

# SUPPORTING EFFECTIVE DECISION-MAKING THROUGHOUT THE EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT PROCESS

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## ABSTRACT

This paper describes an effective Integrated Emergency Management System (IEMS) for developing Emergency Management Plans (EMP) which best express a community's commitment to managing hazards and the effects of disaster. It also describes, in general terms, how communities manage disaster response and how the decision-making process should be described in EMPs.

## AN INTEGRATED EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

All governments recognize their fundamental responsibility for public safety.

The mission of emergency management agencies (EMA) is to improve public safety by enabling individuals, groups and communities to effectively manage hazards and the effects of disaster. EMAs enable development and implementation of Emergency Management Plans (EMP) through an Integrated Emergency Management System (IEMS), the most credible, responsible and effective method of achieving Comprehensive Emergency Management (CEM). {Peña, 1994}

IEMS is based on several principles:

People are affected by crisis as individuals, as members of groups and as citizens in communities.

Individuals, groups and communities can act before disaster strikes to prevent or minimize

impact, and to assure the most effective response to and recovery from disaster. The extent to which they do act depends in large part upon perceptions of risk before, and event-generated need after, disaster.

How well people manage hazards and the effects of disaster at all three levels (individual, group and community) depends in part on how thoroughly activities are integrated. EMAs must assure high-level integration of emergency management activities.

Emergency management professionals are duty-bound to do the very best job they can. All EMAs are small parts of the governments to which they belong; except during the community's disaster response, emergency management will not be a priority government activity.

An essential function of all (nonelected) public servants is to provide the best available information to support effective decision-making.

## THE PROCESS

The process starts with a comprehensive planning assessment at two levels - agency and community. Agency assessments provide information about services, number of employees, hours of operation, facilities and so forth. The community assessment provides demographics, geography, etc. Assessments identify potential special circumstances - people, systems or areas that may require increased or special attention during crisis. The assessment also identifies essential functions. For an agency this could mean protecting employees and essential systems and the provision of essential services.

For a community, this would mean law enforcement, fire, public works, public health, human services, etc. All of this is combined with an identification and analysis of hazards of particular concern to the community and is compiled and analyzed by the EMA.

Next, EMAs develop DRAFT Emergency Management Plans (EMP). Based on formats developed by the Federal Emergency Management System (FEMA) and incorporating information derived from the assessments, EMAs write plans which describe how the community and its agencies will manage hazards and the effects of disaster through Comprehensive Emergency Management (CEM) activities. *Comprehensive Emergency Management, A Governor's Guide*, a study conducted by the National Governors Association in 1979, argued persuasively that the activities communities can and do engage in to manage hazards and the effects of disaster fall into four categories - mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery, or CEM. The EMPs developed and refined by EMAs through continuing dialogue with communities identify activities in all four phases of CEM that the community is capable of engaging in. Application of the process at the agency (group) and community levels also assures integration of emergency management activities.

Implementing the plan is the last and most important part of the process. Once a community plan has been developed, it is brought before the governing body for review, comment and adoption. Policy makers must understand how the plan was developed, and they must understand its implications, particularly regarding cost. They must have the opportunity to alter the document to the extent they believe necessary and appropriate, given priorities and available resources. **In short, policy makers must be empowered by EMAs and by those who have participated in the process to make the best-informed decisions possible about how the community will manage hazards and the effects of disaster.** This step is critical; without it, plans can neither be completely valid nor completely effective. Once this step is completed, the community can implement a plan that provides the most realistic and best possible expression of how hazards and the effects of disaster can and will be managed.

#### DECISION-MAKING DURING DISASTER

One of the most important functions of a community EMP is to answer those questions that can be answered before disaster strikes, so that it is not necessary to

answer them during disaster response. However, we must acknowledge that disasters will create unique situations that will require unique response decisions to be made. EMPs must therefore describe an effective decision-making process, one that is flexible and based on what really happens during disaster response.

In its most minimal sense, community disaster response will be characterized by these activities:

Community emergency response personnel will respond to the site(s) to assess disaster effects and to provide services. More than one agency (police, fire, emergency medical services, public works, utilities and so forth) will have major site responsibilities. Interaction is unavoidable; each agency's actions will impact all others.

Other community personnel, from emergency response and other agencies, will proceed to other locations to obtain and make available essential resources.

Still other community personnel will proceed to a centralized location usually near the seat of government (frequently called an Emergency Operations Center or EOC) to compile and exchange information to support emergency response.

Disaster experience has proved that an effective decision-making system recognizes shared responsibilities. EMAs must assure that emergency response personnel at the site jointly decide how to manage multiple emergency needs. They must also assure that personnel at the EOC jointly support site activities, establish priorities among multiple emergency sites and support response activities beyond the scope of site response personnel (e.g. shelter operations, etc.)

The EMP must describe an effective interagency decision-making process. The following example used in EMPs developed by communities in Dane County, Wisconsin is offered for consideration:

A. During routine activity the established procedures for managing incidents will be used by community agencies. Some events, due to their duration or other factors, may require coordinated incident site management. In those cases, all appropriate agencies will be represented at the Command Post (CP) and

support will be provided through established structures.

B. During disaster events, all agencies will respond in accordance with both their own standing operating procedures (SOP) and the provisions contained herein. If a conflict arises between the two, the provisions set forth herein will govern:

1. The Community Emergency Operations Center (EOC) will be activated. All local agencies with emergency responsibilities will have a representative at the EOC. Other local, mutual aid and support agencies may be asked to send a representative to the EOC.

2. CPs may be established at or near the emergency site(s), depending upon the nature of the event. All agencies responding to the site will be represented at the CP. There will be only one CP established per site.

3. Communications will be established between the EOC and CP(s) in accordance with the provisions set forth in the Communications Annex of this Plan. Communications will also be established with other facilities as appropriate.

4. Management of the incident will be achieved jointly by EOC and CP personnel. The CP(s) will direct site operations with EOC support. Certain functions (coordination of multiple CPs, prioritizing of needs presented by multiple sites, support of shelter operations, joint public information activities, etc.) will be managed by the EOC, including coordination with other EOCs.

This decision-making process is flexible and based on what disaster experience has shown actually happens in communities stricken by disaster. It also establishes a sound structure for joint decision-making which is so essential for coordinated community response to disaster.

## REFERENCE

### JOURNAL:

Peña, R. M. 1994 "Reinventing Emergency Management - Back to the Future" *American Society of Professional Emergency Planners Journal*

Ray Peña has been involved with emergency management since early 1985, first as Director of Disaster Services with the Dane County Chapter of the American National Red Cross and, since 1988, as Population Protection Planner with Dane County (Wisconsin, U.S.A.) Emergency Management. He is Chair of Wisconsin-Nicaragua Partners of the Americas Emergency Management Committee. He is married and has three young children.