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Achieving community preparedness post-Katrina

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Achieving Community Preparedness Post-Katrina

Dr. Christine G. Springer
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Improving disaster response capabilities within this country requires better coordination not only within the Department of Homeland Security, but also across the federal government as well as with state and local governments, private and non-profit sectors. To do so, according to more than 150 state and local stakeholders that I surveyed in April, 2009 and again in April, 2010, requires that FEMA improve its capacity to fully support state, local and tribal stakeholders ...that it improve its internal business practices so as to better implement federal policies and guidance...that it find a way to use thematic goals and transition forums so as to create a better understanding of prevention, protection and coordination in every region taking into account differences between states and major metropolitan areas. There are at least three strategic national challenges that need to be addressed in the process of doing so including 1. the shifting of preparedness and protection efforts toward an overall concept of national resiliency 2. building a framework that supports comprehensive and coherent preparedness and 3. ingraining sustainability into all homeland security and emergency management endeavors.

Achieving National Resiliency

National resiliency requires more than critical infrastructure protection. It requires major structural and programmatic changes in FEMA and the application of a nation-wide “resilience metric” such as the time it takes to reconstitute every day services and routines of life to preparedness planning builds on traditional, sector focused protection efforts and provides the means to objectively assess, triage and significantly mitigate the initial and cascading consequences of infrastructure service disruption, regardless of the cause. If resilience is to become a unifying goal of the nation, DHS policies and programs must empower, enable and leverage the experiences, vision and innovations that reside in the private and non-profit sectors as well as other federal agencies (e.g. DOT, DOD), state, community and regional governments.

Bringing FEMA Post-Katrina Changes Current

There are two central goals that have driven the major structural and programmatic changes and a transfer of preparedness programs from DHS to FEMA since 2006. They are to integrate preparedness across FEMA mission-programs and to build regional office capabilities to interface with stakeholders before, during, and after disasters. FEMA regions are becoming more robust, but challenges remain. Overall, a regional permanent full-time workforce has increased significantly. As of April 2009, there has been a 40% increase from FY 2003 levels, and a 73% increase from FY 2006 levels. Due to preparedness integration activities, over 60% of respondents report their region’s interaction with headquarters has increased. The majority said that this has had a positive impact on preparedness in their region.

Creating a Framework for Preparedness

For there to be integration, coherent relationships must exist between stakeholders including regions that focus on preparedness not simply response. Robust regions have to focus on funding, staffing, empowerment, clarity of standards, and mission-specific actions. Annual or quarterly FEMA Regional Office meetings with stakeholders will provide an opportunity to

discuss issues and monitor progress. There needs to be a focus on outcomes and silos within DHS and within the federal government need to be broken down. Regional offices must be full partners with headquarters through collaborative decision-making. Regional offices are now considered good partners to states, but they need to be empowered to expand on relationships. PKEMRA is an opportunity for FEMA to do so. Additional analysis on the depth and breadth of stakeholder engagement should continue with the acknowledgement of critical factors such as how states have dealt with disastrous events successfully and the sharing of those experiences so as to increase future preparedness (e.g. Florida dealing with hurricanes.) Funding thresholds need to be revisited so that poor communities in big budget states are not sanctioned. New capabilities for now and the future need to be built into FEMA's processes so as to continue to promote the critical preparedness integration mission.

Improving Risk Management

Building a framework that will support preparedness requires expanded and improved risk management and communication across agencies and levels of government. Ultimately, a good risk framework is only useful if political leaders at all levels of government as well as public managers are willing to make tough choices on security trade-offs and that there is a coherent communication with the American people and disaster preparedness partners. DHS needs to establish risk management as a thematic goal in allocating resources, making decisions, communicating threats, readiness and proactive actions. It will then require a consolidation of existing risk management programs across and up and down government so as to insure consistency. Improved risk communication will require attention to ten critical elements: 1. Clarity, 2. Authenticity 3. Accuracy 4. Efficiency 5. Completeness 6. Timeliness 7. Focus 8. Openness 9. Action Orientation 10. Depersonalization.

Toward Long Term Sustainability

Ingraining long-term sustainability into homeland security and emergency management requires focus and financial commitment as well as the empowerment of FEMA regional offices. Progress has been made in terms of Director Fugate recently delegating authority to regional offices to provide them with authority to make decisions previously made by headquarters e.g. allowing them to issue mission assignments in excess of \$10 million, contract for aircraft to support regional requirements, approve requisitions for nondisaster goods and services and select and hire staff in senior regional positions. The establishment of thematic goals would assist with the focus and financial commitment. In this period of economic challenges, financing long-term disaster preparedness efforts will always have detractors and be criticized. Maintaining the political will and public support to move forward with the necessary long-term commitment so as to be prepared for disasters requires that leaders and managers up and down and across government inspire a sense of urgency in the public and among stakeholders so that protection efforts are recognized as a necessity. To do so, requires active and continual engagement of leaders academically, governmentally and professionally to forge a thematic consensus through some kind of a mechanism like transition forums.

Conclusion

The results of this assessment produced emerging themes. There seems to be success based on an increased shared understanding of the keys to implementation. The changes to date that have been noted include increased communication and collaboration from FEMA headquarters to

regional offices and state and local stakeholders, dispersion of power and decision making authority to regions, progress toward increased engagement of stakeholders and an intent to act coherently.

It was also noted that progress toward coherent action would take more than 2 years and that critical success factors include decentralization of authority and staff to empower the regions to support state and local relationships, providing trained staff to regions, moving national preparedness grant decisions to the regions, and providing training, exercises and resources for joint collaboration to the regions and to the states. As one State Director observed – *“Current budget crises at the state and local governmental level are the biggest challenge because Federal dollars are a drop in the bucket when you are laying off first responders.”*