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IAEM Bulletin

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International Association of Emergency Managers

Looking Back at 2026 National Emergency Management Awareness Month

National Emergency Management Awareness Month is an initiative IAEM launched in 2025 to spotlight the emergency management profession and increase public awareness of what emergency management is and why the work matters.

Making the Profession More Visible

This was the second year of the campaign, and we continued building on last year's message of making the profession more visible. Throughout August, we shared stories, resources, and educational social media content highlighting the role emergency managers play in preparing for, responding to, and recovering from disasters. Our 2026 campaign had four main goals: introduce the public to emergency management, explain why the profession matters, highlight what the work looks like in action, and showcase the people behind it.

Social media was one of the main ways we brought these goals to life. We used dedicated Facebook and LinkedIn pages as the primary channels for campaign content, while IAEM's established social media channels, including Instagram, helped us reach broader audiences. Through IAEM's main social channels, we highlighted real emergency management perspectives, giving emergency managers opportunities to share their experiences and show what the profession looks like in practice. We also amplified content from members and organizations across the emergency management community to highlight the different ways they participated.

Our website resources gave people another way to learn more. The Know Your EM webpage served as the campaign's public landing page, with social media posts directing audiences there to learn more about emergency management. The National Emergency Management Awareness Month webpage provided a central location for campaign resources and information for members.

This work was a collaborative effort across IAEM. Association leadership and members of the Government Affairs Committee and Community and Member Engagement Committee helped develop resources, encourage participation and spread the word. Their contributions helped bring the campaign together and extend its reach both within the profession and beyond.

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From the IAEM-USA President

Reflecting on the Journey, Looking Towards Tomorrow

By Josh Morton, CEM, IAEM-USA President

When I accepted the gavel as president of IAEM-USA last November, I hoped to bring a greater sense of cooperation to our association and a renewed focus on serving our members. As I prepare to hand the gavel to Todd DeVoe, those are the commitments I find myself returning to.

This year brought considerable uncertainty to emergency management. Changes at FEMA raised a lot of difficult questions about the future of our profession and the support our communities depend on. Our members faced that uncertainty while continuing to do their jobs, serve their communities, and prepare for whatever might come next.

Against that backdrop, one of the things I'm most proud of is that we helped bring a sense of calm back to our association. We could not resolve every uncertainty, but we could listen, work together, and keep our attention on serving our members. At a time when so much felt unsettled, that steadiness was important.

That work belongs to many people. Our board of directors has shown outstanding dedication throughout this year. Much of what they do happens outside the view of our membership: preparing for meetings, working through difficult questions, listening to concerns, and following through on decisions. They've given their time and energy while balancing careers, families, and responsibilities in their own communities. I'm so incredibly grateful for their commitment, their willingness to work together, and the care they have shown for this association. I'm equally grateful to our IAEM staff, whose work behind the scenes makes so much of what we do possible.

Some of the most valuable experiences for me this year came from getting out and meeting our members and partners. Those conversations reminded me of how much knowledge and experience exist across this association and how important it is that we make room to hear it.

I also had so many opportunities to connect with other associations, governmental partners, and people from across emergency management and related industries. Those conversations reinforced something we all know from our work as emergency managers: partnerships are everything.

The relationships we build help us understand one another's capabilities, recognize shared concerns, and find opportunities to accomplish more together. Strengthening those partnerships has been an important part of this year, and I hope those connections continue to grow long after my term ends.

Serving as president has also reinforced something I want every member to understand: you can make a meaningful impact, regardless of the size of your organization or the community you represent.

I am a local emergency manager from a small, rural, economically challenged county in South Carolina. I cannot think of another national association where I would have had the same opportunity to serve as president. Here, I've had the privilege of representing colleagues from across the country and bringing the perspective of my community to national conversations.

That says something truly special about IAEM. Your experience matters here. Your ideas matter here. The challenges you work through in your community can help someone else, and your willingness to contribute can help shape this association and our profession. I hope my experience encourages someone who has wondered whether there is a place for them in IAEM to step forward.



Josh Morton, CEM, President, IAEM-USA

There are also some people back home whose support made my time as president possible, and whom I would be remiss not to acknowledge. To my wife, Bethany, and my daughter, Temmer: thank you for giving me the time and space to do this job. This role required time away and attention that otherwise would have belonged to you. I am so grateful for your love and support.

To my staff and the leadership of Saluda County: thank you for giving me the time and freedom to serve, and for stepping up to fill the gaps while I was away. Your support allowed me to take on this responsibility with the confidence of knowing

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Finishing Strong

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that our community remained in capable hands.

As Todd accepts the gavel, I look forward to seeing the work continue. There is still so much to do, and I believe this year has helped set the stage for great things ahead. I will be sharing more about some of those things during the Monday morning plenary at the conference, so make sure you are there!

My final request as your president is simple: get more involved in IAEM. Share your perspective. Bring forward an idea. Volunteer for work that matters to you. If you have been waiting for the right time or wondering whether you have something to offer, I hope you will take that next step.

In closing, **THANK YOU** for trusting me with the opportunity to serve this amazing association. I leave this role grateful for the people I have met, proud of the work we've done together, and excited about the future we will continue to build.

IAEM truly is the greatest association in emergency management, and that's because of you!

See you in Long Beach! 🔷

NEMAM

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A Look at Community Participation

As we invited the emergency management community to participate in this year's campaign, we requested members and nonmembers to submit their activities through a survey form. In total, we received 325 submissions representing 277 affiliated individuals, organizations or jurisdictions. Seventy submissions came from nonmembers. Organizations and individuals took different approaches, from public education and social media campaigns to professional recognition and local government proclamations.

IAEM staff also monitored public social media and web alerts to identify additional campaign activity. This effort identified 482 publicly visible campaign-related items from 370 distinct sources. We also documented 50 government actions recognizing the month: six at the state level, 29 at the county level and 15 at the city level.

The range of activities recorded showed the many ways individuals and organizations across the emergency management community participated in the campaign. Activities included social media campaigns, public education and outreach, emergency manager spotlights, behind-the-scenes looks at emergency management work, community events and government proclamations recognizing the month.

Explore the Campaign Results and Resources

To see more of this year's campaign, explore IAEM's 2026 Campaign Quick Recap, which takes a closer look at participation, government recognition, and the range of activities that took place throughout the campaign. For organizations looking for ideas for their own outreach, IAEM's Social Media Examples and Inspiration includes 360 examples of campaign-related content shared by organizations and individuals.

Help Shape the 2027 Campaign

IAEM is already looking ahead to 2027 and welcomes members who want to help shape the next campaign. Share your ideas, bring your expertise to the table and help us continue raising awareness of the emergency management profession by emailing marketing@iaem.com. 🔷



The IAEM Booth at the New Jersey Emergency Management Association (NJEMA) 2026 Symposium, held Oct. 1, 2026, staffed by Mike Prasad, CEM, IAEM-USA Region 2 President.



Keynote session during the National Weather Association Conference held Oct. 17. (L-R), Josh Morton, CEM; Ken Graham, Director, NOAA's National Weather Service; and Jim Cantore, meteorologist for The Weather Channel. The Session was facilitated by NWA President Kim Runk.

IAEM Announces the 2026 Award Program Awardees

The IAEM-USA Awards & Recognition Committee proudly announces this year's IAEM-USA Award recipients. The recipients will be honored during the Certification and Awards Banquet on Wednesday, Nov. 11, at the Long Beach Convention Center in Long Beach, California, as part of the IAEM Annual Conference. This prestigious Awards Program recognizes programs and individuals who have significantly contributed to the emergency management field over the past year. Congratulations to the following recipients!

Lifetime Achievement Awards

■ **IAEM-USA Clayton R. Christopher Memorial Award**
Judson M. Freed, MA CEM

■ **IAEM-USA Career Excellence Award**
Harold Damron, CEM

Individual Awards

■ **IAEM-USA Emergency Manager of the Year**
Rachel Porter CBCP, AZ-MEM

■ **Elizabeth B. Armstrong Award for Outstanding Contributions to the Association (IAEM)**
Lanita Lloyd, CEM

■ **IAEM-USA Rising Star Award**
Megan Berumen, CEM

■ **IAEM-USA Emergency Management Educator Award**
Dr. Edward C. Wolff, CEM

■ **IAEM-USA Emergency Management Education & Training Program of the Year**
UCF Emergency Management Undergraduate Degree Program

Programmatic Awards

■ **IAEM-USA Emergency Management Mentor of the Year**
Trey Hewtty

■ **IAEM-USA Technology & Innovation Award**
Response Finance, Inc. (ResponseFi)

■ **IAEM-USA Preparedness Award**
Operation: REACT - Girl Scouts of Historic Georgia Preparedness Camp

Public/Private Sector Awards

■ **IAEM-USA Business and Private Sector Integration and Public Sector Partnership Award**
Colorado Emergency Management Blood Partnership

Student Awards

■ **IAEM-USA Student Advocate of the Year**
UCF Emergency Management & Homeland Security Advisory Board

■ **IAEM-USA Student Chapter of the Year**
California State University, Long Beach

■ **IAEM-USA Student of the Year**
Ethan Scenters-Zapico

Volunteer Awards

■ **IAEM-USA Voluntary Organization of the Year**
Sonoma County Community Organizations Active in Disaster (COAD)

■ **IAEM-USA Volunteer Emergency**
Manager of the Year
Michael F. Collett

Uniformed Services Awards

■ **IAEM-USA Uniformed Services Auxiliary Emergency Manager of the Year**
Maj. John A. Bryant

■ **IAEM-USA Uniformed Services Civilian Emergency Manager of the Year**
Lt Col (Ret) Dean A. Richardson

■ **IAEM-USA Uniformed Services Uniformed Emergency Manager of the Year**
LCDR Ramon Gil Dominguez

Join IAEM to celebrate the award recipients. IAEM's deserving award recipients will be honored by their peers at the IAEM Awards and Certification Banquet. The event is included for conference attendees who selected the full conference rate package. Individual tickets may be purchased. Contact Alex@iaem.com for assistance.

IAEM Selects Five Students for Scholarships

The International Association of Emergency Managers (IAEM) has many roles, including scholarship support and the development of future leaders in emergency management. Since 2002, the IAEM Scholarship Program has awarded $251,250 in scholarships through a competitive process to 95 deserving students pursuing degrees in emergency management, disaster management, or a closely related program of study. This year's five recipients received $24,000. Meet them below and learn more about them in the Awards Booklet, which will be issued online in November.

Congratulations to the 2026 IAEM Scholarship recipients

Ninna Balauro, the tenth recipient of the Robert C. Bohlmann, CEM, Scholarship for Service in Emergency Management, is pursuing a B.S. in Emergency Management at Pierce College and is expected to graduate in 2028. In 2026, she graduated from the inaugural cohort of the Inclusive Emergency Management Program at American Samoa Community College (ASCC). She is an IAEM student member and attended the 2025 IAEM Annual Conference in Louisville, Kentucky, and the 2026 IAEM-USA Region 9 Conference in Hawaii, where she spoke. Ninna is a member of the Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society, the first honor society recognizing academic achievement among students at associate degree-granting colleges. She was awarded a $5,000 IAEM Undergraduate Student Scholarship.



Michelle Pratt, CEM, the second awardee of the IAEM–Women in the Field of Emergency Management Scholarship for the highest-scoring woman graduate student, is pursuing an M.A. in Disaster and Emergency Management at Royal Roads University in Canada and plans to graduate in May 2027. An IAEM 2025 40 Under 40 honoree, Michelle holds several professional certifications, including Certified Emergency Manager (CEM), Certified Business Continuity Professional (CBCP), and Certified Associate in Project Management (CAPM). At Inter Pipeline Ltd., a Canadian energy infrastructure company, she plays a key leadership role in strengthening emergency preparedness and business continuity across multiple business units. She is leading a major initiative to modernize the company's emergency management and business continuity program, improving response capabilities, regulatory compliance, and organizational resilience. She received a $4,000 IAEM Scholarship funded by WTFem).



Mohammad Newaz Sharif is pursuing a Ph.D. in Public Affairs at the University of Central Florida (UCF) and plans to graduate in Spring 2027. His academic journey spans continents and disciplines from his foundational degree in Environmental Science and Disaster Management in Bangladesh to his M.A. in Public Policy in Germany, and now his doctoral work at UCF. He has over seven years of experience at the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society and international deployments with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. At UCF, he has served as both a graduate research assistant and instructor of record and received the 2026 Excellence in Graduate Student Teaching Award from UCF's College of Community Innovation and Education. As the highest-scoring graduate student, he received a $7,000 IAEM Full-time Graduate Scholarship.



Jyun Yi Wang, CEM, is pursuing a Ph.D. in Urban and Regional Science at Texas A&M University and plans to graduate in 2028. He served in leadership positions with the New Taipei City Government Fire Department, including as a battalion chief overseeing five fire stations and more than 100 firefighters. At Texas A&M,

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Students for Scholarships

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he has maintained a perfect GPA while conducting research focused on improving hazard mitigation planning, disaster recovery, and community resilience. He has presented research at the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning Conference and the Natural Hazards Workshop. Demonstrating his commitment to international collaboration, he helped establish partnerships between Texas A&M's Hazard Reduction and Recovery Center, the Texas A&M Engineering Extension Service, and the New Taipei Fire Department to advance emergency management research and training. Jyun Yi received a $5,000 IAEM Full-time Graduate Scholarship.



Andrew Watkins is pursuing a master's degree in Emergency and Disaster Management at CQ University Australia and plans to graduate by the end of 2026. He is the ninth recipient of the Samuel Henry Prince IAEM Scholarship for part-time graduate students, partially funded by IAEM-Canada. He is an emergency management and paramedicine professional with more than 20 years of operational, volunteer, leadership, and training experience across ambulance and state emergency service organizations. Since 2021, he has served as a clinical support officer at the Queensland Ambulance Service Education Centre. Andrew also holds an MBA from the University of the Sunshine Coast and a Master of Emergency and Disaster Management from CQ University. He received a $3,000 IAEM Part-time Graduate Student Scholarship.



Recognition

Scholarship recipients will be recognized at the Certification and Awards Banquet, on Nov. 11, during the IAEM Annual Conference & EMEX, in Long Beach, California.



Special Focus Articles, Part 2:

Due to the volume of submissions on this special focus topic, it is necessary to present the content in three parts. Part 1 is available in the October edition of the IAEM Bulletin, and Part 3 will be available in the December edition.

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IAEM Offers AEM/CEM Interest Self-Assessment Tool

IAEM's new AEM/CEM Interest Self-Assessment can help you explore which certification fits your background. The checklists walk you through key requirements and highlight areas that may need additional preparation. Use it alongside the Applicant Guidebook to plan your next steps toward certification.

The self-assessment is available on the Certification Resources page.

Recovery Without a Response: What Wichita Learned from the American Airlines Flight 5342 Crash

By Dr. Julie Stimson, Director, Sedgwick County Emergency Management, Kansas

The author will be speaking as part of the IAEM 74th Annual Conference on Nov. 11 from 10:15 a.m.-11:15 a.m.

On Jan. 29, 2025, American Airlines Flight 5342, traveling from Wichita to Washington, D.C., collided with a United States Army Black Hawk helicopter over the Potomac River. All 67 people aboard the two aircraft died. For Wichita, the tragedy was deeply personal: the city had just hosted the 2025 U.S. Figure Skating Championships, and 28 members of the figure skating community were among those on the flight. The event also involved Kansans, military personnel, educators, families, and travelers with connections throughout the community.

The emergency management challenge was unusual. Wichita did not manage the crash site or the initial life-safety response. Instead, we found ourselves supporting a community experiencing profound loss from an event that occurred more than 1,000 miles away. In many ways, Wichita experienced recovery without a traditional local response. What made that recovery possible was not a new plan written after the tragedy. It was the relationships, exercises, partnerships, and community knowledge established before the event.

A Community Connected

The timing magnified the impact. Wichita had just hosted its first U.S. Figure Skating Championships, Jan. 20-26. More than 50,000 tickets had been sold, with an expected 75,000 to 100,000 people visiting the Wichita metropolitan area. More than 180 athletes participated, and the seven-day championship included development camps before and after the event. A National Development Camp for youth skaters was occurring on the day of the crash.

Wichita also has a strong aviation identity. The community describes itself as the "Air Capital of the World," and the aerospace industry employs thousands of local residents. Flight 5342 was only about a year into its service between Wichita and Washington, and it had become a familiar route for residents and public officials.

When news of the crash arrived, the community therefore had multiple points of connection. Families were traveling to Washington. Skaters and coaches had just spent a week in Wichita. Local businesses, hotels, schools, the arena, the Wichita Ice Center, and community organizations had interacted with the championship participants. The disaster was not geographically local, but its consequences were.

The First Need Was Family Support

The Wichita Airport Incident Family Support Team became an important bridge. The volunteer organization is activated by the Wichita Airport Authority and trains together regularly. Its mission is to provide family members and friends of aircraft accident victims with support and compassion until professional assistance arrives.

That capability mattered because the airport immediately became a place where people sought information and comfort. The activation demonstrated the value of having a trained, ready-to-go family support capability rather than trying to build one during a crisis.

At the same time, the community faced a difficult information environment. Manifest details were slow to emerge because family notifications were occurring, including notifications involving families overseas. Uncertainty created frustration and anxiety. People wanted to know who was aboard, while responsible agencies had to protect the integrity and dignity of the notification process.

For emergency managers, this is an important reminder: information management during mass-fatality events is not simply a public information problem. It is a family assistance, privacy, emotional-support, and interagency coordination problem.

Emergency Management's Role Was To Connect

Because the incident occurred in Washington, D.C., Sedgwick County Emergency Management faced a different kind of coordination challenge. Our role was less about directing tactical response and more about connecting people, organizations, information, and resources.

Recent full-scale exercise activity at the airport helped establish relationships among airport, city, county, and other partners. Those relationships became useful immediately. Emergency management also connected with organizations that had direct relationships with the affected community, including the Wichita Ice Center, Wichita Figure Skating Club, INTRUST Bank Arena, Visit

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Recovery Without a Response

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Wichita, local hotels, schools, Wichita State University, Butler Community College, the Chamber of Commerce, ComCare, and the Wichita Foundation's ICT-Together community aid effort.

This network allowed the community to identify people and organizations who might need support even though they were not physically at the crash site. It also helped emergency managers understand that recovery would extend far beyond the airport terminal. Schools, workplaces, faith communities, sports organizations, businesses, and families all became part of the recovery environment.

Unified Messaging and Space to Grieve

The community needed more than facts. It needed reassurance, credible information, and permission to grieve.

Local elected officials set that tone early. A joint statement from American Airlines, Kansas Governor Laura Kelly, United States Representative Ron Estes, and Wichita Mayor Lily Wu emphasized standing with the families and friends of the passengers. That visible alignment across government and the airline helped establish a unified message.

Local messaging also connected residents with behavioral-health resources, including the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Disaster Distress Helpline and the 988-crisis line. Social media became an important mechanism for sharing resources, acknowledging grief, and reinforcing community togetherness.

Physical spaces for grief emerged as well. A memorial at Wichita Eisenhower National Airport grew from three tables to seven as people added notes, flowers, and gifts. A public prayer vigil brought people of different faiths together. The Wichita Ice Center established a memorial and participated in a nationwide moment of silence for the skating community. Butler Community College campuses held a moment of silence in honor of the teacher lost on the flight.

These actions were not traditional emergency operations, but they were essential recovery functions.

The Red Cross Connection

One of the most important lessons was understanding the American Red Cross role in aviation disasters. The presentation highlighted the National Transportation Safety Board's Federal Family Assistance Framework for Aviation Disasters and the Red Cross role in providing psychological, emotional, and spiritual care; coordinating with the air carrier and other response partners; supporting Family Assistance Centers; and assisting families through the long process following an aviation accident.

The Red Cross response demonstrated the importance of thinking beyond jurisdictional boundaries. National resources supported the response in Washington, while local Red Cross personnel supported needs in Kansas. In Wichita, Red Cross volunteers provided disaster mental health and spiritual care, participated in vigils and memorials, conducted outreach to next of kin, supported families returning with remains, and met with elected officials.

Support also extended internationally. Red Cross organizations in other countries became involved when language and international family-assistance needs arose.

For local emergency managers, the lesson is straightforward: know what national partners can do before the disaster occurs, understand how they are activated, and exercise with them whenever possible.

What We Learned

Several lessons stand out from Wichita's experience.

First, exercise for recovery—not just response. The annual exercise involving airport, city, and county agencies included recovery objectives. Those relationships became essential when the community needed to recover from an event it did not physically respond to.

Second, understand your community's culture. Wichita's aviation identity, figure skating connections, educational institutions, faith organizations, businesses, and history all shaped how residents experienced the tragedy. Knowing those relationships before the event made it easier to identify who needed support.

Third, understand the roles of organizations outside the traditional emergency-management structure. The Airport Incident Family Support Team, American Red Cross, schools, colleges, businesses, faith leaders, nonprofit organizations, and community foundations all contributed to recovery.

Fourth, elected officials matter. Their early tone and visible support can influence how a community responds emotionally and socially to tragedy.

Finally, remember that recovery does not always follow a response. Sometimes the emergency manager's most important work is connecting a community to people, resources, information, and each other.

Conclusion

Flight 5342 changed Wichita. The community continues to remember the victims and the families whose lives were forever altered. Memorials, tributes, community events, and the Wichita Foundation's ICT-Togeth-

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Reimagining Public Education and Community Engagement in Emergency Management

By Larissa Parekh, Emergency Management Specialist, City of Mississauga, Ontario, Canada

The author will be speaking as part of the IAEM 74th Annual Conference on Nov. 8 from 9:00 a.m.-10:00 a.m.

Emergency preparedness has typically been framed around individual actions: Make a plan, build an emergency kit, and stay informed. These messages continue to be important components of preparedness, providing individuals and households with practical actions they can take to reduce risk and navigate emergencies. However, as the emergency management field continues to evolve its understanding of what it means to be resilient, there is an opportunity to reconsider whether individual preparedness messaging on its own reflects the full scope of what enables communities to withstand and recover from disruption.

Emergencies are not experienced by individuals in isolation; they occur within families, neighborhoods, organizations, and broader social networks. A neighbor checking on an older resident during a prolonged power outage, a community organization sharing information with residents who may not be reached through traditional channels, or a local organization opening its doors during an extreme weather event are all expressions of preparedness. These actions may not resemble the traditional emergency kit or household preparedness plan, but they can be equally important in determining how communities experience and navigate emergencies.

This broader understanding of preparedness can create important shifts for public education and community engagement work. If resilience is understood as a social process and preparedness as a collective responsibility, then public education can serve a purpose beyond communicating information about hazards and individual actions. It can also create opportunities for people and organizations to strengthen the relationships, knowledge, and capacities that contribute to community resilience.

Expanding The Concept Of Preparedness

Individual preparedness has been an essential foundation of emergency management. It's important for households to understand the hazards they may face, have access to emergency supplies, develop plans, and know how to access reliable information, and these actions can increase an individual's ability to make informed decisions to manage the impacts of an emergency. The challenge is when preparedness is conceptualized primarily through these individual actions without considering the broader social environment in which emergencies occur.

An emergency can disrupt transportation, communications, electricity, access to essential services, housing, and other systems on which individuals depend on. During these disruptions, people turn to family members, neighbors, trusted community organizations, and informal networks they are familiar with to support them and to support each other. These relationships can facilitate the exchange of information, mobilization of resources, mutual assistance, and connection to services when formal systems are strained.

Collective preparedness therefore represents an expansion rather than a rejection of individual preparedness. It recognizes that individuals and households are embedded within communities and that the strength of those communities can influence their ability to withstand and recover from disruption. From this perspective, preparedness encompasses not only what people have prepared for themselves, but also the relationships and capacities that exist between people, and these capacities are developed through everyday interactions, long before an emergency occurs.

Public Education Portfolio As A Pathway To Capacity Development

This expanded understanding of preparedness creates an opportunity to reconsider the role of public education. Emergency management organizations have traditionally approached public education primarily as a communications function. Information is developed, packaged, and distributed through campaigns, presentations, websites, social media, printed materials, and other means. This work remains necessary, particularly in ensuring that communities have access to this information, however distribution of information does not necessarily create capacity.

Capacity development takes a broader view by considering how individuals, organizations, relationships, and systems develop the ability to respond to changing circumstances.

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Recovery Before Disaster

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When applied to emergency management, this suggests that public education can serve a purpose beyond transferring knowledge. Rather than viewing residents primarily as audiences for preparedness information, emergency management can create opportunities for people and organizations to contribute knowledge, identify local strengths, develop relationships, and build their capacity to act within the places and spaces that they know best.

Building capacity in this way requires emergency management professionals to meaningfully work alongside communities, leveraging the tangible and intangible assets that already exist within them. This approach is known as Asset-Based Community Development.

Asset-Based Community Development For Meaningful Partnerships

Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) is an approach to community development that emphasizes the strengths, assets, and capacities that already exist within a community, and is the opposite of a needs-based approach that is often seen in top-down approaches to development. Examples of assets include local organizations, community leaders, relationships, skills, cultural knowledge, gathering places, and informal networks.

For emergency management, this can mean looking beyond the traditional boundaries of emergency preparedness programs. A faith-based organization may have an established facility and trusted relationships with residents. A neighborhood association may possess knowledge and relationships that allow it to engage residents who are less likely to participate in municipal programs. A grassroots organization may have an active communication network and offer diverse programming to increase connection and capacity. These are all assets that represent existing local capacities that can contribute to greater community resilience.

Rather than attempting to formalize every community network into an emergency response structure, the role of emergency management can help create the conditions for those assets to be recognized, connected, and strengthened. This requires approaching communities as meaningful partners rather than simply as beneficiaries of information or services.

Partnership also requires a different understanding of engagement. Meaningful engagement is not simply a matter of increasing the number of people attending a preparedness presentation or how many brochures were handed out during an event. It involves developing relationships over time, actively listening to community priorities, respecting organizational capacity, and co-designing opportunities for communities to influence the programs and approaches intended to support them. To engage in this type of work, leveraging social capital within neighborhoods is important.

Social Capital And Community Capacities

Social capital refers to the resources and benefits that exist within relationships and social networks. This includes trust, reciprocity, information exchange, cooperation, and mutual support. In emergency management, these social resources can influence how communities access and mobilize information, connections, and other forms of support during disruptions.

It's important to remember that social capital cannot be created when an emergency begins. It develops through time, through trusted relationships and repeated interactions over time. Trust is built when organizations consistently show up, actively listen, demonstrate reliability, and recognize the expertise of others. Community engagement needs to be a prioritized action item within the scope of the broader public education portfolio in order to generate a strong sense of trust and ultimately strengthen the relationships and collective capacity that exist within communities.

Anchoring Public Education In Resilience

Anchoring public education in community resilience is not about asking emergency management professionals to do more. It is about reconsidering where we place our time, attention, and priorities. Individual preparedness remains important, but so too are the relationships, trust, contextual knowledge, and community assets that help people navigate disruption together. When public education and community engagement create space for these strengths to grow, they can become more than vehicles for sharing information; they can help build connections and capacities that make communities stronger.

This shift also asks us to see communities differently. Residents and community organizations are the experts in their areas, and they hold localized knowledge, connections, skills, and resources that already contribute to their resilience. Our role is to work alongside them, recognize those strengths, outline opportunities for funding and government support, and create opportunities for them to be agents of their own change. By shifting our approach from simply communicat-

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The Ripple Effect: What Community Surveys After Mass Violence Tell Emergency Managers

By Angela D. Moreland, Ph.D., Associate Director,National Mass Violence Center; and Elizabeth Cronin, J.D., Associate Academic Program Director, National Mass Violence Victimization Resource Center, Charleston, South Carolina

The authors will be speaking as part of the IAEM 74th Annual Conference on Nov. 9 from 9:45 a.m.-10:45 a.m.

When a mass violence incident ends, most of the emergency management apparatus stands down within days. The scene is released, the Family Assistance Center closes, and the after-action review begins. But for the community, the mass violence incident is not over. The healing and recovery is really just beginning for the community.

The National Mass Violence Center (NMVC) surveyed nearly 6,000 adults in six U.S. communities that experienced a mass violence incident: San Bernardino, California; Parkland, Florida; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Virginia Beach, Virginia; El Paso, Texas; and Dayton, Ohio. These were probability samples of ordinary residents, most of whom had no direct connection to the mass violence incident. We also surveyed more than 1,200 direct victims and survivors at five incident sites through their local Resiliency Centers.

The comparison between those two groups is where the lesson for emergency managers lives. It confirms what many practitioners suspect but rarely have the data to disseminate and utilize: mass violence ripples through an entire community, and the ripple lasts for years.

What The Surveys Found

Direct victims were hit hardest, as expected. But the harm reached far beyond them. Roughly one in four community members met criteria for posttraumatic stress disorder, about five times the national rate, and one in six met criteria for depression. More than one in eight reported substance use problems since the mass violence incident.

Fear and behavior change were even more widespread. About two in three community members worried that they or a family member would be the victim of another violence attack or mass violence incident. One in four had avoided crowded events, and one in ten had avoided public places altogether.

Two factors stood out as risk markers. Community members with a prior history of physical or sexual assault, and those with low social support, were roughly two to three times as likely to meet criteria for PTSD as their neighbors.

Two further findings matter most for emergency managers and those working on community preparedness plans. First, distress did not fade quickly; it persisted years after the incident. Second, only a small fraction of community members knew that mental health, support group, or chaplaincy services were available to them, and far fewer used them. The communities did stand up services, but the people who needed them mostly did not know.

The picture is not only one of injury. A large majority of community members reported posttraumatic growth, including greater appreciation for life and closeness to others. Resilience in these communities is the majority experience.

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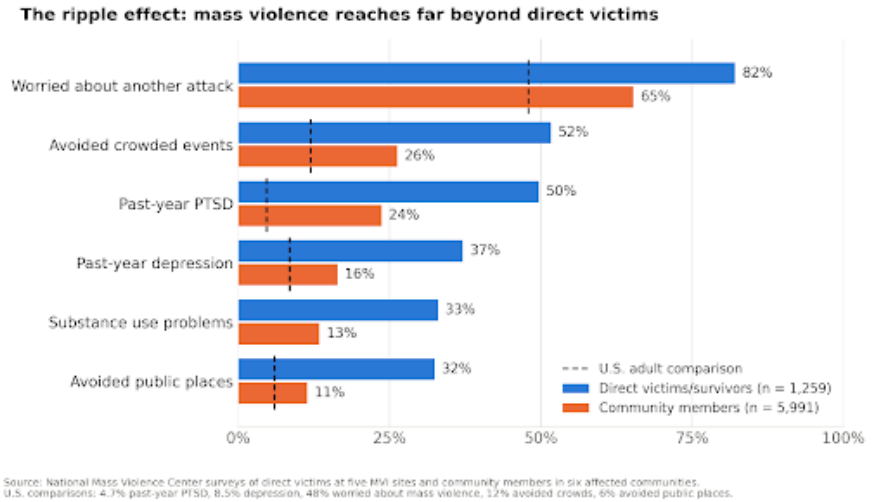


Figure 1. Every problem measured was most common among direct victims, but rates among community members far exceeded U.S. adult norms (dashed lines). Source: National Mass Violence Center.

The Ripple Effect

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Implications For Emergency Managers

Write behavioral health and victim services into the plan, not just the after-action report. A mass violence annex should name the lead agency for behavioral health, the victim services partners, and the funding pathways before the mass violence incident occurs.

Plan for three centers, not one. A Friends and Relatives Center for the information surge in the first hours, a Family Assistance Center for victims' families to receive ongoing assistance and information, and a Resiliency Center as the long-term hub for services and community connection in the years that follow.

Expect community-wide impact. Screening and outreach that target only those who were on scene will miss most of the people with clinically significant distress.

Reach the people at highest risk. Domestic violence advocates, sexual assault programs, faith communities, and organizations serving isolated residents already know where prior victimization and low social support are concentrated. Bring them into planning now.

Close the awareness gap with sustained, multi-channel messaging. A single press release about counseling services is not enough. Messaging needs to continue for months and be repeated around anniversaries and other important time periods.

Anticipate avoidance and substance use. When one in four residents avoids crowded events, public gatherings, businesses, schools, and workplaces feel it.

Plan and fund for the long haul. Recovery timelines, grant applications, and staffing plans should assume years, not months.

Anchored In Resilience

Emergency managers cannot prevent every mass violence incident, and they cannot treat PTSD. What they can do is build a plan that recognizes the true footprint of the event, connects the people most likely to be harmed with the people most able to help, and keeps that connection open long after the last news crew leaves. The communities we surveyed showed remarkable strength. Our job is to build the systems that let that strength do its work.

Resources

The NMVC special report, "The Ripple Effects of Mass Violence in America," and preparedness resources for community leaders are available at nmvc.org. Peer-reviewed findings from the community surveys appear in Moreland et al., JAMA Network Open, 2024;7(7):e2423539.

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Recovery Before Disaster

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ing preparedness to strengthening relationships and capacity, emergency management can work alongside communities to be not only more prepared for emergencies, but more connected and capable of supporting one another through them. 🔷

Recovery Without a Response

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er effort demonstrate that recovery is measured in months and years, not hours.

For emergency managers, the most enduring lesson may be that preparedness is ultimately about relationships. Plans matter, but people activate plans. Exercises create familiarity. Partnerships create trust. Community knowledge creates pathways for assistance.

Wichita was able to begin recovering from a tragedy that happened far away because people and organizations already knew how to work together. That is the kind of preparedness emergency managers should build before the next disaster—because sometimes the greatest test of an emergency management program is not whether it can lead a response, but whether it can help a community recover when the response happens somewhere else. 🔷

New to the Field: Charting Your Own Path into Emergency Management

By Ben Reavis, MPA, AEM, Emergency Management Specialist, U.S. Air Force Armament Directorate, Eglin AFB, Florida

The author will be speaking as part of the IAEM 74th Annual Conference on Nov. 8 from 10:15 a.m.-11:30 a.m.

After over two decades serving in the military, I thought I understood complex operations, high-stakes decision-making, and working under pressure. What I did not fully expect was how humbling and challenging it would be to become a student all over again.

Like many individuals approaching a career transition or students looking for their path, I found myself searching for a profession that would allow me to continue serving others while building on the experiences I had gained throughout my military career. Emergency management seemed like a natural fit. The mission mattered and the work felt meaningful.

What I quickly discovered, however, was that emergency management has become an entirely new profession, culture, and discipline for me. For those considering a move into emergency management from the military, public safety, business, education, healthcare, as a new graduate, or another field entirely, understanding this truth is one of the most important first lessons to learn.

Accept Being New Again

In my previous career, I could walk into a room and immediately understand the language, processes, and expectations. Entering emergency management felt completely different. Suddenly I was surrounded by unfamiliar acronyms, planning processes, and a lot of unfamiliar terminology. For many, this initial learning curve can feel overwhelming.

The temptation is to compare yourself to seasoned emergency managers and conclude that you're behind. Instead, I learned to view the transition as a deliberate professional development process. Emergency management is a field that rewards curiosity, patience, and continuous learning. Nobody can master it overnight.

If I had one piece of advice to share, it would be to give yourself permission to be a student again. Ask questions. Read plans. Get involved. The faster you accept that you're learning a brand-new profession, the faster your growth will occur.

Shifting From Commanding To Coordinating

Perhaps the greatest adjustment for professionals entering emergency management is learning that success often depends less on authority and more on collaboration.

Military and many corporate organizations typically operate within clearly defined command structures. While emergency management certainly incorporates leadership and incident command principles, much of the profession revolves around coordination among organizations that may have no direct authority over one another.

Emergency managers routinely work with local governments, state agencies, federal partners, nonprofit organizations, private-sector, schools, healthcare systems, and community groups. The ability to build consensus often becomes more valuable than the ability to issue directives.

This cultural adjustment can initially create frustration for professionals coming from highly structured environments. However, there is an undeniable strength in the whole-community approach. The diversity of perspectives often produces better outcomes than any single organization could achieve independently.

Understanding this distinction early can accelerate your transition significantly. Success in emergency management is frequently measured by relationships, trust, and influence rather than positional authority.

Your Previous Experience Is An Asset

One misconception among some is that they must somehow erase their previous professional identity to fit into a new role in emergency management. The opposite is true.

The profession benefits tremendously from people who bring different experiences and perspectives. Emergency management is inherently multidisciplinary. Communities face a wide variety of hazards and challenges, which means the profession requires varied expertise.

Military veterans often contribute strengths in logistics, planning, operational coordination, and decision-making under pressure. Healthcare professionals bring expertise in medical surge planning and support for vulnerable populations. Educators contribute communication, training,

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New to the Field

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and public engagement skills. Business professionals frequently excel in continuity planning, project management, budgeting, and risk analysis. Communication specialists strengthen public information programs and crisis messaging efforts. Recent graduates often bring technical skills such as research and data analysis, as well as a fresh perspective us "seasoned" professionals may lack.

The key is learning how to translate your experience into the emergency management language.

Rather than focusing on job titles or organizational structures from your previous field, emphasize competencies that employers value. Leadership, planning, problem solving, stakeholder engagement, resource management, training development, and crisis communication all have direct applications in emergency management.

The profession does not need everyone to think the same way; it needs people with different backgrounds working together.

Building Knowledge Through Structured Training

One of the advantages of entering emergency management today is the abundance of accessible training opportunities.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency Independent Study program provides an excellent starting point. Foundational courses such as IS-100, IS-200, IS-700, IS-800, and the Professional Development Series of courses can help establish a solid baseline of knowledge. Additional in-person and virtual courses are available through organizations such as the Texas A&M Engineering Extension Service, the National Disaster and Emergency Management University, the National Disaster Preparedness Training Center, and the National Domestic Preparedness Consortium.

Training alone will not make someone an emergency manager, but it does reduce uncertainty and build confidence. More importantly, it provides a common professional vocabulary that allows you to engage meaningfully with practitioners across the field.

My recommendation is to build a structured learning plan rather than randomly taking courses. Focus first on the foundational topics, then gradually expand into planning, exercises, continuity, or other areas as you figure out your path into emergency management.

Certifications As Career Milestones

Many people may wonder whether professional certification is worth pursuing.

In my personal opinion, certification serves two important purposes. It provides a structured roadmap for professional development, while demonstrating a commitment to the profession. The International Association of Emergency Managers offers both the Associate Emergency Manager (AEM) and Certified Emergency Manager (CEM) certification. While both certifications require training, references, and successful completion of an examination, the AEM is designed for professionals who are still building their experience and the CEM requires more substantial emergency management experience and documented professional contributions. For career transitioners, the AEM can be especially valuable because it provides a meaningful professional goal during the transition period. This can also signal your commitment to the field for potential employers and other emergency management professionals.

Equally important, however, is recognizing that certification complements experience rather than replacing it. Employers and colleagues ultimately evaluate performance, relationships, and results. Certifications are valuable milestones, but they are only part of a broader professional journey.

Building Professional Credibility

When organizations respond to disasters, they depend heavily on trust. Emergency managers want confidence that the people working alongside them can perform under pressure, communicate effectively, build relationships, and contribute constructively.

Volunteering is one of the most effective ways to gain experience and begin to establish credibility. Community Emergency Response Teams, Team Rubicon, the American Red Cross, Volunteer Organizations Active in Disaster, and local emergency management agencies all provide opportunities to learn while serving communities.

Exercises can also be invaluable. Many agencies need evaluators, controllers, role players, and support personnel for tabletop to full-scale exercises. Participating in these activities exposes you to emergency management operations while creating opportunities to build professional relationships. These opportunities aren't always widely advertised, so this is where effective networking is the key!

Networking often receives an undeserved negative reputation. In reality, professional networking is simply relationship-building. Attend meetings. Participate in conferences. Join professional associations. Seek mentors. Remember, the goal is not to collect business cards, it's to become an active member of the community.

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Understanding The Job Market

Another lesson I learned is that emergency management jobs can vary dramatically.

A local government emergency manager may spend significant time on planning, grant administration, preparedness activities, and coordination with community partners. A private sector emergency manager may focus heavily on business continuity, risk management, and operational resilience. University emergency managers often concentrate on student safety, event management, and campus preparedness.

There is no single "emergency management resume." Applicants must tailor their materials to a specific position. Study job announcements carefully. Identify the organization's challenges and priorities. Then connect your experience to those needs. By translating your accomplishments into language that demonstrates planning, coordination, leadership, and resource management can significantly improve your hiring outcomes.

Finding Your Purpose

Transitioning into emergency management has been both challenging and rewarding. There were moments when I questioned whether I belonged in the field and when the amount of information seemed impossible to absorb. There are certainly occasions when I still feel like the least knowledgeable person in the room. These experiences, however, gradually give way to developing your sense of purpose.

Emergency management exists to help communities become safer, stronger, and more resilient. Few professions offer such a direct connection between daily work and public service. Whether supporting preparedness initiatives, coordinating disaster recovery, developing mitigation strategies, or helping citizens navigate emergencies, emergency managers can make a meaningful difference in people's lives.

For those considering the transition, my message is simple: your previous experience matters, your perspective has value, and your background can strengthen the profession. Utilize structured training, build relationships intentionally, seek opportunities to serve, and remain committed to continuous learning.

You do not have to arrive as a finished emergency manager, but you must be willing to start the journey. Based on my own experience thus far, it's a journey well worth taking. 🔷



Anchored in Writing: Putting Infant Feeding Into Your Policies and Procedures

By Ashley Mickelson, Infant Feeding Specialist, SLP IBCLC
SAFE Team; and Love Anderson, Co-Founder, SAFE Infant Feeding Team Breastfeeding Family Friendly Communities, Durham, North Carolina

The author will be speaking as part of the IAEM 74th Annual Conference on Nov. 9 from 11:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m.

When Hurricane Helene hit western North Carolina in September 2024, a plan at every level of government should have said who was responsible for feeding the children in its path. The county plan. The state plan. The federal framework above them. None of them did. Children from birth to three can neither wait nor substitute, and they were the population nobody had been assigned.

What covered that gap was luck. North Carolina holds an unusual concentration of lactation expertise, including the Carolina Global Breastfeeding Institute at UNC and a state breastfeeding coalition that had already claimed this work. Nine days after landfall, 23 infant feeding specialists deployed. They went on to run more than 5,000 rapid needs assessments and move roughly 250,000 ounces of human milk and more than 7,000 cold sanitation kits.

We want to be precise about what that cost. Volunteers worked seventy hour weeks, many fifty-seven to fifty-nine days without a day off, in a region where Asheville went fifty-three days without potable water. We spent about twelve thousand dollars a week and brought in about ten. A nonprofit partner carried the deficit. The last payroll went out February 26, 2025, and people kept working after it stopped.

None of that is a capability. It was people who happened to be nearby, who knew each other, and who decided that if it was nobody's job it would be theirs. Nothing in your emergency operations plan can requisition it, and nothing obliges it to exist next time.

Here is the gap at ground level. A mother sheltering in a hotel room with three children was handed 32 ounce ready-to-feed bottles for her two week old. They would not fit in the mini fridge, nobody told her an opened bottle has to be refrigerated, and she was giving the baby water for hiccups because her newborn appointments were gone and no one was left to ask. That observation is now in the Government Accountability Office's July 2026 report to Congress. Nobody in it did anything wrong; the failure was not effort or compassion. No document said what gets stocked, in what size, or what to ask and say when handing it over.

What The Plans Actually Say

That is not a North Carolina finding. In July 2026, Pewitt and colleagues published the first peer-reviewed assessment of U.S. state IYCF-E preparedness in the International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction, scoring all fifty states' emergency operations plans, health department guidance and WIC materials against the Operational Guidance on Infant Feeding in Emergencies.

The mean state score was zero. Of the 46 plans obtained, 12 mentioned infant feeding at all, usually one sentence about acquiring formula, and none carried operational guidance on breastfeeding support, safe preparation, coordination or donation management. Only four contained any variation of the word "breastfeed." Across all fifty states, five explained how a family reaches skilled lactation support during a disaster, and none had a donation management plan. Eleven published advice that is not evidence based, such as recommending formula in emergency kits without specifying clean water or safe cleaning, which the authors warn gives families "a false sense of preparedness." For scale: Florida's plan references "animal" 54 times and Michigan's 179, against nine and eight mentions of infant or baby. Many EOPs carry a dedicated animal sheltering annex; the authors found none for infant feeding.

One state is the exception, and it is worth an afternoon of your time. South Carolina's Department of Public Health emergency plan includes Appendix 14, "Access to Lactation Consultants and Infant Formula/Food," covering both general population and medical needs shelters:

- Structured triage using a lactation screening flowsheet.
- A regional on-call rotation of board certified lactation consultants, with virtual consultation protocols.
- Staff training requirements, breastfeeding friendly shelter space and privacy accommodations.
- Procedures for acquiring formula and baby food through the state resource system, coordination

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with ESF-6 and ESF-11, escalation to ESF-18 and food banks, and mission requests to FEMA for infant and toddler kits.

It earned the only full point awarded on any criterion in the country, and it sits in a public health supplement rather than the state's primary plan. It did not wait for Washington.

Improvised capability is not resilience. Written capability is.

Nobody Is Assigned, Which Is Not The Same As Nobody Being Responsible

Ask who is responsible and the honest answer is everyone. Health and Human Services is congressionally the lead for sheltering, emergency management carries life safety, and feeding a two-month-old is life safety. The study names the mechanism: doctrine splits infant feeding across mass care in ESF-6, public health in ESF-8 and food supply in ESF-11, and without explicit coordination it "may occupy an ambiguous space within governance." What is missing is not responsibility. It is assignment.

Diffuse responsibility does not diffuse consequences. After a disaster the Department of Justice does not ask which agency held the assignment. It asks whether a group of residents was neglected, intentionally or not. A point of distribution stocked with bottled water and MREs has only planned for part of its population: the same fix that serves infants serves people with diabetes, people requiring artificial nutrition, and many elderly residents.

It Is Already Reimbursable

The argument used to be that this is cheap. As of January 6, 2025, it is also reimbursable. FEMA's Public Assistance Program and Policy Guide version 5.0 added breastfeeding and chestfeeding support items to the eligible congregate shelter supplies list under Category B, where the prior version had named only formula, baby food and diapers. It reached the final guide because one emergency manager filed a public comment. That same letter got feeding inserted into the personal assistance services definition, which may make lactation counseling claimable as eligible shelter staff. No jurisdiction has tested it yet.

Where This Actually Goes In Your Documents

Integration is not a briefing or a training. It is edits to five documents you already maintain.

Your emergency operations plan and ESF-6 annex. Name one infant and young child feeding lead by position title, not by person, reporting into Operations, Human Services Branch, where mass care already lives. Then name the outside expertise it calls, by organization: your WIC agency, your hospital lactation department, the lactation consultants in your county. A relationship you have not written down is not a resource, it is a memory.

Your shelter plan and, more importantly, your shelter walk-through checklist. The checklist is what makes everything else happen. A designated lactation space is mostly a sign on a door, sited near the nurse station and the activity area so older siblings are supervised next door. If it is not on the walk-through at setup, it gets remembered on day three. Add safe sleep beside safe feeding, and label the single stall a family restroom rather than a gender neutral restroom. Site a washing area for bottles, teats and pump parts: schools will not open the kitchen, so find a staff break room with a sink.

Your registration and intake instrument. Assess every family with an infant at registration, per infant rather than per household, so distribution rests on documented need. It is the only way this reaches a situation report or a resource request, because right now no system captures it. Record what a family actually uses: switching a breastfed baby to formula is not, as Prasad and Russell put it, a reasonable accommodation that discharges your duty.

Your logistics and resource typing. Size it: Red Cross recovery case work averages about three children under two per hundred people, so a 300 cot shelter should plan for roughly nine. Prioritize ready-to-feed formula, preferably two ounce bottles with disposable teats, when power and water are uncertain. Plan the last mile: pallets reaching the county is not formula reaching a family. Do not require pre-disaster medical authorization before releasing feeding equipment. And FEMA's Commonly Used Sheltering Items catalog, which jurisdictions model purchases against, contains no pumps, milk storage bags or cold sanitation kits.

Your training and exercise plan. Train registration staff, feeding staff and anyone who meets families, not only health staff. As Prasad points out, FEMA's Resource Typing Library already carries a Feeding Services Team Leader position, a mass care role rather than a public health one, and its required training omits IS-366.a, Planning for the Needs of Children in Disasters, a course in which breastfeeding is never mentioned and formula appears twice, once about evacuating a daycare. In the 2024 National Mass Care Exercise, a breast pump request routed to the Sheltering Task Force was still unresolved when the exercise paused. Put an inject in your next

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Resilience Doesn't Come in a Box: Building on the Tools You Already Have

By Ryan Steele, CEM, PMP, CBCP, Response & Recovery Coordinator, City of Richardson Office of Emergency Management , City of Richardson, Texas

The author will be speaking as part of the IAEM 74th Annual Conference on Nov. 11 from 10:15 a.m.-11:15 a.m.

Emergency managers train for the big, the bad, and the ugly. But what about the small incidents? Seemingly random utility outages when it gets hot, that one low road crossing that floods every time it rains, 5 O'clock traffic on your only route home. Even though these incidents are common, they can still be resource intense.

Power outages are a good example. They happen constantly, and they're almost never catastrophic, which is exactly why they get overlooked. My office keeps a list of residents enrolled in the State of Texas Emergency Assistance Registry (STEAR), people who registered voluntarily with the state that they are part of a vulnerable population. The registry tells us who might need a call. It doesn't tell us who actually lost power, and calling all eighty (or up to 2000 in some jurisdictions) names on it every time the lights go out somewhere in the city isn't a responsible use of a small team's time. Being good stewards of limited resources means asking a different question: is there a faster, more efficient way to make positive contact?

Most of us don't start with unlimited staff, money or time. We start with a process that takes too long, information stored in several places, and a team already carrying a full workload. The natural reaction is to go shopping for a new platform. Sometimes that's the right call. More often, the faster fix is less exciting: understanding the problem, inventorying what is already available, and connecting those resources differently.

Start With The Work

Technology projects often begin with a product: What can this software do? A stronger approach begins with the work: What problem are we trying to solve, who is affected and where does the current process slow down or fail?

Map the process before changing it. Follow information from the moment it enters the organization until someone acts on it. Look for repeated downloads, duplicate data entry, emailed spreadsheets, unclear ownership and decisions that depend on one person's memory. These friction points are more than inconveniences during routine operations. Under incident conditions, they consume scarce attention and can delay service to the community.

Then inventory existing capabilities. Most organizations already have some combination of forms, shared workspaces, spreadsheets, geographic information systems, mass-notification platforms, dashboards and workflow tools. Employees also possess capabilities that may not appear on an organizational chart: someone understands data, someone builds reliable spreadsheets, someone knows the community, and someone can translate an operational need into a repeatable procedure. Resilience grows when leaders connect those technical and human assets around a clearly defined outcome.

FEMA's Whole Community approach makes a similar point: work with what a community already does well instead of trying to replace it. That holds inside an emergency management program too. A system that works doesn't need to go away just because something new looks better on paper. Ask first whether what you already have can be reorganized, connected or automated to do more.

Lead With Questions

Modern emergency management leadership is less about controlling every task and more about creating the conditions in which people can solve problems responsibly. That requires leaders to set the outcome, establish guardrails and give employees room to experiment.

The leader does not need to be the best programmer, GIS analyst or application designer. The leader must be able to ask useful questions:

- What decision will this improve?
- What manual work will this remove?
- Who will maintain it after the original developer leaves?
- How will staff know when it fails?
- What is the manual fallback?
- Does it protect sensitive information and remain accessible to the people who need it?

Leaders should also treat technology projects as operational change, not simply installation. New workflows alter responsibilities, expectations and workplace habits. A tool that works perfectly in a demo but isn't trusted, documented or understood by the team won't hold up during an activation.

This changes how teams should work. Emergency managers can

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create short-term, cross-functional groups around a specific problem rather than sending every technical request through a long chain of handoffs. Operations personnel define the need. GIS, information technology, communications, public safety and community partners contribute their expertise. Users test the process early. Leadership removes barriers and keeps the group focused on the operational outcome.

What you end up with is a workplace where employees can identify friction, propose improvements, test them safely and share what they learn. That is how continuous improvement becomes part of preparedness instead of an activity reserved for after-action reports.

Train Problem-Solvers, Not Button-Pushers

Preparing the next generation of emergency management professionals requires more than teaching plans, doctrine and response structures. Those foundations remain essential, but emerging professionals must also learn how information moves, how systems interact and how technology can support (or distort) decision-making.

The Next Generation Core Competencies describe technological literacy as the ability to understand evolving technologies, evaluate their usefulness, apply them appropriately and recognize associated security concerns. The framework pairs that skill with systems literacy, critical thinking, community engagement and leadership. That combination matters. We don't need more people who know how to operate software. We need people who can see a process as a system, identify the point of failure and decide whether technology is even the right intervention.

Supervisors can develop those skills through everyday work:

- Let newer professionals map an existing process and recommend one improvement.
- Pair operational staff with GIS, IT, communications or data personnel.
- Include them in exercises as designers, evaluators and controllers, not only participants.
- Ask them to document both the automated workflow and its manual fallback.
- Give them opportunities to brief leaders and explain the operational value of their work.
- Treat unsuccessful prototypes as learning opportunities when they were tested responsibly.

This is also a knowledge-management strategy. If only one person understands a process, the organization has created vulnerability. Build with succession in mind. Use common language, document dependencies, cross-train staff and assign backup owners. FEMA's Emergency Management Professional Program makes the same case for building skills over a whole career, starting at entry level.

What This Looks Like When the Power Goes Out

Back to that outage. STEAR gives local emergency planners and responders information about residents who may need additional assistance during an emergency. The operational challenge was not simply obtaining the registry. During a power outage, staff needed to identify which registrants were likely affected, move those records into a usable call list and begin the escalating wellness-check process without spending critical time manually comparing multiple datasets.

The response did not begin with purchasing a single-purpose system. It began by mapping the work and connecting capabilities the city already used: state registry data, ArcGIS, ONCOR service information, Everbridge, Power Automate, and a shared SharePoint/Teams environment. Automated processes perform repetitive comparisons and prepare an actionable list. People still decide when to activate the process, speak with residents, evaluate needs and escalate unanswered contacts.

That distinction matters. Automation should take the repetitive work off people's plates, so they have more time for the conversations that need a person on the other end of the phone.

The example also shows why efficiency and equity are connected. A faster internal process has little value unless it improves service to the community. Whole Community emergency management expressly includes individuals with access and functional needs, along with families, businesses, nonprofits, schools, faith-based organizations and all levels of government. By narrowing a broad registry to the people potentially affected by a specific outage, the STEAR workflow helps direct limited response capacity toward residents who may need it most.

The process is not perfect or finished. Data formats change. Addresses do not always match. External websites and interfaces can fail. Systems require maintenance, testing, logs, access controls and manual alternatives. A resilient organization does not hide those limitations. It plans for them, assigns responsibility for them and teaches the next employee how to manage them.

Pick One Problem

Every emergency management office has unresolved problems that may not require a new procurement. One may be a resource request that travels through email. Another may

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be a continuity plan that nobody can find during an activation. Another may be a vulnerable-population list that requires hours of manual sorting before staff can use it.

Choose one. Define the operational outcome. Map the current process. Inventory the tools, relationships and talent are already available. Build the smallest workable improvement, test it with users, document it and keep a manual fallback. Then let the people who built it teach someone else.

The next generation of emergency managers will inherit more data, more technology and higher expectations. Handing them more tools won't be enough. We have to teach them to question a process, see how the pieces of a system fit together, work across disciplines and keep the community at the center of it.

Resilience does not always arrive in a new box. Sometimes it is already in the people, platforms and partnerships we use every day, waiting for someone to connect them with purpose. 🔷

Follow-Up Resources

- FEMA, Whole Community: https://www.fema.gov/about/glossary/whole-community.
- Next Generation Core Competencies: https://www.atu.edu/ceh/pace/emhs/ngcc.php
- Texas Division of Emergency Management, STEAR: https://www.tdem.texas.gov/response/state-of-texas-emergency-assistance-registry

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tabletop and see whether yours resolves faster.

None Of This Is A Hurricane Problem

A January 2026 cold snap put an eight month old in a Wilmington warming shelter. A July 2026 water main break left half a county at low pressure with no declaration at all. A daycare outbreak. A cafeteria that loses cold storage. The need is identical: safe water, a clean place to prepare and wash, a private place to feed, and someone who knows what to do.

Charting through preparedness means deciding these things while the sky is clear. Anchored in resilience means writing them down so they hold when it is not. Open your shelter walkthrough checklist and add a line. It takes a minute, and it pulls the other four behind it. 🔷



The Resources Are Already Here: Building Response Capacity Before Disaster Strikes

By Monique Lewis, CSP, Training Department Head, NWFF Environmental, Kodiak, Alaska

The author will be speaking as part of the IAEM 74th Annual Conference on Nov. 11 from 11:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m.

When you live on an island, the phrase "mutual aid" takes on a different meaning.

In Kodiak, Alaska, a significant incident can quickly exceed locally available emergency response resources. Unlike communities connected by a highway system, specialized assistance cannot simply drive in from a neighboring jurisdiction. Additional resources arrive by air or sea, and the same earthquake, severe weather, tsunami, or other events may also disrupt those transportation systems.

That reality forces a different kind of thinking about what constitutes an emergency response resource.

The lesson Kodiak is applying is simple: resource scarcity does not always mean the resource does not exist. Sometimes it means we have not created a way to access, integrate, and use the resources already in our community.

That distinction is becoming increasingly important well beyond Alaska. Emergency managers face reduced public-sector staffing, declining volunteer participation, increasingly specialized technical requirements, longer operational periods, and incidents affecting multiple jurisdictions simultaneously. Traditional mutual aid remains essential, but we should not assume the public-sector resource network represents the entire capability available to our communities.

Start By Breaking Down Organizational Boundaries

Kodiak already has some important pieces of this approach in place.

The career and volunteer fire departments have representation on the Local Emergency Planning Committee (LEPC), connecting emergency responders, emergency management, industry, and other community stakeholders. The career fire department and two volunteer departments conduct joint training whenever possible, and training opportunities also include the U.S. Coast Guard fire department.

Those relationships make a significant difference during emergency operations.

During a major incident, responders should not be exchanging introductions for the first time at the command post. Joint training builds familiarity with people, equipment, terminology, procedures, strengths, and limitations before an emergency.

But Kodiak responders are beginning to ask a larger question: Why should our resource network stop at the doors of the fire stations?

Build Capability, Not Just Departments

One concept is an island-wide special operations capability that draws personnel from multiple organizations, potentially including those outside the traditional fire service.

Consider a major earthquake.

Responders may encounter damaged buildings where they must evaluate structural stability before personnel can safely enter. Kodiak has residents with engineering and other technical expertise who could be extremely valuable during such an incident. Some may be willing to train and serve in a disaster role but have no interest in becoming volunteer firefighters.

Structural firefighting should not be the price of admission for someone whose real value to the response organization is engineering expertise.

Instead, think about capabilities. What qualifications are necessary? What disaster-specific training does that person need? What safety and ICS training should be required? How will credentials be verified? Who supervises the individual? What is the scope and limitation of the assignment?

Answering those questions creates a way for skilled community members to supplement the response organization without asking them to become something they are not.

Look For Specialized Capability That Already Exists

The private sector provides another opportunity.

Public agencies cannot realistically maintain proficiency in every low-frequency, highly technical discipline that a major disaster could require.

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Building Response Capacity Before

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Public-safety diving is a good example. Developing and maintaining a proficient rescue dive team requires significant investments in personnel, equipment, medical qualification, training, and recurring dives. Maintaining that capability can be especially difficult for volunteer organizations and small career departments.

But Kodiak already has professional commercial divers, including certified underwater welders, who routinely maintain their diving skills.

The capability exists.

What does not yet exist is a fully developed mechanism for turning that commercial capability into an emergency response resource.

Rather than creating a government-owned version of every specialized capability, communities can explore pre-established agreements that address activation, qualifications, insurance, liability, operational supervision, equipment, compensation, safety requirements, and integration into the Incident Command System.

That does not mean commercial divers automatically become public-safety rescue divers, nor does it eliminate the need to define appropriate qualifications for a specific mission. It means determining whether an existing capability can safely fill part of the identified gap, and what would be required to make that possible, before the emergency.

Create Force Multipliers Before They Are Needed

Hazardous materials response presents a similar challenge.

A catastrophic release of ammonia from one of Kodiak's fish-processing facilities could require far more personnel than the public-sector hazardous materials response community could sustainably provide.

At the same time, Kodiak has private environmental response capability. These companies primarily perform environmental remediation and spill response, but their personnel may already possess skills applicable to portions of a hazardous materials operation.

Availability alone does not make them response-ready.

One model worth pursuing is a pre-established contracting mechanism that lets qualified private-sector personnel participate in appropriate joint training and exercises with public responders. Providing funding or offering a certification path that benefits the business could be far more sustainable than expecting private employers to repeatedly absorb the cost of making employees available for government exercises.

The return on that investment is interoperability.

Personnel learn how they will communicate, where they fit within ICS, what equipment is compatible, what tasks they are qualified to perform, and where public-sector authority ends and contractor responsibility begins.

When the emergency occurs, a known resource is activated rather than improvised.

Solve The Activation Problem Before the Disaster

Even government-affiliated resources can illustrate the difference between being physically present and being operationally available.

Approximately 20 to 30 active members of the Alaska State Defense Force live on Kodiak Island. These members potentially represent valuable additional capacity during small- and large-scale incidents.

However, State Defense Force personnel operate under state authority. Local members cannot simply self-deploy because their own community has experienced a disaster.

That can create an unusual situation during a large-scale event: trained personnel may be physically present on the island while the request for those same personnel moves from the local EOC through the state resource-request process and competes with needs from other affected jurisdictions. During small events, the state EOC may not even know what the local community needs, and by the time a state activation is secured, the incident is over.

The answer is not to circumvent state authority. It is to solve as much of the activation problem as possible beforehand.

Local and state partners should explore procedures for identifying locally available personnel and establishing a method to fast-track properly authorized activation when predefined conditions exist. The authority remains where it belongs, but the administrative pathway has already been considered before time becomes critical.

Five Questions Every Community Can Ask

Kodiak's circumstances are unusual, but the underlying problem is not. Communities everywhere have capabilities that exist outside their traditional emergency response inventories.

Emergency managers can begin by asking five questions:

- **Where are our recurring capability gaps?** Identify the specialized resources most likely to become limiting during an incident of scale.
- **Who already has those capabilities?** Look beyond government to private industry, technical professionals, volunteer organizations, CERT programs, State Defense Forces, utilities, contractors, and other community partners.

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Building Response Capacity Before

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- **What would make them deployable?** Define qualifications, credentialing, equipment, supervision, authority, insurance, liability, compensation, and limitations.
- **How will we activate them?** Establish contracts, agreements, contacts, authorization procedures, pricing, and documentation requirements before the incident.
- **Have we actually exercised the process?** Test notification, mobilization, integration, supervision, communications, documentation, and demobilization—not simply the technical skill.

Availability Is Not Readiness

A small community does not have to own every capability it may someday need. It does need to know where that capability resides, whether it is qualified, who has authority to activate it, how it will enter the incident organization, and how quickly it can get to work.

For Kodiak, geographic isolation makes that imperative particularly visible. But increasingly complex and concurrent disasters are creating the same problem everywhere: communities may not be able to rely on additional public-sector resources arriving as quickly or in the numbers they once expected.

The answer is not a single new resource source. It is a deliberately integrated network of public, private, volunteer, and community capabilities built before the incident occurs.

The people, equipment, and expertise we will need during our next disaster may already be here.

Our preparedness challenge is making sure they are ready when we need them. 🔷



Rethinking the Planning Cycle: Putting Community Impacts at the Center

By Thomas Walmsley, CEM, Director, Bernalillo County Department of Emergency Management

The author will be speaking as part of the IAEM 74th Annual Conference on Nov. 11 from 11:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m.

As emergency managers, we often talk about preparedness as a cycle, but our planning processes rarely work that way. Most jurisdictions maintain an Emergency Operations Plan, a Hazard Mitigation Plan, continuity plans, annexes, a Threat and Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment (THIRA), a Stakeholder Preparedness Review (SPR), and an Integrated Preparedness Plan (IPP). Each serves a purpose. The problem is that they often operate on separate tracks.

We do not necessarily need another plan. We need a better way to connect the tools we already have.

The Community Impact Planning Cycle is one approach. It uses Community Lifelines to strengthen our understanding of impacts, connects those impacts to THIRA capability targets, uses the SPR to assess gaps, and turns the IPP into a strategy for addressing those gaps through planning, training, and exercises.

We Have The Tools, But Not A Cycle

THIRA gives jurisdictions a structured way to identify threats and hazards, build realistic scenarios, and establish capability targets. The SPR then asks us to assess those capabilities through Planning, Organization, Equipment, Training, and Exercises (POETE). The IPP is supposed to take the next step by aligning preparedness priorities with planning, training, and exercise activities.

On paper, those pieces should fit together. In practice, they often become separate products completed on separate timelines.

That separation creates a larger problem. THIRA can describe the direct impacts of an incident, but it does not necessarily show how those impacts interact across a community. A road closure is not only a transportation problem. It may delay restoration crews, disrupt medical access, interfere with fuel deliveries, and create additional problems for systems already under stress.

Incidents do not unfold in silos, but our planning tools often treat impacts that way.

Seeing The Community Differently

My thinking about this changed after I came across a Naval Postgraduate School thesis on extreme heat. The author used Community Lifelines to organize the impacts of several heat scenarios. Until then, I had mostly associated lifelines with response. Seeing them applied to a planning problem showed how they could provide a broader picture of community impacts.

That idea became much more practical during our first Public Safety Power Shutoff (PSPS) in early 2024.

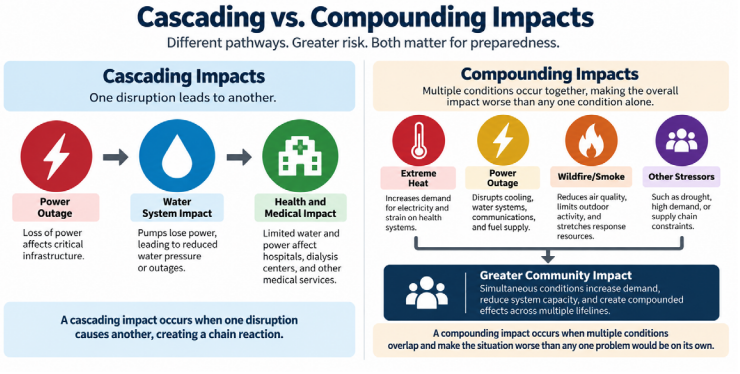
We received notice on a Friday evening that the following Tuesday could bring a planned shut-off affecting about 12,000 customers and a population of roughly 25,000. Because every line would have to be inspected before power could be restored, our worst-case estimate was an outage lasting as long as 36 hours.

Our initial concerns were predictable: fire stations, sheriff substations, communications infrastructure, and fuel.

Then we started looking at the situation through the Community Lifelines, this gave us the full picture.

Using HHS emPOWER data and local data provided by our healthcare partners, we learned that nearly 10 percent of the affected population relied on electrically dependent medical devices. We identified water systems that could lose pressure. Transportation and fuel became connected concerns rather than separate ones. We also had to remember that a PSPS does not prevent a wildfire from occurring; it removes one

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Cascading vs. Compounding Impacts.

Offline-First Fallback

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potential ignition source while the underlying fire conditions remain.

Looking across the lifelines helped us see both cascading and compounding impacts. A cascading impact occurs when one disruption causes another. A compounding impact occurs when multiple conditions overlap and make the situation worse than any one problem would be on its own.

Those relationships are critical to preparedness, yet they are easy to miss when we assess capabilities one at a time.

Put Community Lifelines Into Planning

Community Lifelines provide a practical way to close that gap. Using FEMA's eight lifelines, Safety and Security; Food, Hydration, and Shelter; Health and Medical; Water Systems; Energy; Communications; Transportation; and Hazardous Materials, planners have a common structure for asking how a scenario affects the community as a whole.

The process can begin where THIRA already begins: with hazard context.

Instead of stopping after identifying the direct consequences of a scenario, planners can examine those consequences across each lifeline. Where does one disruption create another? Which systems depend on each other? Where could simultaneous impacts overwhelm existing capability?

That analysis can then inform the capability targets in the THIRA. Rather than developing targets in isolation, jurisdictions can connect them to the systems and dependencies they are intended to protect or restore.

The next step is the SPR. Once the impacts and capability targets are clearer, POETE assessments have more context. We are no longer asking only, "How capable are we?" We are asking whether our planning, organization, equipment, training, and exercises are sufficient for the impacts we have identified.

The resulting gaps should drive the IPP.

That is an important distinction. An IPP should not simply be an annual training calendar. It should identify what the jurisdiction needs to improve and then align planning, training, and exercises with those priorities.

From Separate Products To A Continuous Cycle

The Community Impact Planning Cycle can be summarized as a repeating sequence:

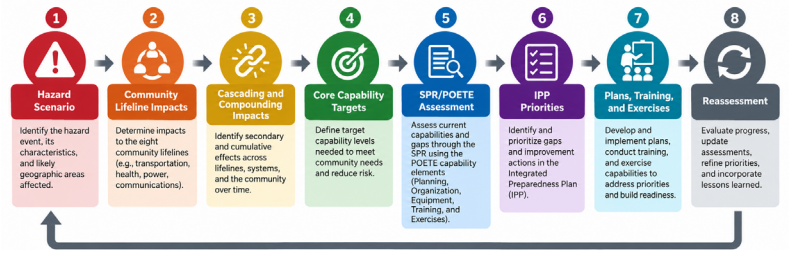
Hazard Scenario → Community Lifeline Impacts → Cascading and Compounding Impacts → Core Capability Targets → SPR/POETE Assessment → IPP Priorities → Plans, Training, and Exercises → Reassessment

The cycle does not replace the EOP, Hazard Mitigation Plan, COOP, or existing annexes. Instead, it helps inform them. Operational gaps can drive EOP or annex updates. Long-term vulnerabilities can inform mitigation work. Capability gaps can guide investments, partnerships, training, and exercises.

Most importantly, each step informs the next.

This also gives local programs a clearer way to explain preparedness decisions. If a jurisdiction chooses to invest in a capability, conduct a particular exercise, or revise a plan, it should be possible to trace that decision back to an identified community impact and risk.

That makes the process more useful than completing individual requirements and placing the finished products on a shelf.



Complete cycle of continuous improvement.

A Better Use of What We Already Have

Emergency management does not need another planning requirement to solve this problem. We already have many of the necessary tools.

Community Lifelines can help us understand how an incident affects the systems people depend on. THIRA can translate those impacts into capability targets. The SPR can help us assess where our capabilities fall short. The IPP can turn those gaps into priorities for planning, training, and exercises.

The missing piece is the connection between them.

The Community Impact Planning Cycle is not new doctrine and does not require jurisdictions to rewrite every plan. It is a way to organize existing tools around how emergencies actually unfold: across interconnected systems, with impacts that cascade and compound.

If we connect those tools into a repeatable process, we can move beyond maintaining a collection of plans and toward a planning cycle that helps us understand risk, build capability, and prepare for what our communities will actually experience.

When Governance and Culture Shape Preparedness: Lessons from Tribal Emergency Management

By Zuzzette Bricker, CEM, Emergency Services Coordinator
Pechanga, Temecula, California

The author will be speaking as part of the IAEM 74th Annual Conference on Nov. 11 from 10:15 a.m.-11:15 a.m.

Emergency management often speaks about resilience as something we build: resilient communities, resilient infrastructure, resilient organizations, and resilient systems.

During National Tribal Training Week, however, I found myself thinking about resilience differently.

Throughout the week, I heard two words repeated again and again: sovereignty and resilience. Different speakers and different conversations kept returning to a similar message. Tribal Nations were here before the United States became a country. They have endured generations of disruption, displacement, loss, and change.

And they are still here.

There is weight in those words that is difficult to capture on a page. Sitting there listening, I realized that perhaps we have been approaching part of the resilience conversation backward.

As emergency managers, we spend a great deal of time talking about how we help build resilient communities. Yet I was surrounded by representatives of communities that have been practicing resilience for generations.

Perhaps they can teach us about resilience.

Not the other way around.

That realization does not diminish the value of modern emergency management. Instead, it asks us to approach our work with humility—to bring our plans, systems, training, technology, and professional knowledge while recognizing that knowledge and capability already exist within the communities we serve.

Preparedness becomes stronger when both inform the work.

Sovereignty Is More Than Jurisdiction

The other message I heard repeatedly throughout Tribal Training Week was sovereignty.

For emergency managers unfamiliar with Tribal government, sovereignty can easily become a legal term associated primarily with jurisdiction and authority. Those issues are important, but sovereignty represents much more than a line on a jurisdictional map.

It reflects the inherent authority of Tribal Nations to govern themselves, make decisions for their communities, protect what matters to them, and determine their own futures.

That has direct implications for emergency management.

A Tribal Nation is not simply another stakeholder, community organization, or special population within a county. Federally recognized Tribes are sovereign governments with a government-to-government relationship with the United States.

Emergency managers routinely operate within systems built around city, county, state, and federal relationships. Mutual aid, resource requests, Emergency Operations Centers, alert and warning systems, public safety coordination, disaster declarations, and recovery programs frequently reflect those structures.

Tribal governments may interact with those same systems while exercising their own authorities, maintaining their own governmental structures, protecting culturally significant resources, and working directly with federal partners. Standard emergency management structures, including the Incident Command System, may also need to operate alongside Tribal governance and community decision-making structures.

That does not make Tribal emergency management incompatible with the larger emergency management system. It means partnership should not begin with the assumption that a Tribal Nation will simply fit into a structure designed around other forms of government.

The best time to understand those differences is long before the EOC activates.

Culture Is Operational

Emergency management sometimes treats culture as something adjacent to operations. It may appear in a community profile, demographic section, or introductory portion of an emergency plan.

In Tribal emergency management, I have learned that culture can be operational.

Cultural resources, sacred places, traditional knowledge, language, elders, community relationships, ceremonies, and connections to the land can influence decisions throughout

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preparedness, mitigation, response, and recovery.

Consider a wildfire threatening an area containing culturally significant resources. Protecting that area may represent far more than protecting property. Consider an evacuation or sheltering strategy developed without understanding community relationships, transportation realities, elders, animals, culturally significant locations, or how people receive and trust information.

A technically sound plan can still fail if it does not reflect the community it is intended to protect.

Cultural understanding should not be added at the end of emergency planning as an inclusion exercise. It should be incorporated from the beginning as part of understanding the jurisdiction and the people we serve.

Every community has characteristics that influence how people receive warnings, make decisions, seek assistance, evacuate, shelter, recover, and trust institutions.

Tribal emergency management reminds us of something fundamental:

Know the community before writing the plan.

Relationships Are Preparedness Infrastructure

Emergency managers spend considerable time assessing physical capabilities: generators, communications systems, EOCs, vehicles, equipment, supplies, technology, and facilities.

Those capabilities matter.

But relationships are also preparedness infrastructure.

Relationships among Tribal governments, neighboring jurisdictions, Tribal and neighboring fire and law enforcement agencies, public health, utilities, schools, businesses, nonprofits, and federal, state, and local partners can determine whether coordination begins from an established foundation or with introductions during a crisis.

Building those relationships requires more than exchanging business cards.

It means including Tribal representatives in regional planning efforts from the beginning, exercising together, understanding who has decision-making authority, and learning how our emergency management systems intersect before those systems are under stress.

Most importantly, partnership requires reciprocity.

Tribal Nations should not only hear from partners when an organization needs participation, representation, information, or a box checked on a planning document. Sustainable partnerships develop when organizations consistently share information, training opportunities, planning efforts, exercises, resources, and lessons learned.

Preparedness grows stronger when relationships exist before they are needed.

Start by Asking, Not Assuming

Emergency managers are trained to solve problems. That instinct is valuable during disasters, but it can occasionally work against relationship building.

When working with Tribal Nations, practitioners do not need to arrive with all the answers.

Start with questions.

How is emergency management organized within the Tribal government? Who has authority during an emergency? What hazards concern the community? What resources, places, or functions are especially important to protect? How does the Nation communicate with its community? What mutual aid relationships already exist? What barriers have Tribal partners encountered when coordinating with outside agencies?

There is no single Tribal or Indigenous emergency management model. Tribal Nations differ in geography, governance, economic resources, infrastructure, hazards, and capacity. A gaming Tribe should not become the model through which we understand a non-gaming Tribe, nor should one Tribal Nation be assumed to represent another.

The distinctions become even more important when considering Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian communities, whose histories, cultures, governmental relationships, and operational environments are different. Inclusivity begins with recognizing those differences rather than assuming one framework will fit everyone.

Those conversations can reveal considerations that will never appear on an organizational chart. They also help prevent a common mistake: assuming that a system designed for one jurisdiction automatically works for another.

Preparedness should not require communities to continually reshape themselves to fit emergency management systems developed without them in mind.

Sometimes the system needs to adapt.

Putting the Lesson Into Practice

Emergency managers do not need to become experts in every Tribal Nation or Indigenous community before beginning this work. They do need to be intentional.

Listen before planning. Learn how the government or community is structured, who holds authority, what capabilities already exist, and

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You Cannot Out-Staff a Disaster, But You Can Out-Network One

By Nancy Brown, PhD, Sonoma County Department of Emergency Management

The authors will be speaking as part of the IAEM 74th Annual Conference on Nov. 10 from 11:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m.

Emergency managers are trained to build plans, issue alerts, activate emergency operations centers, and coordinate resources. All of that work is essential. Yet even the strongest agency cannot knock on every door, translate every message, know who needs a ride, or recognize every household that may require a check-in. The gap is not always planning or expertise. Often the gap is reach and effective collaboration will expand your reach (Chandra et al., 2015).

Community resilience grows when we stop treating community engagement as an outreach activity and begin treating relationships as part of our operational infrastructure. Smaller staff can still build wide reach when trusted community members, neighborhood leaders, nonprofits, faith-based organizations, libraries, tourism partners, and local agencies are engaged and working collaboratively before disaster strikes.

Relationships Are Infrastructure

Research on social capital reinforces what emergency managers see in practice. This is not a new concept, Aldrich and Meyer (2015) found that social networks, trust, and norms of mutual support can shape disaster survival and recovery. The National Academies (2021) identified social capital and connectedness as priorities for hazard mitigation and resilience building, emphasizing community led approaches, equity, trust, and co-creation of plans. CDC (2021) crisis communication guidance similarly recommends building relationships before an emergency and involving communities in planning, message development, and response. With shrinking budgets and staffing challenges to consider, emergency managers can enhance their capacities by adjusting their network priorities.

The operational lesson is simple: preparedness is social before it is operational. During a disaster, relationships create speed (Aldrich & Meyer, 2015). We already know wider networks leverage your capacity and grow efficiency and speed when minutes count. You may have human assets you have not efficiently leveraged. Community partners already have deep community connections and trust. Emergency management does not need to replace or duplicate those relationships. Neighbors already know who may need transportation, language support, medication, power for medical equipment, help with animals, or simply a reassuring call. We need to connect these resources to reliable information, appropriate tools, and knowledge of safe response structures.

Community Capacity Extends Official Capacity

Government brings plans, alerts, emergency operations, technical expertise, and public resources. Communities bring trust, local knowledge, language access, cultural understanding, and hyperlocal mutual aid. These capacities are not interchangeable, and community participation must never become an excuse to transfer government's responsibilities to volunteers. The goal is to align both forms of capacity around a shared objective: life safety.

In Sonoma County, we use a repeatable four-part model: listen, equip, practice, and connect.

Listen: Begin with the people who already have trust. Ask neighbors who they call when they are uncertain, where people naturally gather, which organizations understand local barriers, and who can reach people government messages may miss. Then listen before designing the program. For true buy in community partners and leaders should help define the need, not merely distribute a solution created without them.

Equip: Give trusted connectors practical tools they can use immediately: bilingual messages, emergency planning guides, evacuation checklists, starter supplies, discussion prompts, or simple host kits. Clear expectations matter as much as materials. Leaders should understand what they can safely do, what they should not do, how to share verified information, and when to refer a problem to public safety or emergency management.

Practice: Practice makes relationships operational (Bogdan et al., 2021). Neighborhood discussions, drills, tabletop exercises, and partner workshops help people discover gaps before a real event. Practice reveals who has backup communications, who may need transportation, which routes could become unsafe, and

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how information will move if power or cellular service fails. Practice builds capacity and familiarization.

Connect: Finally, connect community partners to one another and, where appropriate, to response structures. A collection of isolated champions is helpful; a network is resilient. Nonprofits can coordinate groups through a Community Organizations Active in Disaster (COAD/VOAD) structure. Faith-based and tourism partners can participate in exercises. Trusted representatives can be incorporated into emergency operations center roles or liaison processes before disaster strikes. Neighborhood leaders can link together across areas for added leadership and capacities, enabling them to help each other when official response resources are stretched thin. It is important to note, people respond most effectively by drawing on the relationships, and knowledge, already in their communities, and to the partners and capabilities they already know (McKeague, L et al., 2023).

Start With a Low-Barrier Invitation

Community programs do not have to be complex and expensive. Sonoma County's Meet Your Street (County of Sonoma Dept. of Emergency Management, 2025) initiative asks a neighborhood host to select a convenient time, use a simple promotional kit, and invite nearby household members to meet up. The purpose is relationships first and formal emergency planning second. In the 2025 countywide Meet Your Street weekend, 61 hosts registered; 55 neighborhood gatherings (after six cancellation) inviting approximately 1,700 households and identified 43 new hyperlocal leaders. The total program cost was about $5,100, including graphics, printing, advertising, and raffle items. The return was priceless. In 2026 the number of households invited rose to more than 4,000.

One host reported being thrilled when nine people attended the first gathering. By the fourth neighborhood meeting, her participation had grown to more than 50. The unplanned outcomes mattered too: in this neighborhood children attending different schools met one another, neighbors stayed after the event to visit, and a one-time preparedness activity became an ongoing local network.

The idea is not that every jurisdiction should duplicate the same event. It is that emergency managers should work with their community to create an easy first step for people who want to help but do not know how or where to start. Low-cost and high-trust can be a powerful combination.

Put Tools Where Trust Already Exists

The same principle guides the distribution of evacuation and emergency planning materials and Go Bag starter kits through neighborhood leaders, libraries, and partner organizations. Distributions of materials through trusted community based partners, faith based partners, neighborhood hubs, and libraries can be effective and efficient. The tool is useful, but the trusted handoff is what gives it reach and relevance (FEMA, 2023).

Gatherings can also build capacity. Sonoma County's Better Together Symposium grew from 65 neighborhood leaders in its first year to 85 in its second, at an estimated cost of $2,300 to $2,900. The event gives countywide neighborhood preparedness leaders a place to exchange practices, learn together, and see themselves as part of a larger preparedness network and feel valued by Emergency Management.

Measure Activation, Not Just Attendance

Attendance is easy to count, but it does not tell us whether capacity increased. Better measures ask what happened next: How many leaders were equipped? How many neighborhoods held an activity? How many partners joined an exercise or response structure? Did bilingual materials reach new households? Did trust and communication continue after the event? The goal is not a crowded room. The goal is activation of people to spread the importance of preparedness, and become ready to support each other in response if needed.

Map out trusted connectors across neighborhoods, nonprofits, faith communities, cultural groups, libraries, schools, businesses, and visitor-serving organizations. Ask, “Who already has trust?” Then invite a small group to co-design one achievable activity. Plan with the community, not for it. Next, equip one pilot group; practice together, capture what was learned, and celebrate the win. Visible success attracts additional leaders and creates momentum for the next cycle.

Community resilience is a journey, not a destination. We will never have enough staff to personally meet every need created by a disaster. We can build relationships that multiply preparedness, move reliable information, reveal unmet needs, and connect people to help. We cannot out-staff a disaster, but together, we can out-network one. 🔷

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what the community identifies as important. Do not assume economic resources, gaming status, geography, or visibility tell you what emergency management capacity looks like.

Build relationships before they are needed. Engagement should not begin when an emergency occurs, a regional plan needs representation, or an exercise needs participation.

Recognize culture as a capability. Community knowledge, cultural practices, language, relationships, and connections to place are not peripheral considerations. They can directly influence preparedness, warning, evacuation, sheltering, response, and recovery.

Be willing to adapt the system. Inclusion should not always mean finding a way to fit communities into an existing emergency management structure. Effective partnership sometimes requires us to examine whether the structure itself needs to change.

Some changes may ultimately involve policy, funding, grant structures, or emergency management doctrine. But practitioners do not have to wait for those larger changes to begin building better relationships. Curiosity, consistency, respect, and a willingness to listen can begin now.

What Are We Anchored To?

The 2026 IAEM Annual Conference theme, Charting through Preparedness – Anchored in Resilience, asks emergency managers to consider how our profession navigates an increasingly complex environment.

After spending a week listening to Tribal leaders, practitioners, instructors, and partners talk about sovereignty and resilience, I found myself thinking about the second half of that theme. **What are we anchored to?**

For many Tribal Nations, resilience is anchored in sovereignty, culture, land, history, community, relationships, and generations of knowledge. Other Indigenous communities may describe those anchors differently, and part of our responsibility is to listen well enough to understand those distinctions. Emergency management did not create those anchors.

Our responsibility is to understand them, respect them, and ensure that the systems we build do not unintentionally weaken them. That requires more than writing plans that meet standards. It requires building emergency management systems that work for the people and governments those plans are intended to serve.

Perhaps one of the most important lessons Tribal emergency management offers our profession is that resilience does not always begin with building something new. Sometimes resilience begins with recognizing what has endured.

Tribal Nations were here before the United States existed.

They are still here.

And there is much our profession can learn by listening. 🔷



Whole Community Means Whole Family: The Case for an All-Species Emergency Management Model

**By Susan Anderson, AEM, Senior Director, Disaster Response,
American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA)**

The authors will be speaking as part of the IAEM 74th Annual Conference on Nov. 10 from 11:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m.

When speaking at emergency management conferences, I always begin my sessions with a simple show of hands: Who owns dogs, cats, or large animals like horses? Invariably, three-quarters of the room raise a hand. This localized response mirrors nationwide realities. 2025 American Pet Products Association data shows that 71% (94 million) of U.S. households include at least one pet. For tens of millions of Americans, these animals are not just property—they are family members.

Later in my presentation, I ask a much tougher question: How many of your jurisdictions have explicit provisions for pets and other animals in your community's emergency response plans? Sadly, far fewer hands go up—typically less than a third of participants. At one recent state emergency management association conference, I was stunned when no one raised their hand. If we endeavor to serve the whole community, we must include animals in the planning process. The public demands it, and human lives are at risk if we do not step up.



An ASPCA field responder leaves food and water for pets left behind fire lines in Altadena during the Eaton Fire, Jan. 2025. Photo credit: ASPCA

Paradigm Shifts In Animal Emergency Management

We have seen monumental paradigm shifts in how emergency managers, public health officials, and first responders view animals in disasters. These shifts are driving evolution across four key areas: legislation, structured agency coordination, integrated emergency management frameworks, and emergency animal sheltering models.

Key Legislative Catalyst Mandates

Major disasters, most notably Hurricane Katrina, exposed the tragic human and operational consequences of leaving pets out of emergency management plans. These lessons catalyzed a series of milestone federal legislative actions:

- **The PETS Act (2006)**: Amending the Stafford Act, the Pets Evacuation Transportation Standards Act requires state and local emergency plans to accommodate individuals with pets and service animals. Compliance is tied directly to a jurisdiction's eligibility for federal disaster aid.
- **Animal Welfare Act Contingency Rule (2022)**: This amendment requires federally licensed animal facilities to maintain functional disaster plans and complete ongoing staff execution training.
- **The PAW Act (2022)**: The Planning for Animal Wellness Act directed FEMA to form an expert working group of veterinarians, academics, and disaster responders. The mandate ensures federal guidance continuously aligns with modern animal care best practices.

Enhanced Agency Coordination

Driven by legislative frameworks and rising public expectations, horizontal and vertical coordination has reached unprecedented levels:

- **National Alliances**: Organizations like the National Animal Rescue and Sheltering Coalition (NARSC) and the National Alliance of State Animal and Agricultural Emergency Programs (NASAAEP) establish state-level MOUs and publish unified operational guidelines.
- **SARTs and CARTs**: State and County Animal Response Teams scale automatically to match incident complexity. Local CARTs handle isolated incidents. When local capabilities are overwhelmed, the Authority Having Jurisdiction (AHJ) escalates resource requests through the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) to activate state SART networks or national NGO partners.

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All-Species Emergency Management

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Integration into NIMS Structure

Animal welfare is no longer a peripheral volunteer function; it is actively embedded inside the National Incident Management System (NIMS):

Shelter Model	Operational Layout	Staffing Ratio	Veterinary Support
Animal-Only Shelter	Animals are completely segregated from owners; the sheltering team manages 100% of daily husbandry. This is the most expensive and resource-intensive method.	1 caregiver per 10–15 pets	High; On-site or adjacent facility
Co-Located Shelter	Animals stay near owners in an adjacent room or a separate facility on the same footprint. Owners remain responsible for daily care.	1 caregiver per 50–100 pets	Moderate; On-call basis
Co-Habitated Shelter	Pets and families are housed within the same shared space as a singular unit, maximizing compliance and drastically reducing local staffing burdens.	Minimal; Staff acts primarily as on-call monitors	Low; On-call basis

- **Resource Typing**: FEMA's Resource Typing Library features 20 animal-specific resources (e.g., Animal Care & Handling Specialist, Animal Sheltering Team, and Companion Animal Decontamination Team), creating a common language for logistics and ordering.
- **Standardized Training**: Standardized certification paths now exist for animal search and rescue, wildfire evacuation, and disaster veterinary triage, supplemented by FEMA distance-learning offerings.
- **EOC Representation**: Animal services have earned a structural seat in the EOC, ensuring operational visibility and real-time coordination alongside human services.

Evolution of Emergency Sheltering Models

A critical operational breakthrough is the transition toward preserving the human-animal bond during displacement. Emergency managers typically deploy three distinct sheltering strategies, balancing resources against public compliance:

While some jurisdictions and facility managers still push back against pet-friendly co-habitation, these models reduce the logistical strain on the hosting organization and its partners with every large-scale disaster.

The Behavioral and Mental Health Imperative

The justification for animal-inclusive emergency planning extends far beyond regulatory compliance. Decades of research prove that human behavioral patterns during evacuations are inextricably tied to their animals. Tragic incidents show that a significant portion of the population will actively refuse evacuation orders or bypass security checkpoints to return to danger zones if they do not have a guaranteed safe haven for their pets. This non-compliance puts the pet owners, their families, and first responders at severe, preventable risk.

Furthermore, integrating animals into response frameworks directly safeguards public mental health. The health benefits of the human-animal bond are well-documented:

- **Physiological Stress Reductions**: According to data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), living with pets reduces blood pressure, cholesterol levels, triglyceride levels, and feelings of isolation. Dogs, in particular, are clinically linked to lower rates of anxiety and stress.
- **Crisis Resilience and PTSD Mitigation**: Pets serve as vital emotional anchors during traumatic events. A landmark study published in Frontiers in Veterinary Science following the 2011 Japan earthquake and tsunami discovered that pet ownership served as a profound protective factor against long-term trauma. Pet owners exhibited significantly lower instances of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)—even four and a half years after the initial disaster.

Conclusion: An All-Hazards, All-Species Mission

Domesticated animals would not exist without human intervention, and we bear a fundamental responsibility to protect them. The operational reality is clear: human and animal survival are interdependent.

Those of us tasked with preserving public safety and health must adopt a comprehensive, all-hazards/all-species approach that considers animals across every phase of the disaster lifecycle. Inclusive planning fulfills legislative mandates, supports the human-animal bond, protects responder safety, relieves overburdened local shelter capacities, and prevents secondary public health crises like zoonotic disease outbreaks.

Implementing robust animal emergency management best practices is not an elective addition to a response plan—it is a core public safety directive that mitigates suffering and saves lives. That is a mission our entire profession can, and must, agree on. ◆

Beyond the Volunteer Roster: Building Resilience Through Volunteer Leadership

By Scott Buziecki, CEM, Director,
Kane County Office of Emergency Management

The author will be speaking as part of the IAEM 74th Annual Conference on Nov. 11 from 2:00 p.m.-3:00 p.m.

Emergency management agencies are being asked to do more with limited resources. Disasters are becoming more complex, expectations are increasing, and demands on emergency management professionals continue to expand. But increasing organizational capacity isn't only a resource challenge—it is a leadership challenge.

There is a difference between having volunteers and building an organization that can benefit from volunteer leadership. A volunteer roster gives an agency people to call when something happens. A strong volunteer program gives an agency people who lead teams, develop others, take ownership of programs, and expand organizational capacity every day. **That difference is where resilience begins.**

Listen Before You Lead

When I became director of the Kane County, Illinois Office of Emergency Management, I inherited a dedicated group of volunteers.

At the time, we had about 40 volunteers, including recent graduates, but the organization had experienced significant volunteer turnover and interpersonal challenges in the preceding two years. **Before deciding what needed to change, however, I wanted to understand the people who were already part of the organization.**

Over the next several months, I held hour-long one-on-one meetings with well over half of our volunteers. I wanted to know why they joined, what we did well, where we were falling short, and what they believed we could do differently.

I compiled their feedback into common themes, removed identifying information, and shared it with the organization, along with some of the ways we had already begun addressing their concerns.

Listening was important. Closing the feedback loop was even more important.

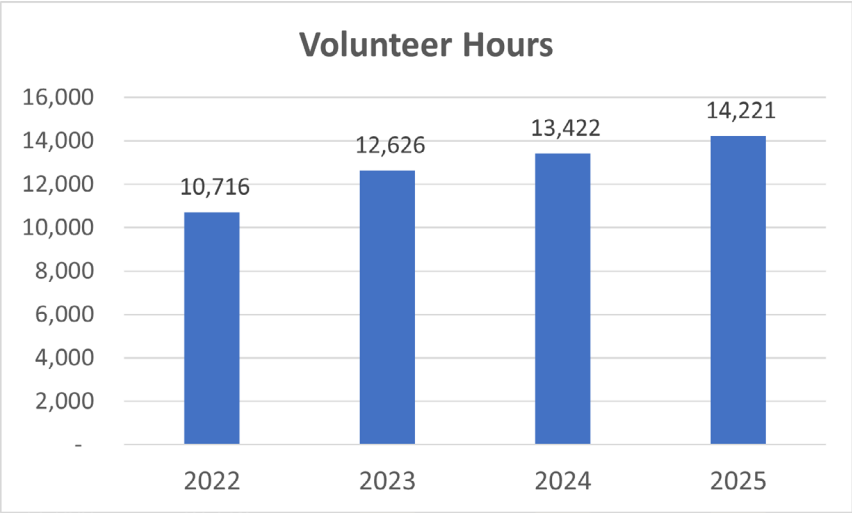
People don't need every suggestion to be adopted. They do need to know they were heard and that their leaders are willing to act.

Those conversations also reinforced something fundamental about volunteers: they don't volunteer because an organization needs help. They volunteer because they believe in the mission. They stay because of the culture.

When salary and benefits are removed from the equation, an organization has to provide other reasons for people to continue giving their time. Volunteers need to feel appreciated, believe their contribution matters, and have opportunities to be useful and make a difference.

In a volunteer organization, culture isn't a perk. It is part of the compensation.

Every volunteer is motivated by something a little different, but culture can either reinforce that motivation or undermine it. If we want people to continue investing their time and energy in our mission, we have to invest in them.



Kane County Office of Emergency Management volunteer hours contributed over the past four fiscal years, 2022 to 2025.

Recruit for Character, Develop Competence

When new volunteers join our organization, we conduct the

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required background screening and welcome those who meet our requirements. Many arrive with little or no experience in the Incident Command System, emergency operations centers, public safety, or emergency management. That's okay. We provide the training, mentoring, and experience they need.

Where character and leadership ability matter most is when we decide who should be entrusted with greater responsibility. My philosophy is simple: Recruit for character. Develop competence.

As volunteers gain experience and opportunities for greater responsibility emerge, we look beyond technical knowledge. We consider how someone works with others, whether they can be trusted to follow through, how they handle responsibility, whether they demonstrate initiative, and whether they have the leadership ability and vision to move a program forward.

Not every volunteer needs—or wants—to lead. Some are excellent followers or outstanding workers. Some simply want to contribute their time and skills to the mission without taking on additional responsibility. Those volunteers remain an important part of the team.

The distinction isn't about who is more valuable. It's about who is ready for greater responsibility. Technical skills and emergency management knowledge can be developed through training and mentorship. Our goal isn't to turn every volunteer into a leader; it is to create an environment where everyone can contribute while identifying and developing those who demonstrate the character, ability, and desire to lead.

Build Capability by Distributing Leadership

As volunteer programs grow, leaders should periodically ask whether too much knowledge, responsibility, or decision-making has become concentrated in too few people.

Sometimes this happens naturally. Someone becomes particularly experienced in an area, develops strong relationships, or takes on responsibilities because they are willing and capable. Over time, however, that can create an unintended vulnerability. If too much of the organization's knowledge or capability rests with one person, the organization becomes less resilient.

The answer is not to diminish experienced volunteers. It is to create opportunities for others to learn, contribute, and lead.

We began intentionally distributing responsibilities and creating additional leadership opportunities so more volunteers could develop expertise and take ownership of important functions. Experienced volunteers could continue contributing their knowledge while helping develop the next generation of leaders. No important capability should depend on one person. Knowledge should be shared, responsibilities should have backups, and volunteers who demonstrate leadership potential should have opportunities to exercise it.

That requires leaders to do something that can be uncomfortable: let people lead. Staff still establish standards, provide direction, and maintain oversight, but within those boundaries, volunteers should have the ability to make decisions and accomplish their responsibilities

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Volunteers and staff of the Kane County Office of Emergency Management at the new volunteer academy graduation in October, 2025.

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without constantly waiting for staff approval.

It also creates succession, preparing people for future opportunities and enabling the organization to continue after someone leaves. It can also improve volunteer satisfaction by giving people meaningful opportunities to contribute.

A volunteer who simply attends an event is contributing. A volunteer who organizes the event, coordinates other volunteers, solves problems, and develops the next person who can organize it is building organizational capacity.

A resilient volunteer program doesn't depend on having indispensable people. It develops people who are willing to make themselves increasingly less indispensable by developing others.

That's not weakness. That's leadership. That's strength.

Protect the Culture

There is another side to building a healthy volunteer culture: accountability.

A person can contribute significant work and still create more problems than they solve if their behavior damages trust, teamwork, or the culture of the organization.

Volunteers are not exempt from accountability because they are unpaid. In fact, culture may be even more important in a volunteer organization because people can choose to leave at any time.

Leaders sometimes have to make difficult decisions to protect the organization. Productivity cannot be the only measure of someone's contribution. If a person's behavior consistently creates interpersonal conflict, undermines teamwork, or makes other volunteers less willing to participate, the negative impact outweighs the work they perform.

There is a phrase sometimes used when discussing professional sports: “addition by subtraction.” Sometimes removing a talented but disruptive player can make the entire team better. The same principle can apply to volunteer organizations.

Protecting culture is not separate from building capacity. It is part of it.

Build Credibility by Measuring Impact

Our volunteer program has grown significantly, and in the last fiscal year our volunteers contributed over 14,000 hours, representing an estimated value of approximately $508,000.

Those numbers demonstrate the program's scale and communicate the value volunteers bring.

But hours are not the most important measure.

The more important questions are: What did those volunteers accomplish? What capabilities does the organization have because of them that it otherwise would not have? How much more capable is the organization because those people are part of it?

The goal of a volunteer program isn't simply to reduce the workload of paid staff. It is to expand what the entire organization is capable of accomplishing.

In our case, volunteers provide capabilities ranging from traffic control, lighting, search and rescue, communications, emergency operations center support, and other response functions to public education, training, logistics, vehicle maintenance, and administrative support. Some also contribute to planning and other functions that supplement staff capacity.

The value isn't measured by staff hours saved. It is measured by what the organization can accomplish because those volunteers are there.

Resilience Is Distributed Capacity

Emergency management professionals spend considerable time talking about community resilience. We should also think about the resilience of our own organizations.

A resilient emergency management organization distributes knowledge, responsibility, and leadership. Volunteers can be an important part of that distributed capacity, but only if we are willing to develop them as leaders rather than treating them solely as a workforce to activate when something happens.

The process takes time. It requires listening, training, mentoring, trust, accountability, and a willingness to let people lead.

Most importantly, it requires understanding why people volunteer in the first place.

They don't volunteer because we need help. They volunteer because they believe in the mission. They stay because of the culture. And they become leaders when we give them the opportunity, support, and responsibility to make a difference.

When that happens, the volunteer roster becomes much more than a list of people who can be called during a disaster. **It becomes a source of leadership. And that leadership becomes resilience.** 🔷

Putting Children at the Center of Family Reunification Planning

By Brittni Blaser MIHMEP, MoCEM II, Emergency Management Coordinator II, Children's Mercy Kansas City; Rachel Mazzara MPH, Pediatric Emergency Preparedness Specialist, SSM Health Cardinal Glennon Children's Hospital; Sarita Chung, MD, Senior Associate Physician in Pediatrics, Division of Emergency Medicine, Associate Professor of Pediatrics and Associate Professor of Emergency Medicine, Harvard Medical School; and Anna Lin, MD, Clinical Professor, Stanford School of Medicine

The authors will be speaking as part of the IAEM 74th Annual Conference on Nov. 11 from 11:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m.

When disaster strikes, one of the first questions many parents and caregivers will ask is: **Where is my child, and how do I get to them?**

In the United States, children make up roughly 25% of the total population. In the aftermath of disasters, children can be separated from their families or caregivers. Delays in reunification can result in significant risks, including physical and psychological trauma, worse health outcomes, and increased operational burden[1]. Reunifying children with their families after a disaster requires intentional planning, coordination, and the integration of child-focused practices into existing reunification operations. This includes taking into account the age, communication abilities, medical and functional needs, as well as the response to stress in children.

For emergency managers, child reunification should be viewed as more than a school, hospital, or child welfare responsibility. It is a community-wide emergency management capability requiring advance planning, coordination, and integration across multiple agencies and systems.

Plan for Family Behavior and Expectations

Following an incident, families and friends will disregard any local emergency instructions and travel to hospitals, schools, and other locations where they believe their loved ones may have been taken[2]. Even an incident involving a relatively small number of children can generate a significant influx of people seeking information.

Emergency managers should anticipate this behavior and its operational impacts. Families searching independently may increase traffic around response locations, overwhelm call centers, place additional demands on hospitals and schools, and contribute to conflicting or incomplete information.

Families may also expect immediate answers when reunification efforts may take days to weeks, especially in case of deceased victims. Identification, medical care, investigative requirements, custody verification, and fatality management can all affect how quickly information can be released. Victim identification may take days, weeks, or longer[3].

Reunification planning must therefore address not only how children will be reunited, but also how families will receive accurate, consistent, and compassionate information while they wait.

Child- Focused Considerations in Family Reunification Planning

Community Family Reunification plans should consider the following assumptions and principles:

- **Integrated Reunification Plans**: Family reunification strategies cannot operate in isolation. Plans and procedures used by hospitals, schools, and other community facilities must be integrated with those of essential partner organizations and incorporated into community-wide reunification and emergency response plans. Special consideration should be given to the unique needs of children to ensure a coordinated and effective reunification process.
- **Child-Focused Experts**: Child-focused subject matter experts should be included in the earliest planning discussions. Their involvement helps communities identify the specialized capabilities, resources, safeguards, and developmental considerations needed when responding to children.
- **Safe Spaces for Children**: Dedicated safe areas, particularly for unaccompanied children, are needed for children who do not have a guardian present. These spaces should provide appropriate safety measures, including controlled ingress and egress, as well as developmentally appropriate care and supplies until each child can be released to a verified custodial adult.
- **Understanding Children's Post-Disaster Behavior**: Behavioral changes and stress-related physical symptoms are expected after a disaster. Health care providers, community workers, and caregivers

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Family Reunification Planning

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should understand developmentally appropriate reactions, support adaptive coping, and identify children who may need additional intervention. This understanding can help mitigate long-term mental health effects.

■ **Child-Informed Cultural Responsiveness**: All staff supporting reunification should recognize how cultural traditions influence the ways families receive information, make decisions, and grieve, particularly when children are involved. Cultural understanding is essential to providing effective, respectful, and compassionate support throughout the reunification process.

Steps to Incorporate Child-Focused considerations into your Community's Family Reunification Plans

Establish a Child Reunification Focus Group: Begin by identifying key community stakeholders who can contribute to a focus group on child reunification. Agency representatives should demonstrate a commitment to child welfare and understand children's developmental, behavioral, medical, and physiological needs.

Understand Demographics of Children in the Community: Communities should assess the demographics, needs, available resources, and potential scale and scope of a reunification event. This information can guide the development of targeted, responsive strategies that address children's unique needs throughout the reunification process.

Assess Existing Local, State, and Regional Plans: Reuniting children with their families requires specialized expertise, detailed planning, and coordination among multiple organizations and, potentially, across jurisdictions.

Are there activation criteria for the start of reunification of children? Are there child- focused memoranda of understanding and data sharing agreements? Are there legal and privacy considerations for children?

Establish Roles and Responsibilities for the Care of Unaccompanied Children:Integrating child-focused roles within the Incident Command Structure with job action sheets will ensure that unaccompanied children are safely cared for within the Family Reunification Center/Family Assistance Center. These roles will implement reunification plans and protocols from childcare staffing to family notification.

Age-appropriate staffing ratios, staff vetting, and staff training – including guidance on how to answer children's questions – are important parts of implementation.

Create Child-Focused Protocols: Community planners can start by creating standard processes for tracking unaccompanied children and reunification when family members are verified. This would include developing guardian registration and child intake forms, scripted public messaging to families looking for their children, and processes for matching and verification of families. Additionally, aligning plans created by hospitals, schools, and other agencies will improve coordination.

Know Your Community—and Exercise the Plan

Effective planning begins with understanding the children who may need reunification services. Communities should consider age ranges, languages, disabilities and access and functional needs, medical and behavioral health needs, transportation, and where children are likely to be located at different times.

That information should drive planning for staffing, facilities, supplies, transportation, partnerships, and other resources.

Plans must also be exercised. Exercises should go beyond simply stating that children will be reunited with their families. Scenarios should test unaccompanied minor operations, identity and custody verification, child supervision, accessible and developmentally appropriate communication, children with disabilities or special health care needs, coordination with child welfare, and safe release procedures. After-action reviews should specifically evaluate these child-focused issues and assign corrective actions, responsible parties, and timelines for improvement.

Recovery: Transition from Reunification Operations to Post-Event Stabilization

Decisions to scale down or demobilize child-focused resources should be based on clearly defined operational criteria. This can include:

■ Most unaccompanied children have been accounted for and safely reunified with verified parents, guardians, caregivers, or other authorized custodial adults.

■ No new child-related inquiries or registrations have been received during a locally designated period, such as 24–48 hours.

■ Required identity, custody, and release verification processes have been completed and documented.

■ Children not yet reunified have been safely transferred to authorized child welfare, health care, tribal, or other long-term support services.

■ Child-specific tracking records have been reconciled, secured, and transferred or closed according to record management procedures.

■ Children have been offered appropriate behavioral health screening, immediate support, and referrals.

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When the National Weather Service Moves In: Success in Embedding Meteorologists at the County Level

By Scott C. Cordero, Meteorologist-in-Charge, National Weather Service Jacksonville, Florida

The authors will be speaking as part of the IAEM 74th Annual Conference on Nov. 11 from 11:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m.

The bottom line: Emergency managers do not need more weather information—they need weather expertise connected directly to the decisions they must make. A 2026 National Weather Service (NWS) Jacksonville pilot demonstrated that putting a meteorologist alongside county emergency managers can shorten decision cycles, build trust, improve preparedness, and make forecast information more actionable.

From Forecast Delivery to Decision Support

The National Weather Service has spent years moving from a product-centered model toward Impact-Based Decision Support Services (IDSS). That shift matters because emergency managers rarely make decisions based on a forecast parameter alone. They decide when to open shelters, adjust staffing, cancel events, communicate risk, protect vulnerable populations, or change operational posture. The useful question is therefore not simply, "What will the weather do?" but "What does the weather mean for this community, and when do we need to act?"

That distinction drove a 2026 NWS Jacksonville pilot in Duval and Clay (FL) counties. Meteorologists worked onsite with county emergency management teams while remaining part of the normal NWS workforce. The model was designed to be FTE-neutral: the goal was not to create a new position, but to test whether rotating operational staff into the partner environment could produce more value than providing the same expertise remotely.

What We Tested

The Duval County pilot ran from January 12 through February 6, 2026, providing weekday support from the county Emergency Operations Center. The period included winter storms, extreme cold, drought and wildfire concerns, and special-event planning. The Clay County pilot ran from March 23 through April 16 and focused on a smaller metro-rural emergency management environment, including wildfire and drought assessments, a two-week county fair, flood-awareness work, and hurricane exercise planning.

The pilots were intentionally broader than incident response. Meteorologists attended meetings, learned how decisions moved through each organization, provided briefings, answered questions as they arose, supported exercises and special events, and delivered just-in-time training on NWS tools and forecast information. In Clay County, the work also included development of a Black Creek flood-planning "deep dive" playbook. In Duval County, the team helped refine cold-weather decision thresholds and resources used by the county.

The Biggest Change Was Proximity

The strongest lesson was simple: physical presence changed the conversation. When a meteorologist was already in the room, emergency managers did not have to decide whether a question was important enough to call, email, or request another briefing. Questions could be answered immediately, and follow-up questions could be handled in the same conversation.

Operational records showed weather-informed interactions on nearly every operational day, with meteorological support influencing at least one operational decision each day. Across the two pilots, embedded support reached more than 275 stakeholders. The pilots also demonstrated a marked reduction in forecast-to-decision latency—from hours in some traditional communication cycles to minutes when the meteorologist was participating directly in the workflow.

This was not primarily a story about producing a better forecast. It was a story about making the forecast usable at the point of decision. The meteorologist became a translator of uncertainty, helping partners connect probabilities, timing, confidence, and changing guidance to staffing, resources, public messaging, and local vulnerabilities.

Examples That Made the Difference

During prolonged cold weather in Duval County, onsite meteorologists helped emergency managers interpret freeze probabilities, windchill timing, precipitation type, and

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National Weather Service Moves In

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forecast confidence. That information supported warming-center activation, staffing adjustments, public messaging, and refinement of local cold-weather thresholds. The same approach supported planning for the DONNA Marathon, where operational questions required more than a countywide forecast.

Wildfire coordination provided another example. Emergency managers needed to understand the difference between NWS Red Flag Warning criteria and the Florida Forest Service Wildland Fire Danger Index. Rather than sending another product, the meteorologist could explain the distinction in real time and connect the forecast to the county's operational thresholds.

Clay County demonstrated that the model also works in a smaller, more rural setting. The embedded meteorologist supported wildfire coordination, county fair operations, flood awareness, and the Florida statewide hurricane exercise. Just-in-time training covered spot forecasts, NWSChat, probabilistic information, and localized graphical tools. These interactions strengthened the county's ability to use NWS information without requiring a major weather event.

The Value Is Often Greatest Before the Next Disaster

Perhaps the most important lesson for emergency managers is that the greatest value of an embedded meteorologist may occur on quiet days. Routine presence gives the meteorologist time to learn the county: who makes decisions, how information moves, which facilities and populations are most vulnerable, how long operational actions take, and what thresholds actually trigger action.

At the same time, emergency managers learn how the NWS works—what forecast uncertainty means, when confidence is high or low, how warnings are issued, and which tools can answer specific questions. That shared understanding creates trust before the next high-impact event. When the weather turns bad, the relationship is already established, and the conversation starts from a common operating picture.

What We Learned About Scaling the Model

The pilots also made clear that there is no single embedding model for every county. Population, hazard exposure, geography, EOC staffing, partner capability, driving distance, and operational tempo all matter. A large metropolitan EOC may benefit from frequent onsite coverage, while a smaller county may gain more from periodic rotations, exercises, training, and targeted projects.

A scalable approach should therefore include several levels of support: on-demand onsite support for incidents and special events; routine deployments that place an NWS meteorologist in a county on a recurring basis; and, where justified, dedicated embedded positions whose duty station is at the partner location. The terminology matters, because emergency managers should know whether they are receiving an occasional deployment, a routine onsite presence, or a permanently assigned embedded meteorologist.

There is also an equity consideration. If onsite support is limited, agencies should deliberately track which counties receive it and why. Rotational models can broaden staff exposure and partner coverage, while consistent liaisons preserve institutional knowledge. The right balance will vary by organization.

A Practical Starting Point for Emergency Managers

Emergency managers interested in this approach do not need to begin with a full-time embedded position. Start by inviting the local NWS office into routine operations. Identify a few recurring meetings, exercises, special events, or preparedness projects where meteorological expertise could add value. Use those interactions to identify local decision thresholds, information gaps, and training needs.

Then measure what changes. Did questions get answered faster? Did partners better understand forecast uncertainty? Did the NWS learn something about local vulnerabilities? Did a briefing change an operational decision? Did the relationship improve before an incident occurred? These are more meaningful measures of IDSS value than the number of briefings delivered.

The Takeaway

The NWS Jacksonville pilots reinforced a fundamental emergency management principle: information has value when it reaches the right decision-maker, at the right time, in a form that can be used. Embedding meteorologists alongside emergency managers made weather expertise more accessible, accelerated consultation, strengthened trust, and connected forecast uncertainty to operational decisions.

The broader lesson is not that every county needs a meteorologist sitting in its EOC every day. It is that NWS service should be flexible enough to meet partners where decisions are being made. For some communities, that may mean an occasional deployment. For others, it may mean a routine onsite presence

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National Weather Service Moves In

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or a dedicated embedded position. The common thread is proximity to the decision.

When the National Weather Service moves closer to the point of decision, the forecast becomes more than information. It becomes part of the emergency management operation.

Resources and Follow-Up

Emergency managers interested in exploring onsite or embedded weather support should contact their local National Weather Service Weather Forecast Office. The NWS Jacksonville pilots were designed as practical tests of partner-centered IDSS and can inform conversations about what level of support best fits a community's needs. 🔷

Lifetime CEM

IAEM has a **Lifetime CEM** designation for current CEMs who are retiring from the field of emergency management. In order to qualify, the individual must be a current CEM and have recertified at least once. After earning Lifetime CEM status, individuals will hold the designation for life without the need to recertify. Application details can be found on the IAEM website.

Family Reunification Planning

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■ Child-focused staff and subject matter experts agree that specialized on-site services can be reduced or transferred without compromising child safety or continuity of care.

Reunification Is a Community Capability

Reunification does not necessarily end when a child leaves the reunification center. Children and families may need behavioral health support, anticipatory guidance, referrals, and other resources as they recover. Communities also need criteria for transitioning unresolved cases to appropriate child welfare, health care, tribal, or other long-term support services before demobilizing child-focused operations. Staff who have supported reunification response may also require mental health support in the weeks and months after Reunification Operations have demobilized.

Reunification Planning Resources

Communities are encouraged to leverage existing evidence-informed resources to support planning, assessment, and implementation of reunification capabilities. The Child Reunification Considerations for Communities Toolkit provides practical guidance, planning considerations, worksheets, templates, and assessment tools to assist jurisdictions, emergency management agencies, and partner organizations in developing, evaluating, and integrating child reunification capabilities. These resources can be used to strengthen community-wide planning efforts, identify gaps, facilitate stakeholder engagement, and support continuous improvement before, during, and after reunification operations. 🔷

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View the PPN Child Reunification Considerations for Communities Toolkit, a supplemental resource to our IAEM presentation designed for emergency managers and community partners.

EM Calendar

Nov. 7-8	Universities and Colleges Caucus Symposium
Nov. 8	Healthcare Caucus Symposium
Nov. 8	Exam Readiness Course - Long Beach, CA
Nov. 6-12	2026 IAEM Annual Conference Long Beach, California
Feb. 22-25	IAEM Region 6 Symposium Hyatt Regency Conroe, The Woodlands, Texas
Nov. 12-18, 2027	IAEM Annual Conference & EMEX 27

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