

PLAN, RESCUE, RECOVER AND REASSESS: CHALLENGES IN COORDINATING RESPONSES TO HURRICANES IN FLORIDA

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Hurricanes in Florida are a fact of life. The state's location has long made it vulnerable and when coupled with a rapidly growing population and massive construction along the coasts, it has become especially susceptible to destruction. The 2004 and 2005 hurricane seasons displaced millions of Floridians and destroyed thousands of homes and businesses. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) still operates mobile home parks with more than 1200 units for residents who have not been able to return to permanent homes.

Florida's demographics also increase its vulnerability to hurricanes. More than 76% of the population lives in 35 coastal counties, 8% of residents live in mobile homes and 20% of the population are elderly. Of the elderly residents, about 340,000 may be termed "frail elderly," and many other residents have disabilities that make survival without power and other services dangerous. More than 12% of Floridians live in poverty, and they are also vulnerable to the damage wrought by hurricanes. At any given time, there are thousands of seasonal workers in the state as well as thousands of tourists who must be evacuated or provided safe havens. Effective emergency plans and coordinated responses are thus critical.

The Role of Government in Hurricane Response:

Coordinated responses to disasters are a late 20th century phenomenon. In 1974 Congress enacted the Disaster Relief Act, which established the process of presidential disaster relief declarations. This was followed in 1979 by President Jimmy Carter's executive order, which merged some of the more than 100 federal agencies involved in disaster response into the FEMA. FEMA had two foci: responding to civil defense concerns and natural disasters. After September 11, FEMA was directed to help communities prepare for and respond to natural disasters and the threat of terrorism. This system remained in place with periodic modifications until March 2003 when FEMA was subsumed under the Department of Homeland Security.ⁱ

Emergency management planning was initiated in Florida with the 1974 Florida Emergency Management Act. Although initially focused on civil defense, this planning effort was quickly expanded to include coastal management, disaster preparedness and hazard mitigation. By 1981, the Florida Department of Community Affairs recommended that the state adopt the Comprehensive Emergency Management Act which "divided management into four phases: mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery, and identified how federal, state and local governments can address and coordinate their emergency and disaster efforts." The Act also required the state to develop a Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan and guidelines for local emergency management plans.ⁱⁱ

It became clear even before Hurricane Andrew in 1992 that the state lacked the resources to handle a major disaster. State officials were unable to make an adequate request for federal assistance or to coordinate the evacuation, shelter or recovery operations – all functions that both the federal government and the state plan required. Florida became, in the words of a state

emergency management coordinator, the example of “what not to do.” To address these major shortcomings, Governor Lawton Chiles appointed the Governor’s Disaster Planning and Response Committee. Within four months the Committee made 94 recommendations to the legislature that focused on: improving the Division of Emergency Management; establishing explicit chains of command, better communication systems, clear evacuation plans and sufficient shelters; effective volunteer coordination; and sufficient funding. Most of these recommendations were enacted during the 1993 legislative session. In recent years, state improvements have been made to facility planning and mitigation strategies.ⁱⁱⁱ

Today, seventeen state agencies provide leadership and are charged along with other state agencies and the private sector with responding to disasters in Florida. The five major functional areas--operations, information and planning, administration, logistics and recovery transition--are headed by a state agency that coordinates the agencies under its jurisdiction.

Disaster Response Sequence:

Florida has designated three levels of disasters: minor, major and catastrophic. In each case, individuals and families are expected to be self-sufficient for the first 72 hours or move to a designated shelter if assistance is needed. Counties are expected to handle minor disasters with assistance as needed from neighboring counties and the private sector, and additional support may be provided by the state. Major disasters are deemed to exceed local capabilities and require a broad range of state and federal assistance. The state will step in if requested and coordinate assistance from state agencies and the private sector. The Division of Emergency Management, within the Department of Community Affairs, is charged with planning and responding to disasters and coordinating the work of the state agencies, local governments and the private sector.^{iv} Florida, like most states, has signed interstate compacts, which provide mutual aid during and after disasters.

In the case of a catastrophic disaster, such as the four hurricanes that hit Florida in 2004 and, more recently, Hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Wilma, the governor may request help from the Department of Homeland Security’s Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). If the President determines that the event meets the criteria for a major disaster, a Presidential Major Disaster Declaration is issued which mobilizes the federal government to provide search and rescue, power, food, water, shelter and other services. This Declaration is made after a damage assessment and a state commitment to provide significant state funds and resources for recovery efforts.

In rare cases in which a hurricane or other event is clearly going to be more than the local governments and state can handle, a Presidential Declaration may be issued before the disaster in order to have personnel and supplies in place for immediate use as well as to begin planning for the long-term recovery. Federal assistance for long-term recovery includes debris removal and repairs of infrastructure and public facilities. Individuals affected by the disaster are also eligible for disaster housing (generally up to 18 months), grants, low-interest loans and personal services such as crisis counseling, unemployment benefits and legal aid.

Private Sector Response:

Private sector agencies have been active in disaster response from the earliest days of this nation. Until the development of the coordinated emergency management process in 1974, first responders were generally civic organizations, churches and groups such as the Salvation Army and the Red Cross which, working with local governments, performed search and rescue, food distribution and rebuilding services. Most of this work was performed on an “as needed” basis with each agency or organization contributing what it could.

Today, nonprofit agencies serve as support agencies for four functions in the Florida Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan: mass care, health and medical services, food and water, and volunteers and donations. Several nonprofit groups also assist in animal control and protection. The Red Cross and the Salvation Army are considered lead agencies, but today’s state plan also includes Florida Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster Agencies, Adventist Community Activities, Christian Contractors Association, Inc., Florida Association of Food Banks, Florida Association of Volunteer Centers, The United Way, Florida Interfaith Networking in Disaster, Church World Service and the United Methodist Committee on Relief. Each of these organizations and their member agencies provide critical services in preparing for hurricanes and in managing the recovery.

Nonprofit organizations operate and staff shelters; provide family assistance and reunification, basic medical and emergency care, clothing and personal hygiene; develop mass feeding stations and water and ice distribution points; and assist in debris removal, home repair and construction. Service groups not directly involved with relief and reconstruction also provide auxiliary services such as extended childcare hours, use of volunteers, and reassignment of personnel. In the 2005 hurricane season volunteers donated more than 4.7 million hours to helping those affected by the storms. In addition, foundations provide essential funding in times of natural disasters.

The business sector is not a part of Florida’s Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan. However, businesses play a key role in hurricane management by ensuring that adequate supplies are available, providing funding for recovery and rebuilding, and playing a leadership role within communities. In the Florida Panhandle, Rebuild Northwest Florida, a coalition of business and the nonprofit community came together to rebuild homes destroyed following the 2004 hurricane season. Many businesses also provide emergency loans, continued pay and special assistance to their employees to expedite the recovery process.

Challenges to Florida’s Disaster Management System

Coordination. Natural disasters can severely strain public and private response systems. Because events such as hurricanes are unpredictable and complex, organizations tasked with planning and responding have to combine clear command and control structures with flexibility and creativity. As early as 1992, researchers at the University of South Carolina, assessing the response to Hurricane Hugo, noted that catastrophic or repeated disasters produce unusually difficult, complicated and unexpected situations. These conditions frequently result in chaotic and dangerous situations that not only harm people and increase loss of property, but also make it impossible to provide organized and prompt assistance. ^v

Citizen confidence and response. Citizen trust in the emergency response system is also essential. Responses to natural disasters are most successful when victims act as they are advised to do so by government and private agencies. Citizens' faith in their disaster response system can be eroded by storm warnings that fail to materialize, the absence of effective communication, and the perceived lack of expertise of the emergency responders.^{vi} In a survey of emergency information management during the 2004 hurricane, researcher Naim Kapucu found that only 40% of the state's information management officials felt that residents responded well and were prepared for the hurricanes.^{vii} Many people failed to heed the instructions to be self-sufficient for the first 72 hours after a storm.

Response times and rebuilding priorities. A major disaster also is the one event that requires the full cooperation and coordination of all levels of government as well as business and the independent sector. This can be difficult when many of the institutions within these sectors are damaged and communication is destroyed. Structural damage to service providers will also affect response times. After the 2004 hurricane season many providers were unable to reopen quickly because their offices were damaged or destroyed. Most emergency response plans do not prioritize rebuilding except for essential government offices and infrastructure.

Dissemination of public information. A critical aspect of Florida's disaster management system is public information. While the National Weather Service provides the basic information about potential landfall, strength of the storm and the progress of a hurricane, state and local governments must provide information about the location and status of shelters, evacuation routes, the condition of roads and other infrastructure, and all other information that will help Floridians. This information must be timely and accurate to reduce the loss of life and property. Providing timely and correct information during and immediately after a major storm is difficult when telephone and electrical lines are down. In 2004-5 many independent radio stations changed programming to provide 24-hour hurricane coverage that helped to fill this gap, although more official sources of information are needed, especially to reach the most vulnerable populations.

Inadequate emergency response plans. Most emergency shelters are open for 24 to 48 hours, but a major disaster may require that they be open for weeks or even months. In 2004 special needs residents in DeSoto and Charlotte counties were evacuated to schools in Sarasota, but had to be relocated when the schools reopened (GC). Some evacuees had to be moved several times. In Orlando and Gainesville, nurses staffing shelters had no replacements when they returned to their jobs.

Outdated emergency response plans. Many areas of Florida still base their plans on a military type model that places primary emphasis on first responders. Immediate mobilization of first responders such as the police, fire and rescue teams is essential, but equally critical is the prompt involvement of community groups and the business sector to minimize the impact on the community. After the 2005 hurricane season, the competition between natural disaster relief and homeland security for limited resources became a major issue.

Absence of emergency response plans. Despite the fact that Florida is regularly affected by hurricanes, many organizations fail to have emergency response plans. The Gulf Coast Community Foundation of Venice surveyed government agencies, nonprofit organizations and local funders in its service area after the 2004 hurricane season. 79% of the respondents had a written response plan or were part of a collaborative plan prior to the hurricane season. However, when responses were analyzed by sector, wide disparities were found. For example, only 45% of funders, 35% of faith-based organizations and 31% of educational institutions had an emergency response plan. Only one-fourth of the service providers had trained their volunteers prior to the crisis.^{viii} On January 5, 2006, Governor Bush announced a new program to create a “Culture of Preparedness” which includes helping every Florida family prepare their own disaster plan.^{ix}

The poor. Hurricanes Andrew and Katrina revealed the disproportionate impact that natural disasters have on the poor. Not only is evacuation more difficult for those who do not have reliable transportation, but also even moving to a shelter can be difficult. Before Hurricane Andrew, some public housing residents were forced to walk or hitchhike out of evacuation zones. In addition, the poor generally live in substandard housing that is often located in the most vulnerable areas.^x The homeless face even more life threatening dangers.

Children. On December 1, more than eight hundred children were still listed on the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children’s Hurricane Katrina website. Although most of these children are expected to be found with some family member, thousands of children were separated from their families during the storm and its immediate aftermath. The Louisiana Department of Families reported that more than 500 foster children were unaccounted for in the days after Katrina. Most shelters were not set up to provide for children. Although community volunteers set up ad hoc programs for them, children frequently suffered emotionally and intellectually from their experiences. Florida has been fortunate to escape a storm of this severity, but it should develop plans to meet the needs of children in such emergencies.

The elderly and disabled. The needs of the elderly and disabled are specifically noted in the state plan, but experience has shown that many elderly and disabled residents are reluctant to move to a shelter and often overestimate their ability to withstand a major storm. After Hurricane Wilma, many elders in Miami were stranded in their high-rise apartments unable to obtain help because power outages prevented the elevators from working.

Budgets. Disasters can drain the resources of all three sectors and make it more difficult to provide ongoing services. Government resources are finite, especially when there is more than one hurricane in a fiscal year. In such cases, the independent sector and business are typically asked to take on more responsibility. However, their resources are also finite, and several nonprofit organizations were forced to close their doors after the 2004 hurricane season. Many remaining non-profits also report they are facing donor fatigue. Foundations have tried to help fill the gap and have created emergency relief grants, but two severe storm seasons coupled with international disasters have strained the system.

Potential for improvement:

If there is a bright side to the 2004 and 2005 hurricane seasons, it has been a reexamination of Florida's mitigation, response, and recovery and rebuilding process.

Betty Morrow, Professor Emeritus, International Hurricane Center, FIU, has proposed one solution to improve service to the most vulnerable populations. She suggests developing a community database that reflects the extent to which highly vulnerable groups are represented in a neighborhood.^{xi} This database would include residents of group living facilities, frail elderly, physically or mentally disabled, combined households (multiple families in one home, often characteristic of recent immigrants and the poor), large concentrations of children/youth, poor households and the homeless. Such a community database would enable disaster responders to tailor their responses to the specific needs of the community and ensure that those who need the most help would receive it.

Foundations are being encouraged to use their purchasing power, influence and leadership to "think out of the box" and develop different approaches for communities.^{xii} Foundations may be in the best position to act as advocates for intelligent rebuilding that focuses on partnerships, local control, safety and more equitable distribution of resources. Advocates for this approach believe that foundation and advocacy groups are needed to counter rebuilding projects that bring in money but often devastate sustainable communities.

Every business, nonprofit, foundation and civic association would be wise to use the time before the 2006 season to develop an emergency response plan, but many smaller organizations may need assistance in this effort. The Gulf Coast study found that collaborative response plans are an important tool for interrelated organizations. A creative approach is essential for assisting organizations within the state, not only to develop a plan, but also to train employees and clients about the plan.

The business sector can also be more effectively integrated in emergency management. Although research on the consequences of natural disasters for the business sector is limited, business leaders clearly have a key role to play in all phases of hurricane preparation, response and recovery. Business associations may also assist their members and the public through the development of coordinated plans and public information systems. For example, the Florida Bar Association has prepared a disaster response plan for use by law offices, provided consumer information on available services, court closings and ethical practices after the 2004 and 2005 hurricane seasons, and has coordinated fundraising and legal assistance.

Many other suggestions for collaboration and improvement are possible, and we hope that this Institute will develop creative recommendations that will improve Florida's preparation for and response to hurricanes in the future.

ⁱ "About FEMA" (n.d.) Retrieved October 23, 2005, from <http://fema.gov/about/history.shtml>.

ⁱⁱ Rainey, Eve. n.d. Emergency Management Planning. Presented to the Florida League of Cities.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Florida Division of Emergency Management. The State of Florida Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan 2004. .

^v Schneider, Sandra K. (1992) Governmental Response to Disasters: The Conflict Between Bureaucratic Procedures and Emergent Norms. Public Administration Review, Vol. 52, No. 2, 135 – 145.

^{vi} Kapucu, Naim and Sprouse, Sarah. Better Community Organizing, Better Public Emergency Preparedness: Evidence from Florida Counties. Manuscript submitted for publication.

^{vii} Ibid, page 30

^{viii} Gulf Coast Community Foundation of Venice. Lessons Learned: A Review of Our Regional Disaster Response. Final Report. February 2005. Retrieved March 15, 2005 from <http://www.gulfcoastcf.org/>.

^{ix} Governor Bush and Lt. Governor Jennings Announce New Funding Recommendations for Hurricane Preparedness, Response and Recovery. January 6, 2006. Retrieved January 7, 2006 from <http://www.floridadisaster.org/eoc/>.

^x Morrow, Betty Hearn. (1999) Identifying and Mapping Community Vulnerability. Disasters, Vol. 23, Issue 1, 1 – 18.

^{xi} Ibid, p. 8.

^{xii} Mayer, Steven E. After the Flood: Some “Out of the Box” Options for Foundations. Presented at the Southeastern Council on Foundations on October 1, 2004.