

# Virtual Operation Support Teams; Practical Implementation and Lessons Learned

T. Duffy<sup>1</sup>, D. Merrick<sup>2</sup> and J. Broder<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Doctoral Researcher, Center of Disaster Risk Policy, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL*

<sup>2</sup>*Director, Center of Disaster Risk Policy, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL*

<sup>3</sup>*Director of IT, Center of Disaster Risk Policy, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL*

*Email: tduffy@cdrp.net, dmerrick@cdrp.net, jbroder@cdrp.net*

## **ABSTRACT:**

Interest in the use of Virtual Operation Support Teams (VOSTs) is becoming widespread in the realm of Emergency Management in Florida and other parts of the USA. While the potential usefulness of these teams is appreciated, little has been written about the practicalities of forming, organizing and implementing these teams in an effective manner. This paper discusses the challenges encountered and lessons learned by the VOST managed by the Center for Disaster Risk Policy (CDRP) at Florida State University (FSU) and their client the Florida Division of Emergency Management (FDEM). The data for this paper was collected during an FSU.VOST activation for the Spring 2014 Panhandle Flooding in which 26 counties in North Florida had emergency declarations. Through the appropriate use of technology and the organization of digital volunteers and experienced emergency management analysts, FSU.VOST were able to engage in mass data collection whilst countering the problems associated with data verification. The team also developed protocols for appropriately channeling information into an operational emergency operations center. Through this workflow, the FSU.VOST was able to produce detailed situation reports for FDEM at 12 hour increments with additional interim and critical incident reports as dictated by ongoing events. These reports were used by FDEM to augment their operational picture, measure public sentiment and engage in rumor control.

## **KEYWORDS:**

Virtual Operations Support Team, VOST, Emergency Management, data verification, rumor control