

by Christine Shenot

Local Government Professionals Team Up on Disaster Recovery

For many Americans, the horrors of Hurricane Katrina have been forever distilled in the frightening media images that came out of New Orleans. The chaos that consumed the Big Easy played out in countless scenes of desperate evacuees packed into the Louisiana Superdome and the city's convention center. We saw people waving for help from rooftops where they waited to be rescued and residents traveling flooded neighborhoods in small boats, picking up stranded people including seniors, children, and the disabled.

Some also remember a sense of frustration about why—in a nation with arguably the highest standard of living on the planet—it took so long to deliver adequate food, water, and other vital resources and assistance to the victims. So many people wanted to help with more than just a check for disaster relief, but they couldn't figure out how or were unsuccessful when they tried.

For local government leaders, the latter feelings, in particular, remained poignant long after the storm. Many had resources and wanted to help, but they could find no way to quickly tie into a disaster assistance network. They knew as they watched media coverage that a disaster of this magnitude would bring huge long-term challenges. They knew that once the search and rescue missions had been completed and people were safe from immediate danger, their colleagues on the Gulf Coast would spend months just trying to begin cleanup and redevelopment.

And they knew that the task of restoring even the most mundane functions of local government would be extremely difficult.

For William Whitson, who at that time was assistant city manager in Port Orange, Florida, and now is city manager of Cairo, Georgia, the feelings stirred by news coverage of Katrina also were personal. He remembers seeing a picture in the *Pensacola News Journal* of a woman standing in what used to be downtown Long Beach, Mississippi, the city where he'd lived about a decade earlier. "I recognized, oddly enough, where she was," he said. "She was crying and there was just debris everywhere around her, and I said, 'This can't be.' It looked like something you'd see in Bangladesh."

"It really hit home," he added. "I said, 'I'm a professional. We've got to get in this fight. We can't just sit back and let this happen.'"

MANAGERS TO THE RESCUE

Whitson had a powerful ally in Port Orange City Manager Ken Parker, who'd spent years developing an informal network for disaster recovery assistance within Florida. After Whitson showed Parker the newspaper photo, the two immediately got to work building support from their mayor and city council for plans to help Long Beach. But they also looked beyond Port Orange.

They knew the job would require far more than one city's assistance, so they started talking to Lee Feldman, city manager of Palm Bay; Frank Roberts, the former city manager of New Smyrna Beach; and other Florida managers they'd worked with on disaster aid. And by September 10, less than two weeks after Katrina made landfall on the Gulf Coast, the first Florida team was on the ground in Long Beach, assessing the city's needs. With strong support from their governing bodies, this same coalition of Florida cities ended up sending dozens of staff members and some elected officials to help their counterparts in Long Beach and two other Mississippi cities.



Pascagoula, Mississippi, issued more than 7,500 building permits after Hurricane Katrina to repair and rebuild damaged homes and other structures.

Soon after they started working in Long Beach, they heard about Pass Christian, a nearby Mississippi town that had been completely wiped out by Katrina, and they launched a parallel effort there. Then, in the fall of 2006, the group responded to a call for help from ICMA (International City/County Management Association) and the city of Pascagoula, Mississippi, which was struggling with longer-term recovery challenges related to everything from inspections and code enforcement to public relations.

Fannie Mae officials had been working with Pascagoula and, after discussions with city officials, realized the need for additional staff, so they contacted ICMA to consider solutions. The two organizations quickly made plans, with Fannie Mae offering to cover the cost of sending teams of Florida professionals to Pascagoula in the fall and ICMA agreeing to organize the effort by working with the Florida Municipal League and the Florida City and County Management Association.

The Florida teams ended up spending a combined total of four weeks helping their peers in Pascagoula catch up on a huge backlog of work. The list included building permits

and insurance paperwork, a survey of residents about their needs, grant writing, and many other critical tasks.

The Florida response in Mississippi marked the beginning of what is fast evolving into a concerted effort to formalize the concept of coordinated disaster recovery assistance by local governments, a concept the Florida managers call recovery strike teams.

Parker, Feldman, and Roberts, who has since retired, had developed their own networks of support in the years since Hurricane Andrew devastated South Florida. They had forged strong relationships with peers in cities and counties across the state, and had done the planning to be sure that each would be prepared to respond with assistance if any of them was devastated by a hurricane or other disaster.

Whitson describes it as similar to the way things have worked for years with police and fire rescue services: local governments lend personnel and equipment to help an affected community during an emergency. Typically, they send people in rotations to help with various aspects of disaster response, and they adjust plans and assignments as needed. "We're using the same template, the same organizational approach and just applying it to the long-term recovery," he said. The

help of other municipal and county staff can be vital, he added, once a community gets to long-term recovery tasks.

"You're talking about a massive, massive effort. The recovery strike teams are meant to customize or mirror the delivery of [local government] services in any community," Whitson said. "They pick up garbage and send out water bills in Iowa. Whether you do it in Mississippi or do it in Iowa doesn't make much difference. That's the beauty of the model."

Last summer, Whitson and Parker took steps toward formalizing a local government role in recovery assistance when they briefed former governor Jeb Bush on their work in Long Beach and Pass Christian. Bush was impressed enough with the idea that he encouraged them to move forward in establishing teams across the state and finding a way to incorporate them in Florida's emergency management system. Last fall, Whitson, who became city manager of Cairo, Georgia, in January, worked with Parker, Feldman, and others to set up the first teams in some of Florida's emergency response districts. In addition to designating team leaders and coordinators for each of four district strike teams, they have identified a state coordinator who would work out of the state's emergency operations center.

Parker said they hope to have the strike team system ready to be tested when Florida carries out its annual exercise of emergency planning in the spring. Along with ensuring that the teams are trained and ready to deploy, their goal is to establish teams in the remaining emergency districts as soon as possible and ensure that all of the necessary information is available.

"We want the system to be so transparent that people at the state level will know that these resources are there," Parker said of the strike team concept and any effort to build a national model. "They could be moving within hours, instead of days."

The Florida group got the chance

to put their concept to a real test in 2004, when the state was hit by four hurricanes. But it wasn't until Katrina that they were able to see how well it might work across state lines. Building on what they've learned, these local government managers now are working with the state to formally establish a network of recovery strike teams in different regions of Florida. And they're exploring the prospects for starting something similar on a national level.

"This is where we should be going," Parker said of the strike team concept, adding that it could be expanded into

The Florida teams ended up spending a combined total of four weeks helping their peers in Pascagoula catch up on a huge backlog of work.

a national model. The most important thing the Florida teams learned from Katrina, he noted, was the urgency of creating such networks. "It has moved us from just talk to action," he said. "We were doing it in an informal manner here in Florida, but it was largely based on personal relationships. What we've found is that it's time to go beyond that."

THE CHALLENGES OF LONG-TERM RECOVERY

In August 2006, Pascagoula City Manager Kay Kell was working with Fannie Mae and other groups to try to jump-start the redevelopment of housing a full year after Katrina, and she kept coming back to one inescapable truth. "The more we talked, it came out that what we needed were people," she said.

Staff members were exhausted after spending months working 12- and 15-hour days trying to get Pascagou-

la's cleanup and recovery under way; in addition, many were bouncing between the trailers that served as their offices and those that provided temporary housing. After Katrina, 95 percent of the city had been under water, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) had brought in 6,300 mobile homes.

"At that point we were just so incredibly stressed," Kell said. They kept hearing that there was money to pay for the work that had to be done, and her staff felt the need to move quickly. "We had this guilt that if we didn't do it all right now, while the money was available, the city would suffer."

Fannie Mae had been working with ICMA on various efforts to support local governments in neighborhood revitalization, and responding to Pascagoula's recovery needs emerged as an excellent opportunity for a partnership. The two organizations launched a pilot peer professional/loaned-executive program in Pascagoula that, like the strike team concept, was designed to recruit and direct local government professionals to assist their peers in cities recovering from a disaster. The idea was to supplement staff resources with professionals from unaffected areas who could help address many of the needs that follow the initial response to a disaster during the long-term recovery process.

The program was built on the network concept promoted in an ICMA policy paper titled "A Networked Approach to Improvements in Emergency Management," which is available online at <http://icma.org/main/ld.asp?ldid=20120>. The white paper was developed in 2006 after ICMA's Executive Board called for the organization to play a leadership role on local emergency management.

For Fannie Mae, which promotes home ownership nationwide and has been active in advancing rebuilding efforts along the Gulf Coast, the idea of bringing the Florida strike teams in to help their peers in Pascagoula made sense.

Lessons Learned in Mississippi

Most local government professionals in Florida know the disaster drill. They have tracked hurricanes headed toward the Sunshine State, and many have had to prepare their communities for a potential landfall. Some have had to lead hurricane cleanup and recovery as well.

But whatever their level of experience at home, those who traveled to Mississippi to help their peers after Hurricane Katrina talked about how much they learned. In addition to practical lessons on how to better prepare for disaster and recovery, many brought back personal insights and a different way of thinking about it.

Mary Schultz, the emergency preparedness coordinator in Palm Bay, gained a sense of urgency to spread the word about Florida's strike team concept, in which teams of city and county staff rotate through a disaster-stricken community to help restore the functions of local government. Schultz, who went to Mississippi shortly after Katrina hit and again a year later, points to the unique needs that local government professionals can help fill. She'd like to see funding to develop training for regional teams to provide long-term recovery assistance. "I see it as an incredible tool," she said. "If we can develop this, it should be expanded on a national level."

Recurring Themes

For building a code enforcement officials, the time spent in Mississippi confirmed the importance of moving fast on damage assessment and inspections. With any disaster, people will quickly try to restore their homes, despite any risks with electrical wiring, mold, or other potential problems. "Folks will start to do repairs and some of the necessary work, whether the city is there to permit it or not," observed Nestor Abreu, the building and code administration director in Palm Coast, Florida, who spent time in Pass Christian, Mississippi, after that town was leveled by Katrina.

Information technology professionals found they had to think about their work quite differently. "You really can't rely on computers," noted James Majcen, who went to Pass Christian from Palm Coast immediately after Katrina and helped develop a GIS tracking system. "When you get to that level of devastation, you need the traditional pen and paper, and a strategy that does not rely on electricity."

Majcen and his colleagues built an application that allowed field inspectors to record damage in specific loca-

tions on paper and then map the damage by linking the inspection sheets with a GIS system. They came to see the value of having pre-printed forms that can be used to make some progress while computers are down.

Joan Dunn, who works in the finance department in Palm Coast, saw a worst-case scenario in Pass Christian. She remembers municipal staff members trying to fill out Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) paperwork. Most of them had lost everything and city hall had been destroyed. "I don't know how they were functioning," she said.

Dunn recalls one staff member going through a paper bag full of mostly hand-written forms, trying to pull together payroll information. "It took my breath away to see her sitting there struggling and trying to get her coworkers paid," she said. When Dunn returned to Palm Coast, she met with her boss to talk about the records for which they needed to have backup copies, and how and where to store everything.

The importance of good recordkeeping was a recurring theme. Matt Efird, the risk manager in Deland, Florida, traveled to Pascagoula, Mississippi, to perform insurance audits. He combed through pictures, estimates, purchase orders, and other records to determine if the city was eligible for additional reimbursement. Fortunately, he found everything he needed. "Paperwork is everything. If it's not written down, it didn't happen," he said. "They were very meticulous about their paperwork. That made everything a lot easier."

Keith DeWise, of Pensacola, went twice to Mississippi. First, he went as a police officer immediately after Katrina hit. And last fall, having changed jobs to work in code enforcement, he went to Pascagoula to help with later-stage recovery needs. While the two trips were different—the first time, he had to sleep in his police cruiser—he learned the same lesson in both cases. "The value of teamwork," he said. "That's the biggest thing. No matter how big or small a project, if everybody pitches in, it goes so much easier."

William Whitson, the former assistant city manager in Port Orange, Florida, who is now the city manager in Cairo, Georgia, echoes that message. He wasn't surprised to hear about local government professionals in Mississippi saying they'll gladly volunteer to provide disaster recovery assistance elsewhere when it's needed. "Come crunch time, we're there for each other," he said. "If there's anything I've learned, that's what it is—we have to be there for each other." **PM**

Fannie Mae had worked with Pascagoula and two nonprofit organizations—NeighborWorks America and Dependable Affordable Sustainable Homes (DASH)—La Grange—on plans

to build more than 300 new homes elevated above street level to replace homes that had been destroyed in the Chipley neighborhood in south Pascagoula. But the city was struggling to

catch up with demolitions, cleanup, and inspections in the aftermath of Katrina. At one point, Pascagoula was issuing more than 10 times as many building permits as it had prior to the

National Emergency Management Network (NEMN)

Hurricanes, terrorist attacks, and numerous disasters experienced in this country each year have exposed the vulnerabilities within our communities. Emergencies have demonstrated that the nation's command-and-control response structure can be easily overwhelmed, and a new approach to disaster response and recovery is required to manage these events and their aftermath.

The National Emergency Management Network (NEMN), created by ICMA and the Public Entity Risk Institute (PERI), can counter the response and recovery needs with a combination of training, information resources, and tools that can prepare and link local governments and organizations.

Local government capacity and effectiveness is enhanced by improved precrisis preparation, planning, and mutual aid. NEMN provides resources in these areas and a software system for communities, businesses, and nonprofit organizations to help manage, share, and deploy resources within their own jurisdictions and within other stricken areas.

The NEMN software system—created with support from Emergency Visions (EV) and the Georgia Tech Research Institute—allows NEMN to provide a service network to members to find and communicate what resources are available, who has them, and how can they be managed and mobilized.

An Integrated Local Government Network

NEMN offers a nationwide network that makes it possible for localities to work together to augment their response and recovery capacity.

NEMN membership includes a suite of local government-focused educational resources supported by a software system composed of a comprehensive database of people and physical assets, plus a geomapping and situational awareness tool to identify, visualize, select, activate, deploy, track, and manage municipal and emergency service assets. NEMN software is available for local incident management and catastrophic event planning and for mutual aid on a regional and national scale.

NEMN membership also includes a one-day leadership forum to help policymakers and decisionmakers prepare their staffs and communities for response and recovery efforts. Each NEMN member also receives the quarterly electronic newsletter, *Mutual Aid*, that promotes mutual aid between local and state governments. More educational and training resources are available based on the needs of NEMN members.

NEMN Software: How It Works

The NEMN resource database assembles human and physical response and remediation assets. It features a point-and-click user interface for entering data into predefined fields for personnel; this includes name, company, contact information, skills, licenses, certifications, training, experience, education, and languages as well as such physical assets as vehicles, aircraft, equipment, supplies, and facilities and their location, ownership, capabilities, and status.

The database includes the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), National Incident Management

storm. All told, the city issued more than 7,500 permits after Katrina.

By bringing in teams of local government professionals who were fresh and knew what had to be done in the hurricane recovery process, Kell hoped to help Pascagoula's city staff get caught up so that they could assemble a realistic to-do list. "I kept saying we needed brains, people who can help us think," Kell said. "That's where this concept came from—people who understood what we had to do and could think clearly."

Fannie Mae officials immediately jumped on the idea, working with ICMA to support the concept with

a financial grant to ICMA to cover the Florida teams' travel expenses. "This project demonstrates how local governments and the private sector can work together in support of community recovery and redevelopment, including housing and business development," said Bill Brown, regional director of the Gulf Coast initiatives for Fannie Mae.

Nine cities and Bay County ultimately sent local government professionals from Florida to Pascagoula. The key to their effectiveness was their spirit of teamwork, said Carol Westmoreland, of the Florida League of Cities. "It was a real people-to-people, very practical effort. They didn't build a lot

into the system that wasn't essential."

In addition to helping the city with building inspections, Kell said the Florida staff identified \$400,000 to \$600,000 in additional federal and state reimbursements due to the city. They also helped develop and publicize a citizens' needs survey and helped Pascagoula put the finishing touches on a presentation about redevelopment opportunities for an Urban Land Institute conference last fall that attracted developers from across the country.

The most significant contribution came in the realm of inspections, permitting, and code enforcement. Steve Mitchell, who is Pascagoula's

System (NIMS), and National Emergency Resource Registry structures to categorize and create standing teams of assets available for rapid deployment within the jurisdiction or within other local governments in the region or nationally. Assets can also be catalogued by custom structures.

NEMN's geospatial mapping and mission-planning tool allows emergency response officials to better coordinate event and incident planning with real-time response. Features include:

- Robust mapping and tracking of resources.
- Simultaneous planning and real-time sharing of information.
- High-resolution imagery and maps that scale with each view.
- Ability to plot hazmat locations and to track chemical plumes.
- Hurricane and flood evacuation route planning.
- Ability to map locations of emergency response resources across a community as well as important facilities, such as hospitals, fire departments, and critical infrastructure sites.
- Special event planning.
- Graphical environment for training and simulation or drill exercises.

NEMN software was designed for incident management during special events. The NEMN technology, for example, was used simultaneously by 25 local, state, and federal agencies to coordinate their combined resources and responses in real time during the G-8 summit at Sea Island, Georgia. The same technology was also used for all of the

simulation and drill exercises and planning sessions that occurred before the actual event.

The collaborative environment is graphical, intuitive, secure, and suitable for both the efforts performed by an individual agency in a community (such as public works performing debris removal, or fire service setting up a staging area in response to an incident) and coordination among agencies (such as a collaborative response to a large incident spanning multiple response agencies).

What Is the Cost?

Network membership is available on an annual subscription basis. Membership provides significant benefits—educational and training resources that can help policymakers develop emergency management programs and separate software licenses and services. NEMN offers add-on functionality and services tailored to the needs of each organization. Members also can contract for additional training or for local training at their facilities.

The NEMN membership level and introductory price varies on the basis of the number of authorized users of the software license and the services selected by the member. The NEMN 20, for example, costs as little as \$15,000 per year for up to 20 users. The introductory membership fee includes client software installation, end-user training, and around-the-clock maintenance and support, including all releases, updates, and enhancements to the NEMN software.

To get more information or to download a membership form visit <http://nationalemergencymanagementnetwork.com/>. To register by phone, call 770/436-2474 and choose "option 2" for sales. **PM**

building official and last year was named director of planning and zoning, said his crew showed up within two days of the storm, and they immediately fanned out to start assessing damage. Once they'd finished the preliminary inspections, they had to do more in-depth assessments in heavily flooded areas to determine which structures would have to be raised, moved, or demolished. The more detailed damage assessments were required by the national flood insurance program.

In the end, there were about 1,200 structures that needed more careful damage assessments before any permits could be issued for

repairs. At that point, the city was issuing some 130 to 140 permits a day, Mitchell said, compared with a pre-Katrina norm of about eight to 10 a day. In the code enforcement area, his team also had to inspect about 460 swimming pools that, because they had been left untended for months, had become breeding grounds for mosquitoes.

"We knew that if we could make it over the hump, we would be in relatively good shape and could even things out. But we just could not get over the hump," he said.

Everything changed when code enforcement staff and building inspectors started arriving from Florida.

"They knew what they were looking for. All I had to do was point them in the right direction," Mitchell said. "When you can bring somebody in here who knows what they're doing and you don't have to hold their hand, it makes all the difference in the world."

Although Pascagoula had the extra help in the building department for only a couple of weeks, it enabled Mitchell and his team to get back to a manageable level of activity. By the end of 2006, they were down to about 35 to 50 permits a day, mostly for new construction. "We're busy, no doubt about it, but it's a routine that we can live with," he said.

PART OF THE FAMILY

Harrietta Eaton, Pascagoula's director of administration, describes other ways in which Florida strike team members helped the city address long-term recovery needs. Debbie Majors, from Boynton Beach, Florida, helped the community development department with grant applications, and Yvonne Martinez, the public information officer in Palm Bay, Florida, shot video to create a short documentary after hearing that many in Pascagoula felt that their city had been overshadowed by New Orleans.

"They fit right in. I felt like they were part of the Pascagoula family," Eaton said of the Florida team members. "They kind of pushed their sleeves up, looked around, and said 'What do you need our help with?' They were so enthusiastic."

Some ended up working on tasks well outside their job description. Mary Schultz is the emergency preparedness coordinator in Palm Bay. She'd worked in Long Beach a few weeks after Katrina hit, and then went to Pascagoula to help that city a year later. In Pascagoula, she served as a public information officer, helping the city develop a survey to determine residents' needs and recommending that it be sent out with utility bills to be sure people got it. In the end, Eaton said, the city got about 2,000 responses, some of which included detailed feedback on Pascagoula's rebuilding and economic development plans.

Today, some of those plans are coming to fruition. In early January, the city held a press conference at a 26-acre site that is being demolished for future development. The city has entered into an agreement to purchase the property, with plans for a community center and a senior activity center. Pascagoula officials hope the site will attract commercial development as well, and revitalize what had been a blighted area.

"We feel like we've gotten beyond recovery, and we're starting to rebuild," said Laura McCool,

Pascagoula's human resources director. McCool was one of those who found nothing but a slab and some steps when she checked on her beachfront home a day after Katrina tore up the city, but she was at work the next day arranging office space in four trailers for about 55 municipal employees, including herself, who needed a place to work. "Without the help that we received after the storm, we would still be in recovery mode. It would just take that much longer," she said. "The network is vital. I

"You're talking about a massive, massive effort. The recovery strike teams are meant to customize or mirror the delivery of [local government] services in any community," says William Whitson, city manager of Cairo, Georgia.

think it's just a vital thing that all cities should have."

While Pascagoula officials credit the Florida teams for getting them to the turning point, the Florida professionals all insist that the time they spent in Mississippi provided an invaluable learning experience. "I'll tell you, the folks who went out there, I think it was some of the best training they have ever had," said Oel Wingo, assistant city manager in Palm Coast, Florida, who spent a few weeks in Pass Christian and had a number of staff members travel there and to Long Beach and Pascagoula to help with computers, financial and FEMA paperwork, utilities, and building inspections. The lessons spanned everything from the importance of how

and where to keep copies of financial records to the value—and limitations—of GIS and other computer-based tools.

"I brought back a lot," Schultz agreed. "I cannot thank those cities enough for allowing me to come in and do this. I've learned a tremendous amount. As much assistance as we may have provided them, it came back 10-fold."

One of the more important lessons for the Florida professionals was that local governments have to be prepared to fend for themselves for several days or more after a disaster. "Every area of the country is susceptible to something," added Feldman, the city manager in Palm Bay. He listed earthquakes, tornadoes, hurricanes, wildfires, and terrorist attacks as events that have devastated U.S. communities in recent years. Two months ago, central Florida was hit by deadly tornadoes. "We all have the chance of having to respond in an emergency mode sometime during our careers," he said. "We have to build that into our organizations, or we're not doing our jobs."

The Pascagoula-ICMA-Fannie Mae collaborative was designed to advance that goal. The pilot initiative began to explore the organization of local government, nonprofit sector, and private sector networks for emergency preparedness, response, and recovery. ICMA and Fannie Mae are now assessing the results and considering ways to expand the pilot to include additional Gulf Coast communities as well as local government and private sector partners.

"This is an excellent example of how people from different organizations can come together for a common purpose and make a significant impact in a short amount of time," said Mosi Kitwana, director of ICMA Results Networks, which provides technical assistance and other services to local governments. **PM**

Christine Shenot is project manager, Livable Communities Team, ICMA, Washington, D.C. (cshenot@icma.org).



When you come face to face with your retirement plan,
we believe knowledge is power.

Our education programs give you access to some of the best retirement planning experts in the business. ICMA-RC makes retirement planning easy to understand. And that helps everyone make more informed investment decisions. We meet where you work. Provide special seminars for women, low-income groups and more. And we arm you with online tutorials for retirement planning and investing, planning calculators, personalized analysis, even tools to monitor fund performance. No one knows more about retirement planning for public sector employees. Find out more. Call 800-669-7400 or visit us at www.icmarc.org.

Building Retirement Security



AC: 0306-648