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LEADING EDGE RESEARCH



# Disaster Recovery Essentials

*A tool for preparing  
your community to  
face the unexpected*

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This tool is an excerpt from a forthcoming ICMA white paper: *Leadership and Professional Local Government Managers Before, During, and After a Crisis*. The paper is based on interviews with city managers in fourteen communities that have experienced a significant crisis. The full report will contain examples and direct observations of the managers interviewed.

*By Ron Carlee, D.P.A.*

# DISASTER RECOVERY ESSENTIALS

## *Preparing your community to face the unexpected*

Professional local government managers find their leadership and management skills are tested when they are confronted with an emergency or crisis situation. Natural disasters such as floods, hurricanes, tornados, and wildfires can cause severe disruptions to the local government organization and to the community for days or years. To support its members and the communities they serve, ICMA commissioned a 2018 study on the common and effective leadership and management skills and techniques that professional managers deploy when a crisis strikes.

Flooding is the crisis most often mentioned by ICMA members as an issue in their communities. In a 2015 ICMA survey, 53 percent of respondents reported having to manage flood events. Three flooding events were considered in this study: two from 2013, which are approaching their five-year anniversaries, and one event from 2017. Two of the events are examined from the perspective of different localities experiencing the same type of event, but in different ways: the 2017 Hurricane Harvey flooding in Texas and 2013 flooding in Colorado. The third event is also from 2013, in Peoria, Illinois. In addition to the flood events, fires and police incidents are also included in this research.

## RECOVERY

For some crises, recovery—the return to normalcy—may be relatively quick. For other crises, recovery can extend for years. Significant physical or social damage can take a long period to rebuild. The recommendation from these cases is to have a disaster recovery plan as part of pre-crisis planning. Not all of the cities in this study had a plan specifically for recovery, which made the job of recovery harder. In some cases, there was only a vague understanding or no knowledge of items such as a disaster recovery center, family reunification center, victim assistance center, or community development disaster recovery grants. Fortunately, these are activities rarely if ever needed in most communities; however, cities may not even know what they do not know.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) provides a starting point in pre-disaster recovery planning: “The ability of a community to accelerate the recovery process begins with its efforts in pre-disaster preparedness, including coordinating with whole community partners, mitigating risks, incorporating continuity planning, identifying resources, and developing capacity to effectively manage the recovery process, and through collaborative and inclusive planning processes. Collaboration across the whole community provides an opportunity to integrate mitigation, resilience, and sustainability into the community’s short- and long-term recovery goals.”

Cutting across these different elements, managers who have been through the recovery process identify the following areas for managers’ attention: recovery plan, FEMA, finance, media management, debris removal, victim assistance for employees, volunteers/donations, and mental health support.

### HOW TO USE THIS TOOL:

The following sections describe essential takeaways from managers’ experiences in eight recovery topics. Each includes a set of related questions to help other managers begin to assess and improve their own capacity to lead a community through recovery.



## PLANNING FOR RECOVERY

Once a crisis occurs, the managers recommend that people immediately start thinking about recovery. It is important to realize that only part of a community may need extended care and attention while other parts of the community and the city organization go about business as normal. Regardless, it is recommended that the city establish specific recovery goals, have them approved by council, understood by the public, and that regular progress reports be made to the council and public. In some communities, reports were made at each council meeting. Some communities “branded” recovery efforts and posted information in the community. Each milestone achieved provided an opportunity to reinforce the commitment of the community to come back—to be resilient. In fact, recovery plans should consider a focus on resilience: that is, not just rebuilding, but rebuilding smarter and better for a stronger and more resilient community.

For a long-term recovery, an organizational structure must be established to support the recovery effort while enabling the city to provide normal, day-to-day operations. The Incident Command System (ICS) used to manage the response phase may not work during recovery.

### KEY QUESTIONS: Planning for Recovery



1. Who will be assigned the responsibility during a disaster to begin the recovery planning process?
2. How will goals be established for recovery? How will the community be engaged? Will the goals be adopted by council?
3. How will recovery progress be reported? What opportunities are there for celebrations or remembrances? What will happen on the one-year anniversary and thereafter?
4. What organizational structure will be created to appropriately resource and sustain the recovery effort to its completion? Who will be in charge and what disciplines and skills will be needed to achieve the adopted recovery goals?
5. How will the recovery be “branded”?



## FEMA

A discussion on federal relations could fill an entire report by itself. Some cities had positive experiences with federal agencies and others did not. The most important consensus recommendation to facilitate relations with federal agencies is to document everything thoroughly from the beginning:

- » Take pictures/video of damage, and provide detailed estimates of damage
- » Document everything that is purchased, and explain why and how
- » Document staff costs and the purpose of the staff.

If a community is at high risk for a FEMA-type event, it is recommended that staff get training on FEMA procedures in advance. Otherwise, it is important to connect with other cities or vetted consultants that have been through a FEMA event and know the policies and procedures.

It is also important to know the following information about FEMA:

- » FEMA staff may not arrive early in the event
- » FEMA resources may be stretched
- » FEMA staff will change regularly, and you may have to effectively start over multiple times
- » Different FEMA staff will give conflicting interpretations of eligible approaches or expense.

### »» KEY QUESTIONS: FEMA



1. What does your organization understand about FEMA procedures? How quickly could staff get up to speed?
2. Who would manage documentation procedures? How quickly could they centralize record keeping?
3. From whom could you get assistance with FEMA procedures?

## FINANCE

The most important aspect of expenditures before, during, and after an emergency is documentation. Every manager who went through the FEMA processes emphasized the critical role of documenting the procurement process and accounting for services, supplies, and staff time. Also emphasized was the need for a healthy fund balance. For midsize cities, reserves were adequate to cover expenses pending FEMA reimbursement. For smaller communities, this can be more challenging since the damage to public facilities can far exceed current resources.

### »» KEY QUESTIONS: FINANCE



1. Who would be assigned to document disaster expenses and are they trained in FEMA processes?
2. What is your fund balance policy?
3. At what point would the fund balance be accessed?
4. If the fund balance was accessed for a crisis, how would it be rebuilt and what contingency plan would the city have during that time?
5. If the fund balance could not support a disaster response, what would the city do?

## MEDIA MANAGEMENT

An area that severely tests a local government in a crisis is media management. What do you do when the satellite trucks roll into town? How do you feed a twenty-four-hour news cycle? Smaller communities may not even have a public information officer. Staff can be overwhelmed almost from the beginning of the crisis. Larger cities can also find resources strained or inadequate. Recommendations from this study include the following:

- » Don't wait to get help if you need it, especially from someone experienced in crisis communications
- » Monitor social media to avoid surprises and to be able to quash rumors
- » Use the city's website to provide comprehensive information in as transparent manner as possible
- » Determine who will be the spokesperson and in what situations. Speak with one voice.

## Communicate Directly with Residents

While dealing with the media is a necessity, modern communication tools make it easy for local governments to communicate directly with their residents and businesses.

**Create a Dedicated Website.** Many people need information after a disaster; at the same time, life goes on in the city. How does a city use its home page to meet both needs? It is not unusual to visit the website of a city that has had a major crisis and find little about the crisis on the site. In other cities, the disaster dominates the website. A practice found in this study was to create a separate web page and sometimes a new URL to address issues related to the crisis.

**Social Media.** Social media presents a daunting challenge during a crisis. It gives cities the potential to get accurate and critical information to people in a timely manner. However, it also provides a platform for rumors, misinformation, and destructive behavior.

An article in a publication for independent insurance agents recommends only communicating critical information with an action item so people can make informed decisions: "Ask yourself, 'What is important to your audience who is being affected by this real-time crisis?' Respect the gravity of the situation at hand in terms of both the content and tone of voice in your posts, and understand that social media is a two-way communication tool. Being responsive and facilitating conversations goes a long way." A disaster recovery firm featured in the article offered these additional guidelines (Smith 2015):

- » Avoid canned responses. Every disaster is local and different, so take the time to find out more about the situation.
- » Follow up on replies, answer any questions, and identify any trends. Your customers expect it. And while you may not know the answer, make sure you follow up with the individual and post the answer publicly—it could be valuable to the larger audience.
- » Don't post anything that looks overly speculative. Date and timestamp posts if they are time sensitive and always ensure content is current and accurate.
- » Use hashtags. It enables those searching your organization or the event to easily find and sort available information and stay a part of the conversation.
- » Be careful of reposting or retweeting content from other organizations, especially with minute-by-minute developments. If you make a mistake, it could go viral. Keep the most accurate information out there that you can.
- » Refer to other authorities and share tools and resources. You can pick up more followers by making it easier for your followers to repost what you provide.
- » Consider all your different audiences: employees, stakeholders, clients, community, media and competitors. Craft your messages carefully and keep in mind that different audiences will see your communications.

It is also recommended that your employees know the city's policy on the use of their personal social media accounts. To the extent possible, try to develop a shared understanding among elected officials about what is appropriate to post during a crisis.

**Branding.** The term “disaster branding” was identified in the after-action report on the Orlando Pulse shooting conducted by the University of Central Florida:

*With Pulse, City staff released for widespread, free use a rainbow version of the City’s fountain logo. Staff really focused on crafting a message and sticking to it in the immediate response and even beyond. Even today, when something negative happens in the City, there is a message of love and unity.*

Other cities also adopted a visual identity related to their disasters and a “brand” name. The most common is [Community] Strong. The use of the term “strong” appears to have emerged after the Boston Marathon bombing, when “Boston Strong” became a rallying point for recovery. The Boston Globe calls the term “shorthand for defiance, solidarity, and caring” (Zimmer, 2013).

## »»» KEY QUESTIONS: MEDIA MANAGEMENT



1. How would you supplement communications staff during a prolonged emergency and recovery?
2. Who speaks for the city and in what circumstances? When should the message come from an elected official or a professional expert? How do you avoid fragmented or conflicting messages coming from the city?
3. What would you do if someone sought to pre-empt communications for the city, such as the county, state, or federal government? How would you ensure coordinated communications?
4. What communication channels do you have to communicate directly with the public: electronic newsletter, social media platforms? How many people do these platforms reach?
5. How would you monitor traditional and social media during and after a crisis? How would you respond to rumors and misinformation?
6. How quickly could you create a website for disaster information? Could you sustain it? How would you drive people to it?
7. Does the crisis need a “brand”? What would it be? How would the visual image be created? What is the brand intended to convey? Is it authentic and inclusive? If the city did not facilitate the brand, is there a risk that someone else will?



## DEBRIS

In major weather events, debris removal is consistently a major issue. The lingering of debris-filled streets provides a visible reminder of the disaster and indicates a lack of recovery. It also creates a public health and safety issue. The leading practice was to have a contract negotiated in advance for debris removal and to assess the community’s capacity to supplement the contract with city crews or other contractors. It is also important to note that there are specialized procedures for debris removal and lot clearance after a fire.

## »»» KEY QUESTIONS: DEBRIS



1. If a major weather event occurred, how would debris be removed?
2. What is the capacity both for collection and disposal?
3. If you use a contractor, what other contracts may conflict with your contract?
4. How would debris procedures be communicated to the public?



## VICTIM ASSISTANCE FOR EMPLOYEES

Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for employees themselves to be victims in a disaster. This also includes elected officials. They or their family members may lose their homes or have major damage. They may also lose a family member, friend, or pet. Cities reviewed do not have consistent policies, if any, for dealing with losses by employees, especially multiple employees.

Cities that had employees affected by an event typically gave employees time off—formally or informally—to deal with their issues. In some cases, the city or city partners, such as the local Rotary Club, municipal league, or other nonprofit organizations, helped raise funds to support city workers.

The sooner that employees can get their lives back in order, the sooner that they will be able to help the community get back in order.

### KEY QUESTIONS: VICTIM ASSISTANCE FOR EMPLOYEES



1. How would your city organization help employees who experience a disaster and major loss? Could the help be provided fairly across a number of employees if necessary?
2. Do supervisors and managers have the discretion to flexibly provide support for employees based on their needs?



## VOLUNTEERS AND DONATIONS

An encouraging aspect of disasters is that many people want to help. However, volunteers and donations are not free of cost. They need to be managed. Volunteers may arrive upon request or just show up. Most local governments have no need for standing capacity in this area, but they need to have a contingency plan. Some communities look to the nonprofit sector to help manage volunteers or donations, turning to an organization like a United Way. A community foundation may also be able to assist with financial donations.

People will want to help: they need a way to express their support for people in need and for the responders helping them. Unless the city proactively finds ways for people to help, they will improvise in ways that may not be helpful.

### KEY QUESTIONS: VOLUNTEERS AND DONATIONS



1. How would you convey what you need?
2. Who would manage volunteers during a crisis?
3. How would self-deployed volunteers—including professionals—be managed?
4. How would volunteers be recruited?
5. How would volunteers be screened, deployed, and supervised? Is there a nonprofit that can help?
6. Where would donations of supplies be received and warehoused? How would they be distributed?
7. Who would receive cash donations? How would they be distributed?
8. How do you handle prepared food that is donated and ensure its safety?



# MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

Some disasters can be traumatizing for people affected. People may see and experience horror. Some people may lose close family, friends, and pets. In some cases, people will have lost all of their physical possessions. Many of the people will not have sufficient financial resources and will feel overwhelmed about starting over. Working with other governmental units to draw on public and private mental health resources will be critical. Cities who have experienced such needs are usually generous in providing advice and assistance.

## KEY QUESTIONS: MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT



1. Who are the mental health providers in your community?
2. Do they have disaster experience and/or capabilities?
3. Are they part of a network that can provide additional resources?

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## ABOUT ICMA

# ICMA

**ICMA, the International City/County Management Association**, advances professional local government management worldwide through leadership, management, innovation, and ethics. Through expansive partnerships with local governments, federal agencies, nonprofits, and philanthropic funders, the organization gathers information on topics such as sustainability, health care, aging communities, economic development, cybersecurity, and performance measurement and management data on a variety of local government services—all of which support related training, education, and technical assistance.

ICMA provides support, publications, data and information, peer and results-oriented assistance, and training and professional development to more than 12,000 city, town, and county experts and other individuals and organizations throughout the world.

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