutions may be used to supplement existing recommendations reported in 2020 to the FEMA Administrator by the National Advisory Council.

**Changes to be implemented**

The first recommended solution is to use current and available technology, such as machine-learning/artificial intelligence, to screen data specifically for bias. If we know there is bias in approving financial applications, let’s identify ways to remove that bias. FEMA and SBA programs can reduce personal bias in FEMA Public Assistance applications (these help communities rebuild), individual assistance applications (these help citizens), and SBA applications by detecting and redacting personally identifiable information (PII).

Two types can be used: supervised learning when there’s an idea of what the problem is, and unsupervised learning when it’s not known what the results may be. An example of supervised learning can be: knowing that of two applicants, someone with a uniquely-spelled name is less likely to be contacted for an interview when compared with a commonplace name, yet both people are equally qualified.\textsuperscript{13} To resolve this, a computer program would be designed to remove the name of each applicant. Unsupervised learning would be a computer program that doesn’t know what it’s specifically looking for, and by creating new clusters of similar information, it may find previously undetected issues. When issues are identified, policies and procedures are created to create solutions.

The second solution is an investment in the future assets of emergency management: people. A common frustration among those in the field is in hiring. Many in this field fall within two types of applicants: A) young people who have passion and ideas from certification and/or academic degrees, but don’t have real-world experience, and B) people with years in the military, fire, or law enforcement who view emergency management to be an easy job requiring limited effort. The latter has a tendency to hinder development of innovative ideas and thought leaders. Both groups have a lot to learn but there are multiple ways to provide training.

Let’s look at a few options to assist type A applicants: 1) Broaden mentorship and paid internship programs at the federal level, continue to expand the Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) grant for states, cities, and institutions of higher education so they can afford to oversee interns. 2) Utilize the existing FEMA corps program to train students and recent grads at the most local level and with hands-on experience.\textsuperscript{14}
Not only racial and ethnic minorities, and women would be lighted recipients of these new programs, but a focus on providing these opportunities to individuals with access and functional needs/disabilities, immigrants, refugees, and asylees, and students coming from lower socioeconomic families. These grant-paid internships would follow Department of Labor intern requirements and require one or more approved project(s), depending on the length of service. Coffee-making and party-planning are NOT acceptable projects. Additional conditions would be included in the program. For example the host agency would introduce the intern to a minimum of three high-level leaders in the emergency preparedness arena, so that they can build or strengthen their network and identify professional mentors.

While eliminating obstacles for hiring and retaining a diverse and experienced workplace is critical, focus may also be on building a culture of inclusion. Formal training is commonplace in large companies so that employees can learn better ways to interact with each other. Unfortunately, recent changes at the federal level have halted diversity trainings, which applies to both employees and private-sector contractors. On September 4, 2020, the Director of the US Office of Management and Budget issued a memo to agency heads to cease training related to racism, followed on September 22, with a presidential order. The third and last simple solution is to reinstate diversity and inclusion training, which may be helpful to the 26 leadership positions within DHS the majority of which are held by Caucasian men (as of July 2022).

These the changes are just the start of a new mission: emergency management agencies help those who need it the most.

Julie Grey
Emergency Manager
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2099-1185

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