

Emergency Management as a Foundational Public Safety Function

A Public Administration Perspective

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Abstract

Emergency management is one of the basic public safety services and should be considered a core function of public administration. Emergency management practitioners are tasked with responsibilities in prevention, protection, mitigation, preparedness and response to disasters, recovery, building community resilience and improving techniques after incidents. Emergency managers work within and across government agencies and jurisdictions, collaborate with community organizations and connect policy, public administration, and operational capabilities. This paper defines emergency management from a public administration lens and makes the case that emergency management should be considered a core function of public administration because it is proactive, coordinating and intergovernmental in nature. Much of emergency management occurs before an incident through risk assessment, planning, training, exercises, mitigation, continuity planning and community preparedness. These activities strengthen the ability of governments and communities to respond effectively, maintain essential services, recover from disasters and continuously improve their capabilities. At the municipal, state and federal levels, emergency management also serves as a bridge among government agencies, public safety organizations and community partners. Shifting minds to see emergency management as a basic public safety function like law enforcement, fire and rescue, and 911 will help governments align organizational structures, resources, professional standards, and policies to meet the responsibilities of the profession.

Keywords: *Emergency Management; Public Safety; Public Administration; Preparedness; Community Resilience*

Introduction

When most people consider public safety, three professions are likely to spring to mind: police officers reacting to crimes in progress, firefighters arriving on the scene of a structure fire, and emergency medical personnel providing patient care. For good reason, these are all considered critical public safety services. Each has a clear and obvious connection to life safety. Emergency management's mission is every bit as important, but much of it happens behind the scenes and often before an emergency happens. This difference in visibility has significant implications for public perception of the profession and how it is structured, funded, and valued by government.

The distinction is not merely semantic. How a government classifies a function can influence where it is placed organizationally, how elected and appointed officials understand its mission, how resources are allocated, whether its leadership participates in strategic decision-making, and what expectations are placed upon the personnel performing the function. At the local level especially, emergency management may operate as an independent office, within a fire or police department, under a county sheriff, within a public safety department, or elsewhere in the governmental structure. Organizational arrangements necessarily vary according to state law, local

charters, community size, hazards, and available resources. Nevertheless, these differences can obscure a more fundamental point: regardless of where emergency management appears on an organizational chart, its mission is inherently governmental and fundamentally concerned with public safety.

Federal doctrine provides substantial support for this conclusion. The *National Preparedness Goal* describes a national preparedness system organized around five mission areas: prevention, protection, mitigation, response, and recovery (FEMA, NPG, 2015). Likewise, the *National Incident Management System (NIMS)* provides a common framework through which all levels of government, nongovernmental organizations, and the private sector can work together across incidents (FEMA, NIMS, 2017). These frameworks do not conceptualize preparedness as an activity that begins after a disaster occurs. Capabilities must be established, trained, exercised, evaluated, and improved before they are needed.

In essence, this broader definition challenges the notion that public safety should be synonymous with emergency response. Public safety exists to protect people and communities, so preventing or reducing harm before an incident occurs should be viewed as equally valuable as responding effectively once harm is imminent or has occurred. Assessing flood risk, mitigating vulnerable facilities, developing evacuation plans, maintaining an emergency operations plan, training staff, educating residents, establishing mutual aid agreements, and participating in preparedness exercises are all critical components of public safety, even if no vehicles have been deployed. Just because there is not an active incident does not mean public safety work is not being done.

In fact, one of the great ironies of emergency management is that some of its biggest successes are also likely to be its least publicized. Successful mitigation efforts may keep a hazard from becoming a disaster. Successful preparedness efforts may keep panic at bay and prevent operational failure. Successful continuity plans may help governments maintain operations and continue providing essential services during times of disruption. Successful training can enable personnel to make smarter decisions with lives in the balance. Successful community education programs can help residents take lifesaving actions before first responders arrive on scene. Successful coordination can enable police, firefighters, EMS personnel, public works, public health officials, utility workers, nonprofit organizations, business leaders, elected officials, and regular citizens to operate with common goals rather than as isolated units.

Emergency management, as a result, should not be seen as simply an extension of first response service providers. To suggest that its role is to kick in when police, fire, and EMS cannot keep up with demand is to misunderstand and severely understate the administrative and operational scope of the profession. Emergency managers help create the conditions that allow public safety agencies, and government in general, to do their jobs when normal systems are overwhelmed by unusual circumstances.

This article advances the argument that emergency management is best understood as a foundational public safety function operating through the mechanisms of public administration. The proactive nature of emergency management does not conflict with its role in public safety. To the contrary, that proactivity is one of the many reasons it should be considered a public safety function. Conversely, emergency management should not be defined as merely another form of

response personnel, like police, fire, or EMS. Part of its unique value is its capacity to operate across those disciplines and within government as a whole. Emergency management bridges the gap between policy and operations. It links the executive suite to folks on the front lines. It joins government to the community and to external partners. It works alongside police, fire, and EMS while also reaching forward to mitigation, continuity, and recovery and toward long-term community resilience.

So, the question is not whether emergency management is part of public safety. If federal doctrine and 40 years of experience have taught us anything, it is that emergency management is an essential component of public safety. The more relevant question is whether we, as emergency managers, have done enough to help governmental institutions understand our profession and fully integrate it into public administration, organizational structures, public safety policies, resource management, professional training, and executive decision making.

Emergency Management Beyond the Response Paradigm

One reason emergency management can be misunderstood within public safety organizations is that public safety performance is often associated with response. Police departments respond to calls for service. Fire departments suppress fires and perform rescue operations. Emergency medical services provide immediate medical intervention. These responsibilities are indispensable, but they represent only part of government's responsibility for managing risk. Emergency management begins from a broader premise: government should not wait for foreseeable danger to become an emergency before acting.

The National Preparedness Goal provides a useful framework for understanding this distinction. Its five mission areas, prevention, protection, mitigation, response, and recovery, recognize that national preparedness requires capabilities before, during, and after incidents (FEMA, NPG, 2015). NIMS similarly establishes structures intended to allow government, nongovernmental organizations, and private-sector partners to coordinate across the spectrum of incident management (FEMA, NIMS, 2017).

The implication for public administration is significant. A municipal government does not cease performing a public safety function when it moves upstream from emergency response to preparedness or mitigation. Consider a jurisdiction that identifies neighborhoods vulnerable to flooding. Subsequent governmental activity may include hazard analysis, infrastructure investment, capital improvement planning, zoning decisions, grant administration, public education, evacuation planning, communications planning, mutual-aid agreements, and continuity planning. These activities may involve emergency management, public works, planning, finance, information technology, law enforcement, fire services, elected officials, utilities, and community organizations. No single department can accomplish the entire mission. Emergency management's contribution is often to connect those capabilities into a functioning system.

The National Response Framework reinforces this concept by establishing scalable, flexible, and adaptable coordinating structures for incidents of varying size and complexity (FEMA, NRF, 2019). Effective emergency response is therefore not created at the moment an emergency operations center is activated. It is developed beforehand through relationships, plans, training,

communications, resource identification, mutual aid, exercises, and clearly understood responsibilities.

Research in public administration supports this collaborative conception. Waugh and Streib (2006) argued that effective emergency management depends substantially upon collaboration and leadership because disasters involve networks of organizations rather than a single bureaucracy. Kapucu (2008) likewise identified planning, communication, coordination, and relationships with elected officials as important elements of community preparedness. More recent scholarship continues to reinforce this perspective. Dai and Azhar's (2024) review of collaborative governance in disaster management demonstrates the continuing importance of partnerships among governmental, nonprofit, community, and other actors. Similarly, research on collaborative emergency response has emphasized that formal structures must operate alongside communication, leadership, trust, and network relationships. These are not peripheral administrative concerns. They are operational public safety capabilities.

The distinction between proactive and reactive work therefore creates a false division if it is used to determine whether emergency management belongs within public safety. Preparedness and mitigation are largely proactive. Response addresses immediate consequences. Recovery reacts to existing harm but can also incorporate forward-looking mitigation, resilience, and redevelopment. Modern emergency management deliberately encompasses these interconnected responsibilities. A more appropriate standard is whether an activity materially contributes to protecting life, property, essential services, governmental continuity, and community resilience. Under that standard, emergency management is unmistakably a public safety function.

Continuous Improvement as an Emergency Management Responsibility

Preparedness cannot be thought of as something to which government arrives and simply remains. Communities evolve. People retire or move on to new assignments. Elected officials come and go. Technology advances. Infrastructure ages. New threats emerge. Climate changes. Demographics shift. Organizations restructure. Mutual aid partners shift. Communication systems get upgraded. Plans created years ago may no longer reflect how a jurisdiction functions. Because things change, emergency management professionals must embrace a philosophy of continuous improvement.

Created recently, FEMA's National Continuous Improvement Guidance provides an important framework for doing so. FEMA defines continuous improvement as "a structured process that whole community partners use to evaluate capabilities and enhance them as needed based on lessons learned and changes to threats and risks" (FEMA, NCI, 2022). This process occurs before, during, and after real world events, but the guidance notably emphasizes that organizations should incorporate continuous improvement into practice rather than treating it as something they do only after a significant incident occurs. I believe this has notable implications for public administration.

Emergency management is most effective when it operates as an ongoing process:

Planning → Training → Exercising → Evaluation → Corrective Action → Improvement → Reassessment

This is not necessarily a linear process. Lessons can be learned during real world operations. Training can uncover issues before an exercise is conducted. An evolving hazard may mandate changes to a plan prior to an event. The key, however, is that things change, and preparedness efforts should change with them. Agencies should routinely ask whether their existing capabilities will meet the challenges they may face when a disaster occurs. This is not simply an exercise in emergency management. It is organizational learning.

If you create an emergency management plan but never test it through exercises, you do not know if it will work. If you conduct a drill and do not evaluate it, you miss the opportunity to learn from your mistakes. If you write an after-action report but never actually apply corrective measures, you will likely make the same mistakes over and over. Improvement, then, must be more than simply identifying lessons. We must act on them.

Training and Exercises: Turning Plans Into Capability

A written emergency operations plan is not the same as an operational capability. Plans establish expectations, authorities, assignments, concepts of operation, and coordination mechanisms. Their real value, however, depends upon whether the people responsible for implementing them understand their roles and can perform those responsibilities under realistic conditions. Training and exercising provide the bridge between planning and performance.

FEMA's Homeland Security Exercise and Evaluation Program (HSEEP) provides a common methodology for exercise program management, exercise design and development, conduct, evaluation, and improvement planning (FEMA, HSEEP, 2020). HSEEP emphasizes not simply conducting exercises but evaluating performance, documenting strengths and areas for improvement, and implementing corrective actions.

Preparedness exercises can take multiple forms. Discussion-based exercises include seminars, workshops, games, and tabletop exercises. Operations-based exercises include drills, functional exercises, and full-scale exercises (FEMA, HSEEP, 2020). Different formats allow government to examine different levels of capability without assuming that every preparedness question requires a large-scale field exercise.

The value of exercises is also supported by empirical research. Mahdi et al. (2023), in a systematic review of disaster-preparation simulation exercises, examined 29 peer-reviewed studies and identified tabletop, functional, drill, and full-scale exercise formats among the methods used to improve preparedness. Their review concluded that simulation exercises can improve disaster planning and response but also emphasized the importance of rigorous evaluation and greater standardization. That finding is particularly relevant to public administration. Government should not exercise simply to document that an exercise occurred. An exercise should answer questions. Can officials communicate? Are responsibilities understood? Do departments know how to request resources? Do emergency authorities align with plans? Can essential services continue? Are backup systems functional? Can public information be coordinated? Do neighboring jurisdictions understand mutual-aid procedures? Are elected officials familiar with the decisions they may have to make? If the answers reveal weaknesses, the exercise has provided valuable information.

Tabletop Exercises and Executive Decision-Making

Tabletop exercises are particularly valuable when emergency management is considered through a public-administration lens. A well-designed tabletop exercise can bring elected officials, city or county administrators, department heads, emergency managers, police and fire leaders, EMS personnel, public works officials, public information staff, information technology personnel, legal counsel, finance officials, public health representatives, schools, utilities, hospitals, and other partners into the same decision-making environment. The exercise then forces participants to confront problems before those problems have real consequences.

Consider a severe-weather scenario. The initial question might involve activation of an emergency operations center. Within a short period, however, participants may confront questions concerning emergency declarations, sheltering, utility failures, continuity of operations, public warnings, resource allocation, emergency procurement, vulnerable populations, road closures, staffing shortages, media inquiries, mutual aid, and requests for state assistance. These are not merely tactical questions. They are questions of governance.

A tabletop exercise may reveal that two departments each assumed the other was responsible for a particular function. An emergency contact list may be obsolete. Senior officials may discover that they are unfamiliar with statutory emergency authorities. Information technology personnel may identify an unrealistic assumption concerning system redundancy. Finance officials may determine that emergency purchasing procedures are unclear. Public information personnel may find that multiple departments intend to issue independent messages. Identifying these deficiencies during an exercise should not be regarded as failure. It is one of the principal reasons exercises exist. A well-designed exercise creates a controlled environment in which government can discover weaknesses before lives, property, and public confidence depend upon those systems functioning correctly.

From Lessons Identified to Lessons Learned

Emergency management professionals frequently speak of “lessons learned” following an exercise or incident. The phrase should be used carefully. A lesson documented is not necessarily a lesson learned. If a jurisdiction identifies a communications deficiency during an exercise, records it in an after-action report, discusses the problem at a meeting, and then allows the same deficiency to remain unresolved, organizational learning has not occurred. A lesson becomes meaningful when it produces change. That change might involve revising a plan, purchasing equipment, providing additional training, clarifying authority, changing policy, modifying an emergency operations center procedure, establishing a mutual aid agreement, or assigning responsibility for a previously neglected task.

HSEEP's improvement planning process connects exercise evaluation with corrective action (FEMA, HSEEP, 2020). FEMA's broader continuous improvement guidance extends this concept into real world incident operations, encouraging organizations to identify strengths and areas for improvement and use that information to enhance emergency management capability (FEMA, NCI, 2022). This distinction should become an important measure of emergency management performance. Administrators should not ask only whether an after-action report was completed.

They should ask whether its recommendations were evaluated, assigned, tracked, and, where appropriate, implemented. Government cannot reasonably guarantee that every emergency will be prevented or that every response will proceed without difficulty. It can reasonably be expected to learn. Continuous improvement therefore represents one of emergency management's clearest contributions to responsible public administration.

CERT and Community Preparedness

Preparedness also extends beyond governmental agencies and professional responders. FEMA's Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) program provides a particularly useful example. CERT training is designed to provide community members with basic disaster-preparedness and response skills. Training addresses areas such as disaster preparedness, fire safety, light search and rescue, team organization, and basic disaster medical operations (FEMA, CERT, 2026). The importance of this concept becomes evident during large-scale incidents.

Professional responders are finite resources. A major tornado, flood, earthquake, prolonged power failure, technological incident, or other community-wide disaster can generate demands across an entire jurisdiction simultaneously. Roads may become inaccessible. Communications may fail. Calls for service may exceed immediately available capacity. Mutual-aid resources may be delayed. Residents who understand preparedness and basic emergency principles may be better positioned, within the limits of their training, to protect themselves, assist family members and neighbors, recognize hazards, and avoid unnecessary actions that place additional demands on responders.

CERT training does not transform residents into police officers, firefighters, paramedics, or other professional responders. Nor should community preparedness be used to transfer governmental responsibility to residents. Instead, CERT illustrates a central principle of modern emergency management: professional response capability is strengthened when it is complemented by an informed and prepared community.

Research provides support for the value of this approach. Ryan (2021), examining 481 high-school students who completed Teen CERT training, reported improvements in preparedness knowledge and skills as well as measures associated with confidence and self-efficacy. Although the study focused on youth participants and should not be generalized beyond its design without caution, it illustrates that structured community-based preparedness education can build knowledge and individual capacity.

From a public-administration perspective, CERT is also noteworthy because it changes the relationship between government and residents. Government is not merely delivering an emergency service to passive recipients. It is helping create community capacity. This concept aligns emergency management with broader models of collaborative governance, in which governmental organizations work alongside nonprofit institutions, businesses, community organizations, volunteers, and residents. Dai and Azhar (2024) identify partnerships as a recurring and significant theme within contemporary collaborative disaster-governance scholarship. The result is a broader understanding of public safety. Public safety remains a governmental responsibility, but resilience is a shared community capability.

Creating a Culture of Preparedness Within Government

The same principle applies inside municipal, county, state, and federal organizations. Emergency preparedness cannot belong exclusively to the emergency management office. Finance departments may have emergency procurement, reimbursement, and documentation responsibilities. Information technology departments may be responsible for cybersecurity, communications, data recovery, or restoration of critical systems. Public works may manage debris, roads, water systems, facilities, or infrastructure failures. Human resources may address workforce accountability and continuity. Public information staff may coordinate emergency communications. Legal counsel may advise leaders concerning emergency authorities. Senior officials may make decisions about declarations, resources, closures, continuity of government, and policy. Each responsibility requires preparation before an emergency occurs.

A mature emergency management program therefore distributes preparedness throughout the organization rather than concentrating knowledge in a single office. This is an important distinction. The emergency manager should not be the person who "owns" every emergency responsibility. The emergency manager should help ensure that the governmental organization understands, coordinates, trains, and exercises those responsibilities. Training and exercises create opportunities for departments to understand not only what they must do, but how their responsibilities connect with others. This creates a culture of preparedness.

That culture may be one of emergency management's most important contributions to public safety. Police, fire, and EMS appropriately maintain readiness for incidents that occur regularly. Emergency management adds an organizational dimension by asking the entire governmental institution to prepare for events that may occur infrequently but carry extraordinary consequences. The absence of a disaster today does not make preparedness unnecessary. It creates the opportunity to prepare.

Emergency Management as Public Administration

Emergency management is, at its core, a public administration activity. This is because disaster response reveals government's ability to govern during its worst conditions. Large scale emergencies typically span the responsibility of multiple departments. A catastrophic storm, for example, may require law enforcement, fire suppression, rescue, emergency medical operations, road clearance, sheltering, public health, emergency procurement, public information, IT support, debris clearance, utility restoration, continuity of government, financial tracking, legal guidance, and external agency coordination. The bigger problem is therefore not whether each of these departments can do its part. The real problem is whether government can coordinate each part as a collective whole. Emergency management overlaps with public administration at this point.

Public administration seeks to translate law, policy, public resources, and governing authority into action. Emergency management does this work during circumstances that are uncertain, fast moving, ambiguous, resource constrained, interdependent, and high stakes. Emergency managers should therefore know more than just how to respond to incidents. They should know about authority and organization, public budgeting and finance, grants and procurement, communication and public information, intergovernmental relations, public policy, public engagement, continuity,

and politics. Emergency management today is as much about collaborative public management as traditional response work.

Emergency managers will seldom have direct command and control authority over each organization they need during a disaster. Their influence is based instead on coordination, relationships, mutual planning, trust, information sharing, and the ability to align a network of organizations and actors. This collaborative quality is what Waugh and Streib (2006) defined as integral to emergency management. Kapucu (2008) discusses similar themes on communication, planning, and relationships between emergency managers and government officials. Dai and Azhar (2024) found that collaborative governance continues to be an essential theoretical lens for disaster management. Emergency managers are less “disaster technicians” and more public managers.

Municipal Government: Where Emergency Management Becomes Public Safety

The argument for recognizing emergency management as a foundational public safety function is perhaps most visible at the municipal and county levels. Disasters are experienced locally before they are characterized as state or federal events. Residents call local emergency numbers. Local roads flood. Local utilities fail. Local police officers, firefighters, paramedics, public works employees, administrators, and elected officials confront the initial consequences. State and federal resources may later become essential, but local government remains the governmental institution through which residents most directly experience an emergency.

A local emergency manager must consequently operate both horizontally and vertically. Horizontally, emergency management coordinates with police, fire, EMS, public works, finance, information technology, communications, planning, public health, schools, hospitals, utilities, nonprofit organizations, businesses, and community groups. Vertically, it must connect local government with county, regional, state, tribal, territorial, and federal systems where applicable. Few municipal functions operate across such a broad institutional landscape. The emergency manager's value therefore cannot be measured primarily by the number of incidents personally commanded.

In many jurisdictions, emergency management appropriately does not replace the incident commander or assume statutory responsibilities belonging to police, fire, EMS, public works, public health, or other specialized agencies. Its value lies in helping those organizations function together while the broader government continues to operate. During a major incident, a fire chief may manage firefighting and rescue operations. A police official may manage security or law enforcement responsibilities. A public works director may oversee infrastructure. Yet the jurisdiction must also manage resource requests, emergency operations center coordination, situational awareness, public information, mutual aid, sheltering, continuity, damage assessment, state coordination, decisions by elected officials, and eventual recovery. That coordinating architecture is itself a public safety capability.

Municipal leaders should therefore evaluate emergency management by asking a question broader than, “What does this office do during a disaster?” They should ask, “What capabilities would this government lose if an effective emergency management program did not exist?” The answer reveals emergency management's actual institutional value.

State Government and the Intergovernmental Bridge

State emergency management occupies a distinctive position within American federalism. States support local governments, coordinate statewide capabilities, administer preparedness programs and mutual aid, advise governors and senior officials, manage state emergency operations, and interface with federal agencies. State emergency management therefore functions as a bridge between local needs and broader governmental resources. When an incident exceeds local capacity, affected jurisdictions may seek assistance through neighboring communities, mutual aid systems, county government, or state government. State emergency management organizations can help coordinate resources individual municipalities could not reasonably maintain independently.

The state role is equally important before emergencies. State agencies influence preparedness through planning requirements, technical assistance, grants, training, exercises, mitigation programs, statewide coordination, communications systems, and professional development. From a public administration perspective, this is intergovernmental management in one of its clearest forms. A major disaster may require municipal officials to work through county and state systems, the state to request federal assistance, and federal resources to flow back through intergovernmental structures to affected communities. Emergency management helps make these relationships operational. Its intergovernmental role further distinguishes emergency management from narrowly defined response disciplines and strengthens the case for recognizing it as a core governmental public safety function.

The Federal Role: FEMA, DHS, and National Preparedness

Federal emergency management occupies a different role. Most incidents do not begin as federal emergencies, and FEMA does not replace state and local governments when disasters occur. Instead, federal emergency management operates within a broader system in which responsibilities and capabilities are distributed across levels of government and throughout the whole community. The Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act provides the principal statutory structure for federal disaster and emergency assistance following qualifying events (FEMA, Stafford Act, 2025).

The Post Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006 (PKEMRA) further reshaped federal emergency management following the failures associated with Hurricane Katrina. Among other reforms, the statute strengthened FEMA's role within DHS and defined FEMA's primary mission as an all hazards, risk based, comprehensive emergency management system encompassing preparedness, protection, response, recovery, and mitigation (FEMA, PKEMRA, 2006).

That statutory language is important. It demonstrates that federal law already views FEMA's role as substantially broader than disaster response alone. Federal emergency management also shapes the national public safety architecture through NIMS, the National Response Framework, the National Preparedness Goal, HSEEP, CERT, training programs, mitigation initiatives, grant programs, technical assistance, and continuous improvement guidance. These programs provide

common concepts that jurisdictions can adapt to their own governmental environments. This matters because American emergency management is decentralized.

The federal government cannot create resilient communities solely through federal activity. National doctrine cannot compensate for weak local capabilities. Effective emergency management depends upon state, local, tribal, territorial, federal, nonprofit, private sector, and community organizations developing the capacity to work together. Emergency management is one of the principal mechanisms connecting those actors.

FEMA and DHS are therefore well positioned to reinforce the concept that emergency management is a foundational element of public safety. Such recognition need not describe emergency management as simply another first response service. Doing so would unnecessarily narrow the profession. Instead, federal doctrine should consistently recognize emergency management as a cross cutting “public safety and governance function” responsible for developing preparedness, coordinating complex incidents, supporting consequence management, promoting mitigation, strengthening resilience, facilitating recovery, educating communities, and institutionalizing continuous improvement.

Toward Formal Recognition as a Core Public Safety Discipline

Advocating for greater recognition of emergency management should not be construed as trying to make policing, firefighting, EMS, public health, public works, or another discipline less important. Neither should emergency management try to take statutory or operational responsibilities from those disciplines. This is advocating for equal standing, not identical functions. Emergency management’s strength is in how it is different.

Police departments are experts in law enforcement and security. Fire services focus on fire suppression, rescue, and related hazards. EMS provides prehospital care. Public works keeps our infrastructure operational. Public health deals with population health issues. Emergency management helps integrate all these capabilities into a preparedness, coordination, and consequence management structure. Formal recognition would simply align institutional language with how emergency management operates.

At the national level, FEMA and DHS can continue to lead by using language that frames emergency management as something more than disaster assistance and response coordination. States can do their part by instituting statutes, professional licensing standards, preparedness plans, training certifications, and organizational structures that establish emergency management as a function spanning government. Local governments need to do their part as well. Mayors and county executives should ensure their emergency management function has the organizational access, staffing, authority, training, and resources it needs to coordinate responsibilities that span departments.

The specific model does not need to be uniform across the country. A small town department and a large city jurisdiction operate at nowhere near the same scale. But the basic concept should be the same: Emergency management’s placement in government should reflect the breadth of responsibility it holds, not the fire trucks and ambulances at the scene of an emergency.

Professionalization and Public Administration Competency

Recognition must also carry expectations. If emergency management seeks standing as a foundational public safety profession, the field must continue to strengthen professional education, ethical standards, credentialing, evidence based practice, training, and administrative competence. Emergency managers must be able to communicate effectively with elected officials and senior administrators. They must understand public budgeting, grant management, procurement, organizational behavior, policy development, intergovernmental relations, public communication, risk, continuity, and program evaluation. They must also be able to design meaningful exercises, evaluate performance, facilitate difficult conversations, coordinate organizations over which they possess no direct authority, and translate technical risk information into decisions policymakers can understand. These are not secondary competencies. They are central to contemporary emergency management. The future emergency manager must therefore be both a public safety professional and a public administrator.

Policy Recommendations

Emergency management professionals have advocated for recognition of emergency management as a core function of public safety for years. However, recognition should result in reform, not just a new designation. To truly become ingrained as an essential public service, emergency management must take several steps to change institutional thinking and culture.

First, doctrine at the federal level should unambiguously and consistently define emergency management as a core function of public safety and government. FEMA's mission statement, National Preparedness Guidelines, HSEEP doctrine, NIMS, and guidance on continuous improvement already outline expectations that support such a designation.

Second, states should examine their emergency management enabling statutes and administrative organizations. Statutes written when civil defense or disaster response were considered the main components of the profession may not adequately describe or support modern duties that include mitigation, continuity, preparedness, recovery, community resilience, collaboration, and continuous improvement.

Third, local governments should assess whether emergency management has adequate access to executive authority. A department expected to integrate efforts across an organization needs sufficient direct contact with decision makers to successfully coordinate those activities.

Fourth, governments should assess emergency management across all aspects of the preparedness mission, not just response metrics. Planning, mitigation, exercises, training, warning capability, continuity, intergovernmental partnerships, community readiness, recovery capabilities, and corrective action implementation should be just as meaningful.

Fifth, there should be specific expectations for continuous improvement. Exercises and real events should drive deliberate and useful evaluation. Corrective actions should be assigned, tracked, and evaluated rather than falling off the radar after an after action report is filed.

Sixth, preparedness training should be provided to senior leaders. Chief executives, mayors, city council members, where applicable, managers, administrators, department heads, budget and finance staff, legal personnel, public information employees, IT professionals, and other officials who play a role in emergency management should participate regularly in training and exercises designed to meet their continuous improvement needs.

Seventh, governments should formalize exercise programs. Tabletop exercises, drills, functional exercises, and full scale exercises can help improve readiness but should be driven by capabilities and identified hazards rather than simply fulfilling administrative expectations.

Eighth, community preparedness programs should be seen as a public safety capability. CERT, public readiness training, volunteer networks, and community exercise programs can help improve community resilience without shifting the responsibility of government to provide professional services.

Ninth, public administration should be an intentional part of professional development for emergency managers. Budgeting and finance, ethics, organizational theory, American government, especially intergovernmental relations, public policy analysis, administrative law, collaborative governance, public engagement, and program evaluation are just a few areas of public administration that can complement operational training programs.

Finally, preparedness should be treated as a responsibility of everyone in government, not something delegated or outsourced to an emergency management agency. While emergency management is responsible for coordinating emergency preparedness, emergency managers cannot prepare the whole government by themselves. Buy in from the top is critical.

Conclusion

Emergency management has sometimes occupied an uncertain institutional position because it does not fit neatly within traditional definitions of either public safety or public administration. That ambiguity should not be viewed as a weakness. It is evidence of the profession's distinctive purpose. Emergency management operates where public safety and public administration meet. It is proactive when government identifies hazards, mitigates risks, develops plans, builds relationships, trains personnel, educates residents, conducts exercises, and prepares communities. It is operational when emergency operations centers activate, resources are coordinated, warnings are issued, situational information is developed, and responders require support. It is administrative when officials manage emergency authorities, continuity, procurement, grants, intergovernmental assistance, policy decisions, and recovery programs. It is developmental when exercises and actual incidents are evaluated, deficiencies are identified, corrective measures are implemented, and improved capabilities are tested again. It remains engaged after immediate response operations conclude, when communities face the difficult work of recovery, mitigation, and rebuilding.

Emergency management therefore cannot be accurately characterized as merely a support function for traditional first responders. Police, fire, EMS, public works, public health, utilities, nonprofit organizations, private sector partners, and community organizations each provide capabilities that emergency management cannot and should not replace. Emergency management's distinctive

responsibility is to help transform those separate capabilities into a coordinated system. That responsibility is fundamentally governmental. It is also fundamentally about public safety.

The proactive nature of emergency management should consequently be understood not as evidence that it stands outside public safety, but as evidence that modern public safety must extend beyond reaction. A government committed to protecting its population cannot measure success solely by how effectively it responds after a disaster occurs. It must also consider whether hazards were understood. Were foreseeable losses reduced? Were institutions prepared? Were personnel trained? Were plans exercised? Were senior officials familiar with their responsibilities? Were residents given meaningful opportunities to prepare? Could essential services continue? Could agencies communicate and coordinate? Were weaknesses identified? Were corrective actions completed? Did government learn from previous incidents and exercises? Could the community recover? Emergency management addresses each of these questions.

CERT and other community preparedness initiatives further demonstrate that emergency management expands public safety capacity beyond governmental institutions. Training residents does not transfer governmental responsibility to the public. Rather, it recognizes that resilient communities are created through relationships among government, professional responders, nonprofit organizations, businesses, institutions, volunteers, and informed residents.

Similarly, tabletop exercises, drills, functional exercises, and full scale exercises should not be viewed as peripheral preparedness activities. They are mechanisms through which government tests assumptions before those assumptions are tested by disaster. After action analysis and corrective action then convert experience into institutional knowledge. This continuous cycle of preparation, evaluation, learning, and improvement may be one of emergency management's most important contributions to public administration.

Formal recognition by federal, state, and local governments would not create a public safety role for emergency management. That role already exists. Recognition would acknowledge an existing reality and encourage governmental structures, professional standards, funding decisions, training programs, executive relationships, and public policy to reflect it. The ultimate objective should therefore be greater than recognition of a profession.

It should be the creation of governmental institutions and communities capable of anticipating risk, preparing for uncertainty, coordinating across organizational boundaries, responding effectively, learning continuously, recovering responsibly, and protecting people when ordinary systems are placed under extraordinary pressure. In that mission, emergency management is not peripheral to public safety. It is foundational.

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