

Domestic Preparedness Journal

Community Engagement

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Take Domestic Preparedness



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Business Office: 313 E Anderson Lane, Suite 300 Austin, Texas 78752

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Community Engagement – Strength in Numbers

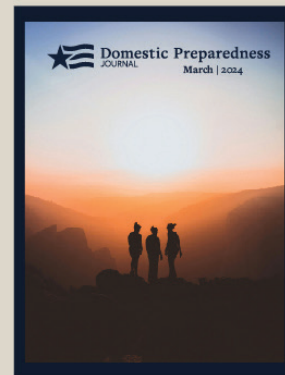
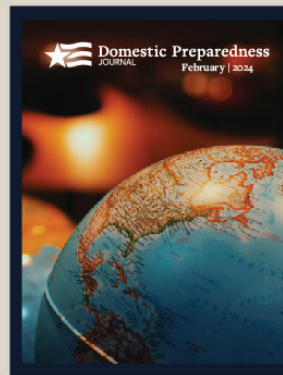
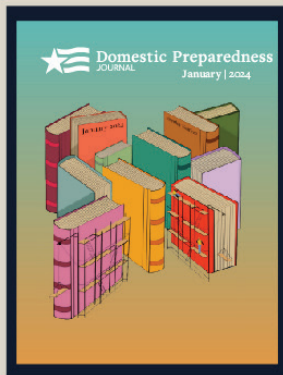
By Catherine L. Feinman

Return on investment (ROI) is a common metric for evaluating investment profitability. Although the term often refers to financial activities, it can also apply to human interactions, which can be much more profitable. When community leaders in emergency preparedness, response, and recovery invest in engagements with community members, the ROI can be measured in lives, properties, and money saved:

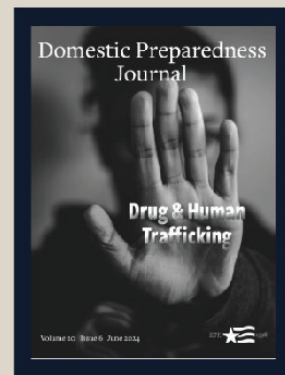
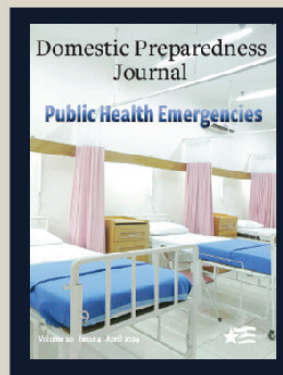
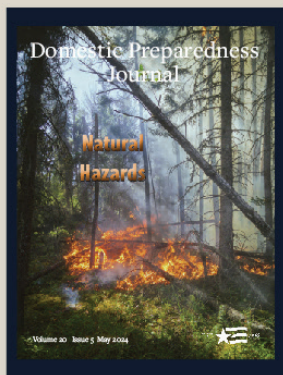
- Teaching children how to prepare for disasters makes them less vulnerable to many threats.
- Listening to and working with people with disabilities ensures that resources are allocated where they are needed most, not where others assume they will be useful.
- Leveraging resources and information from the community reduces costs and time after a disaster.
- Identifying and bridging gaps within the community improves access to critical medical and other supplies that can be scarce when demand is high.
- Bringing all community stakeholders to the table for planning and exercises addresses unmet needs that could otherwise go unnoticed.
- Building awareness of new and emerging threats protects vulnerable people from devastating consequences.

The authors in this August edition of the *Domestic Preparedness Journal* address all these benefits and much more. Community engagement is not simply about building relationships. The ROI of these interactions provide a foundation to strengthen the entire community against known and not-yet-known threats.

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Lessons in Social Media – Preparing Kids and Community Leaders for Disasters

By Patricia Frost and Michael Prasad

Crisis communications can – and should – occur in all phases of emergency management. These messages provide protective and preventative benefits for individuals and families against the adverse effects of any threats and hazards. However, they can also convey the whole community’s support through government leaders. [COVID-19](#) demonstrated these benefits globally: effective risk communications for [protective and preventative behaviors](#) can reduce response missions and save lives.

Addressing Children’s Needs in a Disaster

In [emergency preparedness](#), addressing children’s needs continues to be a struggle more than a decade after the 2010 publication of the [National Commission on Children and Disasters Report](#). Social media has become an important vehicle for the [National Pediatric Disaster Coalition](#), whose preparedness messages exclusively address the concerns for children in disasters. Leveraging social media

influencers and platforms for community outreach is a crucial strategy to raise awareness and help address the [unique needs of children](#) in disaster planning and response. Crisis communicators can validate their social media outreach efforts by using the hashtag #Prep4TheKids.

There is evidence of successful social media campaigns by governmental and non-governmental organizations affecting [positive social reengineering](#) by changing attitudes and behaviors for the benefit of all. One example is the [U.S. National Park Service posts](#) on X. However, crisis communications should follow standards and can be [templated in advance](#). Following the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Crisis & Emergency Risk Communication (CERC) model, [crisis messages](#) should “Build trust and credibility by expressing empathy and caring, competence and expertise, honesty and openness, and commitment and dedication.”

The National Pediatric Disaster Coalition’s social media posts focus on the [National Response Framework’s](#) 15 Emergency Support Functions (ESFs) with the goals of:

- Increasing public awareness of the essential need to include children (as individuals, families, and communities) on an all-threat, all-hazard basis and how emergencies and disasters can adversely impact children differently than adults;
- Generating inquiries and modifications to planning for specific ESF leads based on impacts on children; and
- Promoting a dialogue across a network of community partners to advance information sharing across disciplines to address the needs of children in disaster.

For some, this advocacy campaign may be “aha” moments, with topics and concepts like “[what you do not know, you do not know.](#)” By socializing these campaigns, the knowledge can be shared and amplified for better community resilience.

Categorizing Needs Based on ESFs

The National Pediatric Disaster Coalition plans to launch its new social media campaign in August 2024. Following are examples of information the coalition intends to include in each ESF category.

ESF 1 – Transportation: Safe transport, available car seats, and buses for children with disabilities, as well as access and functional needs, help ensure swift evacuation during emergencies. While many school districts have buses and safe transportation for children who utilize wheelchairs, these assets may not



Fig. 1. One example of a National Pediatric Disaster Coalition social media post. Visit their website for the full catalog of [Social Media Shareables: Emergency Support Functions and Children](#) (Source: National Pediatric Disaster Coalition, used with permission).

already be in that community’s emergency operations plan.

ESF2 – Communications: Include educational institutions, daycare, and children’s hospitals as partners who need telecommunications capabilities and incident intelligence.

Although there is a [federal requirement](#) for childcare settings to have a disaster plan in the United States, each state is responsible for ensuring that childcare providers comply with these requirements. Messaging campaigns emphasizing the importance of communicating with caregivers and their children are needed to bridge these gaps.

ESF 3 – Public Works and Engineering: Shelters, educational institutions, and childcare facilities should be considered essential and critical infrastructure. Restoring the capabilities of a community’s educational and childcare

facilities should be a high priority. Identifying and incorporating these [key resource sites](#) into emergency plans as part of the deliberative planning process are necessary.

ESF 4–Firefighting: Fire prevention education can start as early as one year of age. Socialize toddlers by planning a visit to the local fire department. Read books about firefighters and visit the [NFPA Sparky](#) website, which has activities for all ages. Engaging fire departments in disaster preparedness is a natural evolution of their current fire safety programming, which began in the 1970s. Well-prepared children who know what to do are [more resilient](#) and better equipped to help others and [save lives](#).

ESF 5 – Information and Planning: Include pediatric assessments in all-hazards incident preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation deliberative planning. Knowing the community demographics and social determinants is essential to understanding the risks to vulnerable populations. Using tools such as the [Pediatric Hazard Vulnerability Analysis and the Regional Metrics Score Card](#) developed by [Region V for Kids](#) Pediatric Disaster Center of Excellence ensures children are included in the all-hazards planning process.

ESF 6 – Mass Care, Emergency Assistance, Housing, Human Services: Ensure children arriving at shelters have age-appropriate food, water, clothing, shelter, and sanitation. Children require age-appropriate accommodation to address their basic needs and provide for their well-being. For example, norovirus is a [common problem](#) in congregate settings that are overcrowded, placing children at high risk of infection and hospitalization.

ESF 7 – Logistics: Children need critical supplies and services delivered to disaster support sites sooner than most adults. According to the 2023 National Preparedness [Survey](#), only 48% of the respondents had taken steps to prepare adequate supplies to shelter in place, much less if they were required to evacuate. Essential items like diapers, infant/toddler food and feeding support items, clothing, and portable cribs need to be readily available.

ESF 8 – Public Health and Medical: Triage and treatment protocols for children, especially unaccompanied minors, are vastly different than for adults. Access to care for children is highly variable across the U.S. Children’s hospitals with the highest capability to treat children represent less than 5% of all hospitals in the U.S. and may require seriously ill children to be moved great distances in response to a mass casualty incident. During the [2023 Tripledemic](#), some states implemented [pediatric medical operating coordination centers](#) to allocate pediatric beds to children with the highest need.

ESF 9 – Search and Rescue: Ensure children’s swift and safe rescue during emergencies, understanding they may be fearful, hide, or not cooperate with rescuers. Disasters frighten young children who may not understand what is happening around them. Children with behavioral disorders and disabilities are particularly at risk. For example, children with [Autism Spectrum Disorder](#) sometimes hide in response to stimuli around them and may not recognize responders are there to help.

ESF 10 – Oil and Hazardous Response: Ensure children’s safety by addressing environmental hazards caused by floods, wildfires, and other emergencies. All children are at a higher

risk of harm from environmental hazards associated with wildfire, floods, and toxins. Their smaller airways, faster breathing rates, and longer periods of outdoor activity increase their risk and exposure. Children with pre-existing health conditions are at even higher risk.

ESF 11 – Agriculture and Natural Resources: Ensuring children have healthy meals during emergencies through secured agricultural resources is a life safety priority. Children not only require access to age-appropriate foods but suffer nutritional harm when school-based meal programs are disrupted. During COVID-19, communities mobilized logistics to meet the challenge of getting nutritious meals to children who needed them most.

ESF 12 – Energy: Ensuring a reliable energy supply during emergencies helps keep children safe, warm, and connected to their families. Schools, childcare, and healthcare settings cannot return to normal operations without power. Plans to restore power and fuel delivery for generators should prioritize schools and childcare settings. Mechanisms to acquire portable batteries and generators should be part of community access and functional needs preparedness programs for technology-dependent children.

ESF 13 – Public Safety and Security: Create safe and secure spaces for children from the threats of trafficking and abuse and prevent separation during emergencies. In the chaos of a disaster, children can become separated, lost, victimized, or trafficked during the event. For example, during Katrina, some 5,000 children were separated from loved ones, requiring a massive response from the National Center for Missing and

Exploited Children in collaboration with law enforcement for family reunification.

ESF 14 – Cross-Sector Business and Infrastructure: Ensuring the rapid restoration of businesses and critical infrastructure means children and their families can move toward “normalcy” faster after emergencies. Reopening schools after a disaster is a key indicator of community recovery. The routine of going back to school can support the well-being of children and their families. It represents the ability of children to get school meals and for parents, teachers, and school workforce to return to a familiar routine.

ESF 15 – External Affairs: Schools, childcare, and families of children with disabilities have clear guidance in their daily languages to respond to community alerts. Communication in times of crisis should be “plain language” and simple enough for children to understand how to stay safe and get help quickly in languages their families use. One documentary film found that over 11 million children act as translators for their families and may be the only family members to help other members navigate disaster alerts and messages.

Inspiring Communities Through Social Media

The National Pediatric Disaster Coalition has learned that social media provides a unique environment to inspire individuals. Multidisciplinary public-private organizations can create inclusive preparedness messaging designed to address the needs of children in disaster by:

- Growing a community of social media information-sharing partner organizations and influencers

who include images of children in preparedness posts, provide translated versions, and offer links to just-in-time operational resources to be “reshared” by their followers;

- Laying a foundation for college and university communications majors to co-opt these messages as public service announcement creation projects and refine and revise for everyone’s benefit; and

Encouraging stakeholders to access the evidence-based resources of the [Pediatric Pandemic Network](#) and [Pediatric Disaster Centers of Excellence](#).

Incorporating the needs of children into disaster preparedness and response plans is not just a necessity. It is a [moral imperative](#) for [professional emergency managers](#) and public safety personnel. Social media offers a powerful platform to raise awareness, educate the community, and ensure that children’s needs are front and center in emergency planning. By leveraging social media effectively, practitioners can build a more resilient community where every child is safe and supported in the face of disaster. Consider connecting and engaging with the [National Pediatric Disaster Coalition’s social media](#) and create community outreach campaigns that #Prep4TheKids.



Patricia Frost, RN, PHN, MS, PNP, is vice chair of the National Pediatric Disaster Coalition. She is a subject matter expert in pediatric disaster emergency operations and management. Ms. Frost has over three decades of experience as a pediatric clinical, hospital, and prehospital public health and ambulatory care professional and educator at Children’s Hospital at Stanford. As a former county emergency medical services (EMS) director for Contra Costa County Emergency Medical Services in California, she held responsibilities for countywide disaster medical health response. Ms. Frost’s credentials include being an adjunct faculty for the [TEEX National Pediatric Disaster Response and Preparedness Program](#), a consultant for the [Region V for Kids Pediatric Disaster Consortium for Disaster Response](#), and a consultant for the [Pediatric Pandemic Network](#). She is a member of the American

Academy of Pediatrics Council on Children and Disasters and sits on several national steering committees associated with the [EMS for Children](#) programs. Views expressed do not necessarily represent the official position of any of these organizations.



Michael Prasad is a Certified Emergency Manager®, a senior research analyst at Barton Dunant – Emergency Management Training and Consulting (www.bartondunant.com), and the executive director of the Center for Emergency Management Intelligence Research (www.cemir.org). Mr. Prasad recently joined the National Pediatric Disaster Coalition as a liaison advisor. He researches and writes professionally on emergency management policies and procedures from a pracademic perspective. His first book, “Emergency Management Threats and Hazards: Water,” is scheduled for publication by Taylor & Francis/CRC Press in September 2024 and includes these aspects for adverse impacts on children from disasters. He holds a Bachelor of Business Administration degree from Ohio University and a Master of Arts in emergency and disaster management from American Public University. Views expressed do not necessarily represent the official position of any of these organizations.



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Return on Investments in Public Engagement

By June Isaacson Kailes

Public engagement and participation involve community members in problem-solving, decision-making, and policy development. Partnerships provide actionable opportunities for key stakeholders to participate in decisions that affect their communities. In the emergency context, these partnerships concentrate on organized efforts and activities to prepare for, respond to, recover from, and mitigate the effects of disasters or emergencies. Result-centered community partner engagement approaches can help protect people from many adverse impacts of emergencies by:

- Building community partnerships for response and recovery;
- Seeking and providing feedback;
- Offering training, drills, and exercises; and
- Applying lessons.

Advisory groups – members, sponsors, or those who staff or are considering joining them – should use this content for self-reflection and self-accountability. This article offers ideas regarding how to:

- Strengthen and operationalize tasks mutually beneficial to the government and community partners;

- Understand how to use actionable basics, including clarity regarding objectives, trust, transparency, feedback, support roles, just-in-time training, sustaining efforts, measuring success; and
- Provide additional resources.

Like any “use by” label or operating system update on a mobile phone, agencies and organizations must keep learning because knowledge is perishable. New information, laws, technologies, values, products, and services can limit the shelf life of expertise. However, lifelong learners understand that new lessons are constantly evolving and that what they know and do is a work in progress. Here are seven common beliefs and practices that can be modernized to increase result-centered engagement.

1. Return on Investment

For various reasons, some people believe there is little return on investment when involving community partners. Perhaps it seems like too much work or that the community partners get in the way of a government-centric approach or raise legal liabilities. This calls for new beliefs and practices.

Impact focused on public engagement with community partners moves beyond

checking the box “Yes, we have an advisory committee.” Large disaster disruptions can overwhelm affected governments as they cope with constrained resources and strive to meet emergency services challenges. When adequately prepared, community partners with critical planning, response, and recovery capacity roles can reach and help more people than the government alone to prevent deaths and injuries.

Community partners should establish measurable goals and effective efforts to identify and close gaps between known emergency preparedness and response needs and capabilities. Taking responsibility for increasing capacities, competencies, and ongoing improvement are team activities, not those of a single department.

Planning partners must consider complex demographic shifts to include and represent the perspectives of aging, culturally and linguistically diverse populations. Doing so can help create policies, programs, and response capacity that include and benefit even the most disproportionately impacted groups and communities. For example, in the context of privilege and ableism, avoid implicit disability biases and inaccurate assumptions, such as everyone having stable internet connections, money to buy emergency supplies, a working vehicle, and the ability to walk, run, see, hear, speak, remember, and understand.

To strengthen mutual trust, transparent and honest assessments of weaknesses, strengths, and challenges are vital by supporting what needs to be said rather than what emergency managers want to hear. Advantages and payoffs from community partnerships include:

- Planning with people, not for people. Planning for the known needs of disaster-impacted people with disabilities means partners serving in specific and critical planning,

response, and recovery capacity roles that decrease harm by protecting their health, safety, and independence during and after disasters and providing problem-solving, assistance, and resources.

- Strengthening compliance with civil rights laws by operationalizing physical, equipment, programmatic, and communication access.
- Developing processes, procedures, protocols, policies, and training with community partners, including disability partners (i.e., disability-led organizations and others with lived disability experience and knowledge related to disability, access, and functional needs issues).

Partnership models include disability emergency coordinating meetings consisting of cooperation, collaboration, communication, coordination, and problem-solving tasks to address unmet needs. (e.g., replacing left-behind, lost, or damaged consumable medical supplies and equipment such as wheelchairs, canes, walkers, shower chairs, hearing aids, food, medications, supplies, backup power, wheelchair-accessible transportation, understandable and usable communication, etc.). Following are a few examples of response and recovery coordination meetings put into practice:

- In 2007, Access to Readiness Coalition, The California Foundation for Independent Living Centers, and The Center for Disability Issues and the Health Professions at Western University of Health Sciences partnered to create an after-action report for the [California wildfires](#).
- Starting in 2017, [The Partnership for Inclusive Disaster Strategies](#) led

weekly national stakeholder calls after Hurricane Harvey (Houston).

- In 2018 during and after Hurricane Florence, disability partners met in [North Carolina](#).
- Since March 2019, the [Florida Statewide Independent Living Council](#) has gathered the Centers for Independent Living (CILs) for monthly and long-term planning meetings and conducts daily meetings during major disasters such as Ian 2022 and Idalia 2023.
- On February 28, 2020, [The Partnership](#) began hosting a daily COVID-19 disability rights and disasters call.
- In 2023, the disabilities-led [Able South Carolina](#) and [South Carolina's Centers for Independent Living](#) led monthly meetings and daily meetings during major disasters such as Hurricane Idalia.
- On August 8, 2023, launched the Maui, [Hawaii Wildfire Disability Task Force](#).

2. Community Partners

Community partners are not limited to Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD), which have emergency services as their primary mission. This reliance excludes many community connection helper networks that can serve critical supporting roles. Community partners refer to a broad group of potential partners, including:

- Businesses and business emergency operations councils often comprise businesses that conduct continuity planning and form partnerships with other businesses to support preparing for, responding to, and mitigating emergency risks;

- Health entities such as community clinics, health care coalitions, home health agencies, infusion centers, pharmacy services (including mail-order plans), and vendors of consumable medical supplies, oxygen, durable medical equipment, pharmacy services;
- Big box stores;
- Logistics companies such as United Parcel Service (UPS), United States Postal Service, Federal Express (FedEx), Amazon, airdrop, and drone delivery;
- Private transit providers such as Uber, Lyft, rental car and airport shuttles, taxi services, and vehicles owned by community-based organizations;
- Personal assistance providers or caregivers (public and private);
- Lodging and housing providers such as Airbnbs, hotels, motels, building managers, and realtors;
- Utilities, including power and water;
- Community-based organizations focused on aging, disability, faith-based groups, family services, Meals on Wheels, schools (preschool, K-12, colleges, and universities), Cajun Navy, Trach-Mamas, CrowdSource Rescue, Crisis clean-up; and
- Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster.

Developing, maintaining, and sustaining the necessary emergency preparedness, response, and recovery capabilities require leadership and the coordinated efforts of partners from first responder disciplines, all levels of government, and nongovernmental entities. Going to community meetings can help other planners and responders discuss recruiting issues with community partners.

3. Working Sessions and Feedback

The old practice of conducting all working sessions through committees that convene in person monthly or quarterly is no longer practical. Neither are the one-way feedback methods for commenting on and reviewing the emergency operation plan (EOP), training content, documents, policies, etc., with minimal or no opportunities for discussion.

To maximize constructive feedback, use solution-based processes that ask challenging questions to identify service gaps and possible fixes. Sometimes, this can be accomplished through spontaneous meet-ups, texts, phone calls, emails, coffee lines, hallways, back of meeting rooms, receptions, etc. More often, it is with meetings tailored to the work that needs to be accomplished (email, small workgroups, virtual meetings, hybrid meetings). A combination of in-person and remote participation (i.e., hybrid or crowdsourcing) enables communication using virtual tools such as Zoom and Teams, which include those who have difficulty or cannot participate in person.

Crowdsourcing offers online opportunities to address specific challenges, solve problems, generate ideas, accomplish tasks, and provide subsets of members with tailored discussion forums. Crowdsourcing advantages include tapping into the collective wisdom and creativity of the experts and others with unique skills and perspectives to produce ideas and solutions, complete micro-tasks, conduct research, and minimize time-consuming commutes. With access to online materials via password, 24/7 access is available to minutes, documents, slide decks, upcoming events, etc.

Completing the feedback loop and building an accountability process is critical. Items that take significant time should stay on the agenda under “follow-up needed” or

“pending items” until the issue is addressed. Building and sustaining community partnerships takes teamwork and multiple working sessions. This commitment means dedicating resources, staff, and backup staff, creating agreements, exercising and testing the details, and improving practices by applying new lessons.

4. Roles of Community Partners

It is important to overcome the no-additional-help-is-needed mentality of a government-centric approach to catastrophic disaster management and services. Building broad community partnerships involves developing and strengthening critical emergency capabilities and competencies, using lived and work experience skill sets, and delivering services rooted in understanding the details, diversity, nuances, and complexity of living with a disability. Given the known disaster resource constraints, these partnerships are “not nice to do, but a must-do.” The core value is recognizing that community partners can force multiply and amplify emergency management reach.

Community partnerships start with partners developing or having up-to-date continuity of operation plans (COOP). Partners must conduct an internal accurate assessment to determine if and what they can offer given their skills, capacities, and capabilities (staff, budgets, etc.). Examples of community partner roles include:

- *Messaging* – As a force multiplier, community partners can amplify messages, facilitate time-sensitive information dissemination to diverse communities, and continually test and improve their distribution methods. Existing influence and connections help reach disparate populations in complex media

environments through customized distribution, multiple languages, and culturally appropriate methods. For example, some organizations that support people with intellectual disability are skilled at providing and reinforcing easy-to-understand messages using plain language, pictures, and repetition.

- *Life-safety or wellness checks* – Also known as welfare checks or safe-and-well checks, these checks consist of a phone call, text, email, or in-person visit to make sure individuals are safe and, when indicated, determine if they have any needs related to sheltering in place or evacuating. For the people these wellness checks may support, automated check-in systems can reach people through calls, texts, or emails and ask people to respond by indicating they are “ok” or “need help.” If there is no response, staff can reach out first to pre-identified higher-risk people, including those who are:
 - Geographically isolated;
 - Lack help from relatives, friends, and neighbors;
 - Cannot use, understand, or be reached by alert and notification systems; or
 - Transportation-dependent.
- *Individual preparedness plans* – Tasks to develop detailed emergency plans require time, skill, and often multiple meetings, which include:
 - Helping people let go of denial and address scary, disturbing, and uncomfortable issues;
 - Addressing details needed to shelter in place or evacuate;
 - Labeling equipment with name, phone numbers, email address;
 - Developing a helper list to identify, communicate with, and maintain support teams and support networks of people who agree to help when needed and check on each other in an emergency;
 - Planning for power outages;
 - Developing a communications plan to communicate with helpers in an emergency via landline phone, cell phone, text, email, or app;
 - Signing up for local alerts and notifications that provide weather conditions and emergency information; and
 - Collecting critical documents (paper and digital copies for a “grab and go” bag) that include:
 - Helper contacts entered in cell phones and other devices;
 - Hard copies of phone numbers, addresses, etc. when phone and digital resources are not available;
 - List of essential equipment, serial numbers, date of delivery, and payers;
 - Health insurance cards; and

- Medication lists and prescriptions
- Other roles can include:
 - Evacuation assistance from structures;
 - Transportation to and from affected areas;
 - Personal assistant services (also called attendants and caregivers) who help with dressing, eating, grooming, toileting, transferring, shopping, or communicating;
 - Assistance to divert and transition people from institutions;
 - Sign language interpreting;
 - Communication Access Real-Time Translation (CART);
 - Mucking and gutting;
 - Debris removal from accessible paths; and
 - Telehealth services.

5. Agreements and Contracts

Sometimes there is a false expectation that all community partners will volunteer their time. The term “charitable organization” is misleading. A nonprofit tax status does not mean volunteers do all the work. Community-based organizations have contractual, financial, payroll, operating expenses, compliance, and deliverable obligations. Taking on emergency-related tasks means covering staff salaries, overtime, travel, etc., which is sometimes impossible without additional funding. Agreements must include the who, what, where, when, why, and how of reimbursement details in advance.

Such details should include: mandatory participation in planning, drills, exercises, hot washes, and after-action reports.

Here are two examples of existing contracts with investor-owned utilities. In California, [211 centers](#) and [Disability Disaster Access and Resources](#), a program of the California Foundation for Independent Living Centers, have contracts to help people with access and functional needs, who live in high-fire-risk areas prepare for and cope with power outages. These services may offer help with developing individual emergency power plans, access to loaner backup battery systems, short-term housing support, accessible transportation, and home meal delivery.

6. Training

Old beliefs and practices that can hinder training efforts for community partners include in-person requirements, self-study courses, and hard-to-use training materials. In-person training can limit broad participation due to available space or minimal inclusion beyond government employees. Online self-study courses can seem vague, with unapplied theories for those lacking experience. Training notebooks, student manuals, and slide decks can be large and difficult to use for all partners.

Training teams and their managers using consistent training content is helpful for navigating competing priorities, heavy workloads, and a lack of manager support to convert lessons observed into practice and improve outcomes when identifying and applying new tactics and improving performance. Integrating content from government and community partners increases



an understanding of different core values, cultural issues, specific terms, and jargon.

Just-in-time training can make lessons relevant, concrete, clear, and immediately applicable to discussions, plan development, and agreements. Drills and exercises that include community partners test and stress the system and promote stronger learning and greater impact through applied practice. When followed by honest assessments through hot washes and after-action reports, this training can result in changes in practice and policy.

Actionable, practical, tactical, and deployable steps through checklists, field operation guides, and job aides can sustain and reinforce competencies. Specific content easily accessed by the internet and mobile devices offers just-in-time opportunities for quick review when deployed. This tactic prevents deployed individuals from remembering, untangling, and connecting content from threads of information for critical roles from plans, processes, procedures, protocols, policies, and training notes.

7. Measuring Success

Traditional evaluation methods tend to focus on the *process* outputs and outcomes. Training evaluations, for instance, are often limited to feedback on the content and instructors coupled with the numerical statistics related to meetings held, speakers, training delivered, students in classes, and students who pass pre- and post-training tests.

A new way of thinking is to evaluate the *impacts* of those outputs and outcomes to help measure recovery as well as short- and long-term resiliency. In this discussion, outputs are

*Being at the table
is not enough.*

*Don't merely abide; lesser
deeds will not turn the tide.*

*Avoid the vague,
puffy, and fluffy.*

*Craft the actionable
and the practical.*

*Build partnership
capability and expand
capacity wide, let
impact be your guide.*

*Never settling for less,
we strive for the best
for ourselves and others
on this lifelong quest.*

–June Kailes (2024)

things produced and activities that support the desired results. Outcomes are quantitative, measurable short-term effects and the results of outputs. The impacts are the broader, longer-term effects of the results. Following are a few examples:

- For just-in-time training, the outputs are the training developed and offered. The outcomes are the number of trainings delivered and the number of people completing the training. The impacts are easy-to-access short

training rated as helpful and usable and reinforce the roles and responsibilities of deployed individuals.

- Regarding outputs of drills and exercises, the outcomes are the number of community partners participating, the number of participants honestly assessing drills and exercises in hot washes and after-action reports, and the number of emergency responses. Outcomes are also the number of lessons from these assessments applied through new or revised processes, procedures, protocols, policies, and training. The impact is when deployed partners apply roles and responsibilities in the field.
- For life-safety check interventions, the output is conducting the checks. The outcomes are the number of people who, as a result of these checks, receive needed food, water, supplies, or evacuation. The impact is that the interventions protect people's health, safety, and independence.
- For individual emergency plans, the outputs are people who get help developing plans. The outcomes are the number of people with completed plans. The impact is that

the implemented plans result in people being able to protect their health, safety, and independence.

The seven old beliefs and practices covered above must be re-evaluated and modernized using newer ones. As former Director of Homeland Security and Justice Issues [William O. Jenkins Jr.](#) testified in 2007, these tasks require continuing commitment and weighing “trade-offs because circumstances change, and we will never have the funds to do everything we might like to do.” Operationalizing teamwork with community partners fosters improved problem-solving and solutions to create, deliver, embed, and sustain real impacts, which are the objectives’ long-term goals and achievements.

Embedding competencies, capabilities, and capacities into multiple systems is iterative. This process involves identifying areas needing attention, setting priorities, evaluating progress, ongoing learning, continually improving, and sustaining the effort over many years. Those responsible for creating the sparks, the outputs, and the outcomes often do not get to experience sitting by the fire and enjoying the impacts.



June Kailes, a disability policy consultant (jik.com), has over four decades of experience as a writer, trainer, researcher, policy analyst, subject matter expert, mentor, and advocate. June focuses on building disability practice competencies and health care and emergency management capabilities. She uses actionable details, the “how, who, what, where, when, and why,” to operationalize the specificity needed to include people with disabilities and others with access and functional needs. June’s work converts laws, regulations, and guidance into tangible building blocks, tools, and procedures that close service gaps, prevent civil rights violations, and deliver inclusive, equally effective services.



Repairs at Paul M. Pearson Gardens housing community on St. Thomas after Hurricanes Irma and Maria in September 2017
(Source: [FEMA](#)/Eric Adams).

Realizing the Power of Community in Disaster Recovery

By Aaron Clark-Ginsberg

Decades of disaster research and practice highlight the community's power across [all parts](#) of disaster management. Yet, this power often remains unrealized and untapped in practice. As discussed below, understanding and engaging with communities and their needs, improving resource allocation, and measuring results can better leverage the community's power and promote successful disaster management preparation, responses, and outcomes.

After a disaster, households and communities [almost always come together](#) to support each other to rebuild, reconstruct, and reestablish their lives. Indeed, so much of recovery is in the hands of [households](#) and [communities](#) that researchers have repeatedly identified them, rather than governments, as the primary agents driving recovery.

Government policy recognizes this community power. At the federal level, the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) [Whole Community](#) approach frames disaster management as everyone's

responsibility and describes how government agencies should support others in achieving resilience. The FEMA approach includes the following tools and frameworks:

- [Community Engagement Toolkit](#),
- [Community Recovery Management Toolkit](#), and
- [Community Assistance Recovery Support Function](#).

At state, local, tribal, and territorial levels, different agencies work with communities in various ways. Some have robust networks of volunteers they can utilize after disasters. A good example is Portland's Bureau of Emergency Management's [Neighborhood Emergency Teams](#) program. Others focus on a specific facet inhibiting the community's ability to address crisis. [The City of Boston](#), for instance, has four primary pathways for improving the city's resilience to hazards.

Some of the reasons why disaster management rarely fully utilizes the community's potential, include:

- The need to make recovery-related decisions rapidly in ways that can be hard to weigh in on;
- The difficulties faced by non-experts in navigating complex and esoteric recovery bureaucracies; and
- Communities that are so busy focusing on their immediate survival needs that they do not have the capacity to engage in broader recovery processes.

Regardless of the reasons, the result is that many communities are left behind in the recovery process. Although engaging with communities can be complex, communities are best positioned to drive effective recovery processes. Several strategies can be deployed to better realize the power of community in recovery.

Understand Community Dynamics

No two communities are the same. Each community has unique vulnerabilities, capacities, and needs, and each has its own leaders, areas of cooperation, and areas of disagreement. Understanding how communities work together is a critical first step in any recovery process, as it can avoid painful missteps and build on strengths. Many tools are available to help develop an understanding of community dynamics – including participatory rural appraisal techniques and risk analysis guidelines. Communities know their dynamics best, so engaging with them can help identify the most promising disaster management tools.

Identify Community Needs

Communities have different needs and recovery goals in responding to disasters. Questions that can help identify these needs and goals include:

- Does a community need access to healthcare? Housing? Financial resources?
- Do they need to reestablish a sense of place and normalcy?
- What barriers are inhibiting community members from meeting their own needs?

Knowing what a community needs without talking with its members is impossible. So, capturing community perspectives can be critical.

Develop Structures for Engaging in Community Recovery Planning

Disaster recovery is a years-long and decades-long process. During this time, community needs and resources evolve. Structures should, therefore, be implemented to engage with communities early. A recovery committee of community leaders that meets regularly can facilitate engagement with those with power and insight in the community. Many other countries have established such committees – including the Maldives, Vietnam and Japan, and Sierra Leone. Regular public recovery meetings and planning at the community level should be designed to promote transparency and information sharing.

Tie Engagements to Resource Allocation to Truly Partner

It is not enough to merely consult with communities. Instead, governmental and

nongovernmental recovery resources must be allocated based on the results of community engagements. Directly tying the results of these engagements to recovery decision-making leads to action. For instance, if community members prioritize safe and affordable housing in their vision of recovery, there should be a structure in place that automatically allocates resources toward housing. If it is healthcare for older adults, that should be the funding focus.

Given the reality of post-disaster recovery funding, spending may be controlled outside of the community. If this is the case, advocacy can help lead decision-makers toward funding decisions that community members have identified as being in their own best interests. In addition, community members can secure their resources by applying for grants, seeking support from nonprofits, or establishing public-private partnerships.

Evaluate Recovery Using Community-Derived Metrics

Monitoring and evaluating progress toward disaster recovery is crucial for ensuring that recovery investments result in the targeted outcomes. Currently, recovery monitoring and evaluation is limited and does not necessarily link inputs to the most desirable community outcomes.

Stakeholders' views may differ on whether recovery has been successful. A transportation agency might consider recovery successful if roads have been rebuilt, while a local chamber of commerce might focus on the extent to which businesses have returned. Ultimately, recovery is about people and should be measured through the communities' perspectives rather than the systems they use. This means collaborating with communities to define mechanisms for accurately measuring success at the outcome level and tracking the inputs that led to success.

Understanding community dynamics, building relations with community leaders, and developing structures for engagement take time and resources. Fortunately, these strategies are also useful in general disaster management practices and can be part of broader preparedness and resilience-enhancing activities. They can also be nested into other routine processes where community engagement is already occurring – such as [economic development planning](#), [health assessments](#), and [public safety](#). As a result, these strategies can be effective even for disaster and emergency managers with limited resources.



Aaron Clark-Ginsberg is a behavioral/social scientist at RAND, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research institution.



Source: AI-generated by [IliaNesolenyi](#)/Adobe Stock

Bridging Preparedness: State Medication Reserves for Pandemics and Beyond

By Angie Im

In July 2024, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) confirmed [new human cases of H5N1](#) in Colorado, which brings the total to 13 since April. Unlike COVID-19, there are already several antiviral medications that can be used to prevent the spread of H5N1 among humans. Should H5N1 cases begin to escalate rapidly, having these existing medications is a significant advantage. However, it remains uncertain how states will perform if the need arises to quickly address a worsening situation. One strategy that could help improve the readiness of certain states is leveraging state-managed medication reserves.

A June 2024 Healthcare Ready study on [“State-Managed Medication Stockpiling”](#) showcases where the United States stands if another pandemic becomes a reality. This study revealed a lack of essential funding keeping states from most effectively developing their own reserves of critical

medications and other resources to respond to public health emergencies. The research was prompted by growing concerns over rising drug shortage events and the potential for medication reserves to safeguard patient access to these resources in the future, especially during a crisis.

Varying Levels of Available Reserves

In the past, many states have maintained state-wide medication reserves, primarily for medical countermeasures (MCM) – products or interventions used to protect against, diagnose, treat, or mitigate the effects of a public health emergency. However, the stockpiling study found that fewer than eight states currently operate state-wide medication reserves outside of MCMs. Part of the decline in recent years is being driven by the high costs associated with the management of physical inventory and clearing expired stock.

Through interviews and a search of publicly available information, [the study](#) also found that most states are not prioritizing the development of medication reserves amid competing public health needs such as restoring their healthcare workforce. When asked about current medication stockpiling practices, 10 of the 12 state agency representatives who participated in interviews for this study specifically mentioned having reserves of Tamiflu (generically known as oseltamivir, one of [several antiviral medications](#) that can be used to treat H5N1). Those representatives cited the shelf-life extension program as one of the primary policies that enabled them to have these reserves. Other medications mentioned throughout interviews included:

- Current stockpile medications supplied or subsidized by the federal government, such as Paxlovid, Jynneos, and tecovirimat;
- General antibiotics and immunizations that participants wished to expand within current stockpiles such as naloxone, saline, and penicillin; and
- Medications desired as part of future stockpiles such as ibuprofen, gastrointestinal medications, and sedatives used in surgery (e.g., propofol).

The capacity to develop, manage, and implement strategic medication reserves varies significantly across states. Differences in public health infrastructure (e.g., the availability of hospitals and the number of healthcare professionals), social determinants (e.g., economic stability,

education, and access to healthcare), and existing regional demographics (e.g., rates of chronic diseases) play essential roles in determining health outcomes after a pandemic or other major disaster. As a result, states with fewer resources and less robust infrastructure could face more significant challenges in ensuring access to necessary supplies and medications during emergencies. In today's deeply connected world, addressing these structural disparities is crucial to saving lives everywhere.

Should cases of H5N1 and potentially other flu cases rapidly increase, states with well-established processes and a stocked inventory of oseltamivir and other antivirals may be better equipped to quickly distribute medicines to areas in need or populations who are highly vulnerable to the impacts. This is especially critical in the absence of an emergency declaration, which is needed to activate most major federal disaster relief benefits to states. Programs like the Federal Emergency Management Agency's Public Assistance Program, for example, provide funding for debris removal, emergency protective measures, and the repair, replacement, or restoration of disaster-damaged facilities, which are only accessible through a federal disaster declaration.

Bolstering State Preparedness Capabilities for All Hazards

While pandemics underscore the importance of traditional MCM reserves, the study also highlighted the serious threats that supply-side drug shortages pose in maintaining patient access to life-saving treatments. Interviews from the study reveal that drug shortages pose significant challenges to

the healthcare system but are not always recognized as public health emergencies. This lack of clear classification often results in delayed responses and confusion over which state and federal entities should address these issues, hindering the allocation of state and federal resources to tackle drug shortages. In addition to [calling on Congress](#) to take more action on tackling drug shortages, state agencies and elected leaders are seeking solutions on their own for managing persistent disruptions to medication supplies.

The 2006 Pandemic and All-Hazards Preparedness Act ([PAHPA](#)) and its subsequent reauthorizations have been the backbone of U.S. preparedness, enabling states and major cities to build the infrastructure needed to respond to health emergencies. Programs like the Hospital Preparedness Program and CDC Public Health Emergency Preparedness Cooperative Agreements have expanded state and local recipients' capacity to better coordinate for rapid response to crisis events – including funding some current and past state medication reserves. However, Congress's failure to reauthorize PAHPA last September left a significant gap in the preparedness framework requiring temporary extensions in the continuing resolution. On August 1, 2024, the Senate Labor, Health and

Human Services, and Education (LHHS) Appropriations Committee released its version of the FY25 LHHS appropriations bill, moving it out of committee. Although the proposed funding levels are still subject to negotiation before this fiscal year ends on September 30, 2024, the bill continues to support grants for the development of state stockpiles and other PAHPA-related provisions through September 2025.

Simply having medications in stock is not enough. Ensuring they reach those in need promptly requires sustained public health funding and authorities that support and enable multi-jurisdictional coordination before, during, and after disasters. The support for state stockpiles outlined in the recent Senate Appropriations bill is crucial to this broader strategy. By adopting a comprehensive approach that includes robust infrastructure, clear policies, and effective communication, government and elected leaders can ensure the nation's healthcare system remains resilient and capable of managing future crises. Now is the time for federal and state collaboration to protect public health and guarantee that all Americans have access to the care they need during emergencies.



Angie Im is Healthcare Ready's associate director of Research and Policy. In this role, she oversees the organization's portfolio of research projects with government agencies and private partners. Prior to Healthcare Ready, Angie served in various roles, helping scale digital health startups in artificial intelligence and telemedicine and supporting digital transformation initiatives as a management consultant with IBM Global Consulting Services. Before her work in the private sector, Angie worked with nonprofit organizations and government agencies to design, build, and deploy information transparency tools. Angie has an M.S. in Public Policy & Management from Carnegie Mellon University and a B.S. in Public Health Sciences from the University of California, Irvine.



Source: Compilation of [Who is Danny](#)/Adobe Stock and [ymgerman](#)/Adobe Stock.

Dual-World Tabletop Exercises – Addressing Unmet Infrastructure Needs

By Charles (Chuck) L. Manto

Much can change over ten years. Revisiting content published by Domestic Preparedness in 2014 is a good place to start evaluating the progress made – or not made – in protecting the U.S. critical infrastructure from cyber and electromagnetic threats. With this information as a backdrop, more progress can be made through “dual-world” tabletop exercises (TTXs). This is a proposed approach to a TTX, where the same scenario is addressed by a group using the resources they actually have alongside another group, a near clone of the first, that has additional resources the first group does not have. For example, one group uses existing resources while the other receives a handful of critical community resources that enable local energy systems to operate in island mode. In this way, the outcomes of the two groups can be compared, and the benefits of the additional preparedness resources can be better understood.

High-impact threat scenarios were covered by Domestic Preparedness on September 10, 2014, with the publication of “[Solar Storm Near Miss Threats to Lifeline](#)

[Infrastructure](#).” That article highlighted critical infrastructure threats ranging from electromagnetic pulses (EMPs) to cyberattacks. These topics were further expanded with contributions from other authors in two special issues entitled “[Sustainability](#)” on September 24, 2014, and “[Blackout](#)” on November 25, 2014. The November issue featured the article “[Electromagnetic Pulse Triage & Recovery](#),” which discussed cost-effective EMP protection, including a four-tiered civilian infrastructure rating system modeled after the Uptime Institute’s resiliency model for data centers. In the same issue, the article “[Em-Powering Communities to Prepare](#)” delved into the vulnerabilities of cell phones, the Global Positioning System, and other electronic “lifelines” reliant on power grids.

One advantage of using more extensive impacts, such as a widespread and long-term blackout for the scenarios, is that the outcomes can help procure key infrastructure improvements that assist in other high-impact threat scenarios. The benefit of being well prepared in

advance provides what Dr. Judith Rodin called in her 2014 book *The Resilience Dividend*. By preparing for one significant problem or disaster, communities not only are better prepared for it but also for others they could not foresee. Three such high-impact scenarios – cyber-intrusion, catastrophic solar storm, and high-altitude electromagnetic pulse (EMP) attack – were the subject of a 2015 TTX resource book, *Triple Threat Power Grid Exercise*, which was produced by the EMP Special Interest Group TTX Planning Team and edited by Catherine Feinman, Mary Lasky, and Charles Manto. A resource that adds coordinated physical attacks and pandemics to the list is the 2017 *Resilient Hospitals Handbook* by Charles Manto, Earl Motzer, Ph.D., and James Terbush, M.D. These resources have been used in preparation for the dual-track TTX described in this article.

Current and Emerging Threats

Since those articles and other resources were published, the threats to the nation’s infrastructure have grown. The Department of Energy’s National Renewable Energy Laboratory’s November 2020 report, “[Research Roadmap on Grid-Forming Inverters](#),” indicated that large solar and wind farms are introducing intermittent power sources into the regional grids that are designed for steady and synchronous power sources. These asynchronous sources inadvertently create electromagnetic transients capable of causing extensive and long-term power outages, akin to accidental electromagnetic attacks on infrastructure (see the report’s sections 3.4-3). It is as if the grid is beginning to create accidental electromagnetic attacks on itself and its customers’ infrastructure. After a subsequent request for a proposal based on this report, the Department of Energy tasked the National Renewable Energy Laboratory to

investigate this issue over five years due to uncertainty about preventing these accidental electromagnetic attacks.

In addition to electromagnetic threats from extreme space weather and human-caused intentional electromagnetic interference – ranging from small microwave weapons to high-altitude EMPs from nuclear weapons – communities now face accidental threats posed by the power grids. Despite some progress, efforts over the past decade to mitigate these threats have largely fallen short, leaving lifeline infrastructures inadequately protected.

Positive Developments

On the positive side, a few regional power grid companies have established electromagnetic-protected control centers, and some use neutral [ground blockers](#) to protect vulnerable transformers. In addition, some utility companies are developing emergency communication systems that are less vulnerable to EMPs. When traditional networks fail, these systems will be crucial for communication and coordination.

[Joint Base San Antonio](#), along with its utilities, hospital, and emergency management community, have initiated an electromagnetic defense initiative that includes electromagnetic hardening of the base’s power lines to the local utility’s power generation station and the development of more resilient broadband communications. This base and its community actively participate in conferences with organizations such as InfraGard’s National Disaster Resilience Council and the Electric Infrastructure Security Council, fostering increased nationwide awareness of these issues.

Department of Defense energy programs, like the [SPIDERS](#) program (Smart

Power Infrastructure Demonstration for Energy Reliability and Security), have piloted projects demonstrating how local microgrids can disconnect from the main grid and operate independently. However, many projects lack funding for storage systems, and none are known to have implemented the electromagnetic protection standards long proposed by the Department of Defense.

Similarly, the Department of Energy has funded over [\\$100 million in energy projects](#) to help military bases establish local energy systems for island-mode operation. However, the mandates for such capabilities remain largely unfunded and unrealized. The [Defense Threat Reduction Agency's](#) 2016 declaration regarding electromagnetic attack vulnerabilities remains relevant today:

An electromagnetic ... attack (nuclear ... [EMP] or non-nuclear EMP [e.g., high-power microwave, ...]) has the potential to degrade or shut down portions of the electric power grid important to the [Department of Defense]... Restoring the commercial grid from the still-functioning regions may not be possible or could take weeks or months.

In its Small Business Innovation Research program, the Defense Threat Reduction Agency accepted a proposed solution from Instant Access Networks LLC that involves electromagnetic-protected microgrids capable of operating in island mode. This approach can be nearly self-funded through savings and revenues, making it accessible to most communities. Similar to [power purchasing agreements](#) and energy or resilience-as-a-service agreements, this model can help communities better prepare for potential threats. Versions of such agreements can be provided either by

utilities or third-party entities supporting local institutions and communities.

The Traditional TTX

To further address these vulnerabilities, this article proposes enhancing TTXs nationwide. These exercises, designed to highlight needs and gather resources to resolve vulnerabilities quickly, can be improved with a new dual-track (or “dual-world”) approach, not known to have been done before. Traditionally, a TTX involves emergency management and response organizations coming together to simulate and practice response capabilities. Typically held at an emergency management or fusion center, representatives of key community leadership and infrastructure gather to discuss their approach to a given disaster scenario.

During these exercises, participants are informed of the disaster’s nature, scope, and timeframe. For example, a half-day or full-day exercise might simulate a prolonged power outage starting on the fourth day of a disaster and continuing for several months. Participants may break into smaller groups to discuss their responses, returning to share their findings. Unexpected challenges introduced during the exercise – known as injects – encourage participants to adapt their strategies. After examining these injects, the group engages in a “hot wash” to share key learnings. Then, the exercise planners compile an after-action report summarizing lessons learned and recommendations for improving preparedness.

The Dual-Track TTX Approach

In an admittedly novel dual-track TTX, two groups work simultaneously on the same scenario and injects. Group A operates with the resources they have in the traditional

approach described above, while Group B has additional resources. For example, on September 10, 2024, one such dual-track exercise plans to offer Group B access to five electromagnetic- and cyber-protected local energy systems (micro- or nano grids) capable of providing half their energy needs from local resources. These resources enable continued operation in island mode when centralized systems fail, as recommended by the [Defense Threat Reduction Agency](#) in 2016.

With this approach, both groups convene to discuss the scenario, disaster, and injects, then separate to strategize independently. Each person or entity in Group A is mirrored in Group B, with both groups comprising emergency response organizations, hospitals, utilities, military bases, local governments, schools, or other community entities.

Following the injects, both groups conduct hot washes to report on potential loss mitigation strategies and document losses in finance, infrastructure, and lives. If the disaster is widespread and prolonged, differences in outcomes are likely to be apparent. The resulting after-action report highlights the benefits of improved resilience before the disaster, which can help communities secure the financial and

in-kind support necessary to protect lives, infrastructure, and economic stability.

Invitation to Participate

The successful implementation of dual scenario TTXs can help motivate, showcase, and persuade others to assist communities in securing needed resources. Because of the newness of this approach and the potential to significantly support communities in obtaining resources they have been unable to acquire before, prospective participants are encouraged to help make this replicable elsewhere. For these reasons, interested readers are welcome to participate in the virtual track of the in-person TTX from 9 a.m. until noon on September 10, 2024, at the Office of Emergency Management at Westover Air Reserve Base, and the community of Chicopee, Massachusetts, will undertake this dual-track approach.

The exercise will be led by Charles Manto, the proposer of this innovative approach to TTXs, along with Maj Gen (ret.) K. Luke Reiner, Dr. Earl Motzer, and local emergency management officials. Domestic Preparedness readers who are interested in participating virtually via Microsoft Teams should contact the exercise leaders directly at joseph.bernard.1@us.af.mil or robert.perreault@us.af.mil, (413) 557-3808.



Charles (Chuck) L. Manto is the chief executive officer of Instant Access Networks LLC (IAN), a consulting and research and development firm that produces independently tested solutions for EMP-protected microgrids and equipment shelters for telecommunications networks and data centers. His company holds the data rights package for its SBIR program for EMP-protected microgrid systems. He received seven patents in telecommunications, computer mass storage, EMP protection and a smart microgrid controller, the core of IAN's "Resilient Adaptive Modular-Microgrid System" (RAMSTM). He is a senior member of the IEEE (Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers) and is chairman-emeritus of InfraGard National's National Disaster Resilience Council. Additional publications, patents, and interviews can be found on his profile page on LinkedIn. He can be reached at cmanto@stop-EMP.com.



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A Homeland Vulnerability Continues

By Robert C. Hutchinson

The illegal entry of an estimated [6 to 10 million aliens](#) (the legal term according to immigration law and statutes) to the United States in the past four years has been a subject of significant debate and concern. From known encounters to “got-aways,” the actual number may remain unknown. From illegal entries between ports of entry to the dubious utilization of the immigration parole process via new governmental cellphone applications through ports of entry, the border control and immigration infrastructure has been abused and overwhelmed. The impact has been immediate and will also be long-lasting on many fronts.

This recent unique change in national immigration policy creating the increase is primarily a political issue, but it has significant follow-on societal, fiscal, and economic consequences. An influx of immigrants will likely continue, and possibly increase, until a change of enforcement policy. Should there be a return to the enforcement of the current federal statutes and regulations on the books, there may be a shock to the current system or expectations and the plans of millions of aliens currently residing in the United States.

To evade arrest, detention, and deportation or removal, recent aliens are likely to join over [10 million other aliens](#) of varying status already in the country in seeking

additional or alternative methods to remain within the United States. U visas offer an easier way to exploit and buy time than other avenues. One method immigrants may exploit is discussed in a 2018 Domestic Preparedness article ([U Visas – A Hidden Homeland Security Vulnerability](#)) involving the U nonimmigrant status (U visa) application process. The article stressed that the U visa process was a hidden homeland vulnerability not fully understood or overseen. This important process remains a serious risk for abuse to provide a defense against the timely and fair enforcement of immigration laws.

U Visa Application Process

A brief review of the previous article would explain the process and concerns more fully. As a short reminder, the [U visa](#) is reserved for “victims of certain crimes who have suffered mental or physical abuse and are helpful to law enforcement or government officials in the investigation or prosecution of criminal activity.” The U visa is different from the T visa for victims of human trafficking – another concern with the increase in smuggled people.

The [Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000](#) created the U visa. The new visa was to strengthen law enforcement agencies’ ability to investigate and prosecute cases of domestic violence, sexual assault, trafficking of aliens, and other

FY	Principal Victims				Derivative Family Members			
	Applied	Approved	Denied	Pending	Applied	Approved	Denied	Pending
2012	21,141	10,031	1,684	19,824	15,126	7,421	1,465	15,592
2013	25,486	10,022	1,840	33,409	18,266	7,724	1,234	24,480
2014	26,089	10,077	3,662	45,814	19,297	8,457	2,655	32,948
2015	30,129	10,060	2,440	63,779	22,636	7,649	1,754	46,507
2016	34,797	10,019	1,761	87,290	25,469	7,624	1,257	63,616
2017	37,287	10,011	2,042	112,272	25,703	7,628	1,612	79,971
2018	34,967	10,009	2,317	134,714	24,024	7,906	1,991	94,050
2019	28,364	10,010	2,733	151,758	18,861	7,846	2,397	103,737
2020	22,358	10,013	2,693	161,708	14,090	7,212	2,472	108,366
2021	21,874	10,003	3,594	170,805	15,290	6,728	3,085	114,450

Table 1. Issuance of U status (Source: Congressional Research Service, [Immigration Relief for Noncitizen Crime Victims](#), January 31, 2023, page 5).

crimes. This visa offers protection to crime victims who have suffered substantial mental or physical abuse and are willing to help authorities in the investigation or prosecution of that criminal activity.

With an annual [limit of 10,000 visas](#) a year for principal petitioners, the U visa is valid for four years and eligible for extensions if another immigration adjustment or status is not granted. The approved applicant (petitioner) is eligible to apply for a legal permanent resident card (or green card) after three years providing a possibly easier pathway to United States citizenship than other avenues. Making the U visa even more valuable, there is no limit for petitioner family members deriving status from the applicant or petitioner. Those on the waiting list for review for a visa are granted deferred action or parole and eligible for work authorization by virtue of this status. It is a strong shield within the immigration process to remain in the United States – especially for those not eligible for other options.

U Visa Statistics

The Congressional Research Service [reported](#) in 2023 that the U visas process took approximately five years for the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to adjudicate an application. If the application is approved, the petitioner is placed on a waiting list and granted parole or deferred action. Due to the current backlog, it can reportedly take up to 17 more years to receive U visa status because of the 10,000 annual cap. The petitioner is permitted to remain and work within the United States during this extended process.

The Congressional Research Service received the FY2012-2021 U visa statistics in Table 1 from U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). As of the time of the reporting, over 285,000 pending petitioners had legal status to remain in the United States. According to the [report](#):

While the number of individuals who can receive U status is limited

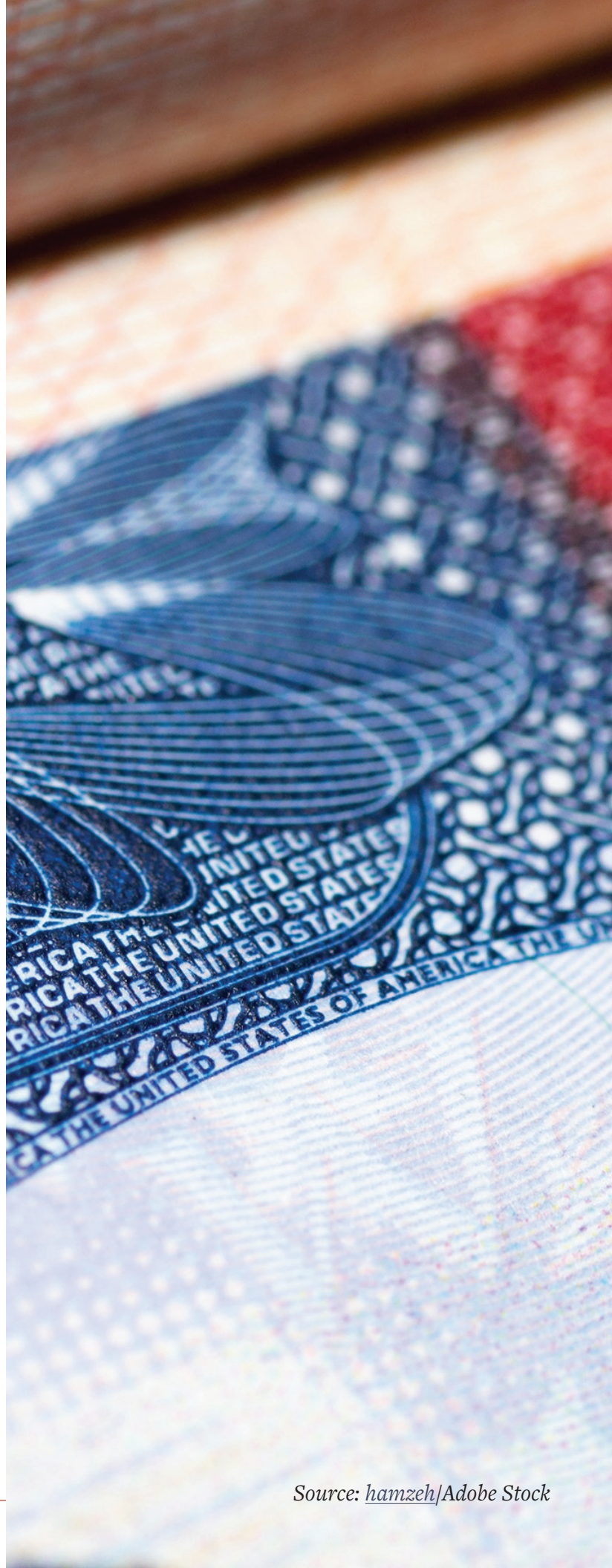
to 10,000 principal petitioners each fiscal year, there is no limit on the number of individuals with U status (whether principal or derivative petitioners) who can subsequently adjust to [legal permanent resident] status in a given fiscal year.

Petitioner Arrest Histories

In response to concerns regarding potential integrity issues and fraud involving the process, USCIS provided in 2020 an analysis of U visa petitioner arrest data between fiscal years 2012 and 2018. The analysis found that 34.7% of the principal petitioners and 17.5% of derivative petitioners “had a previous arrest or apprehension for a criminal offense or an immigration-related civil offense.” The most common arrests were reportedly for immigration offenses and traffic violations. The report concluded:

This comprehensive research on key demographic and filing trends will support USCIS in developing data-driven regulatory and policy changes in order to improve the integrity of the U visa program, ensure that the program is following congressional intent, and increase efficiency in processing U visa petitions. By considering these findings when developing policy and regulatory changes, USCIS can reduce frivolous filings, rectify program vulnerabilities, and increase benefit integrity – key components of USCIS’ mission.

The arrest history of valid petitioners may be a homeland security or public safety concern for discussion. However, the abuse of the process by petitioners who were not crime victims or witnesses could be a much larger homeland security threat. It floods the system with fraudulent claims that harm actual



Source: [hamzeh](#)/Adobe Stock

Data Set Encounters	FY17	FY18	FY19	FY20	FY21	FY22	FY23	FY24YTD
U.S. Border Patrol TSDS Encounters Between Ports of Entry of Non-U.S. Citizens								
Southwest Border	2	6	0	3	15	98	169	93
Northern Border	0	0	3	0	1	0	3	1
Total	2	6	3	3	16	98	172	94

Table 2. U.S. Border Patrol TSDS Encounters Between Ports of Entry of Non-U.S. Citizens (Source: [U.S. Customs and Border Protection Enforcement Statistics](#)).

victims for which the nonimmigrant status was created to benefit.

Recent Prosecutions

Some federal prosecutions have demonstrated an abuse of the process to evade deportation and other immigration procedures:

- Six subjects were [indicted](#) in Illinois in 2024 for conspiring to stage armed robberies to obtain U visas.
- Two New York subjects were [indicted](#) in Massachusetts in 2024 for the same immigration fraud charges.
- A subject was [convicted](#) in Pennsylvania in 2023 for visa fraud and conspiracy.
- Two were [sentenced](#) to prison in 2019 in South Carolina for staging an armed robbery.
- Two more were [indicted](#) in Virginia in 2019 for a staged robbery.

Fictitious criminal activity and reporting can have serious consequences. For example, a 2024 staged [armed robbery](#) at a Texas gas station resulted in a fatal shooting. The performed crime was conducted to support a fraudulent future U visa claim and insurance fraud. An uninvolved witness reacted to the

staged robbery and fatally shot the purported armed robber in the parking lot.

The number of prosecutions is likely lower than the amount of fraud within the process. As discussed in the 2018 article, there were numerous weaknesses and failures in the application and review process to identify fraudulent applications. This important immigration process remains a serious risk for abuse to provide defense against the timely and fair enforcement of immigration laws.

Worst-Case Scenario

Well beyond impeding victims' rightful claims, there is a worst-case scenario. With hundreds of intercepted border crossers [on terrorist watch lists](#), open-door border policies pose national and homeland security threats. It is likely that state and non-state actors are hiding within large groups that are illegally entering the United States. Serious security threats are more likely to pay cartel smugglers to include them in the separate "got-away" groups that cross the border after the zone is flooded in a nearby area with families for time-consuming processing.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection [terrorist screening data set encounters](#) between the ports of entry demonstrates a trend in the wrong direction. Table 2 shows the reported numbers from fiscal years 2017 to 2024 (as of July 15, 2024).

Despite being an imminent threat, a state or non-state actor could use the U visa process as a shield to remain in the United States with a protective status for many years, if not decades. This is a worst-case scenario with possible worst-case consequences. It could become yet another failure to connect the dots prior to the next serious national or homeland security incident.

Continued Vulnerability

It remains critical for Congress to ensure that this vital and worthwhile immigration program is properly overseen and not exploited by individuals or criminal or terrorist organizations. Congress could utilize the Congressional Research Service, Government Accountability Office, congressional hearings, and other avenues to routinely review and evaluate the execution of the U visa process. DHS Office of Inspector General could also play an essential oversight and inspection role.

With the addition of millions of aliens into the United States in the [last four years](#) with limited or no background investigation, the national and homeland security threats have greatly expanded. If there is a return to previous immigration enforcement at the border and adherence to current statutes and regulations with a new administration or policy modification, millions of aliens shall be subject to arrest, detention, and deportation or removal. To evade these consequences and buy time, some aliens may exploit the U visa process to remain in the country and bypass the current legal consequences for years or decades.

As stressed in the 2018 article, it would be wise to understand and address these hidden vulnerabilities before they become the topic of the 24-hour news cycle and numerous congressional hearings that would threaten or overly restrict the U visa program. Enhanced attention, comprehensive training, and robust oversight could help avoid a catastrophe. Unfortunately, it often takes a major crisis or tragedy for oversight and change to be considered. This is another opportunity to react and prepare rather than fail and repair.

Robert C. Hutchinson, a long-time contributor to Domestic Preparedness, was a former police chief and deputy special agent in charge with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Homeland Security Investigations in Miami, Florida. He retired after more than 28 years as a special agent with DHS and the legacy U.S. Customs Service. He was previously the deputy director for the agency's national emergency preparedness division and assistant director for its national firearms and tactical training division. His over 40 writings and presentations often address the important need for cooperation, coordination and collaboration between the fields of public health, emergency management and law enforcement, especially in the area of pandemic preparedness. He received his graduate degrees at the University of Delaware in public administration and Naval Postgraduate School in homeland security studies. He currently serves on the Domestic Preparedness Advisory Board.



Source: [Patrick Daxenbichler/Adobe Stock](#)

Vulnerability and Exploitation – Human Trafficking After Natural Disasters

By Benjamin Thomas Greer

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) defines preparedness as “a continuous cycle of planning, organizing, training, equipping, exercising, evaluating, and taking corrective action to ensure effective coordination during incident response.” This cycle is but one component of a larger National Preparedness System designed to prevent, respond to, and recover from natural disasters, acts of terrorism, and other catastrophic events. To properly prepare, communities and private and public agencies must accurately assess risks and threats. Disasters inherently come with known and unknown threats. One looming emerging threat is human trafficking because traffickers capitalize on the vulnerability these events create to exploit victims. When properly trained, emergency management and disaster responders are uniquely positioned to identify, prevent, and mitigate exploitation before and after an emergency.

Natural and human-caused disasters can wreak havoc on socioeconomic, political, and geographical landscapes. These humanitarian

crises exacerbate preexisting vulnerabilities, which can be conducive to trafficking and exploitation of the people impacted. Disasters exploit and compound vulnerabilities often associated with trafficking, such as poverty, food insecurity, and gendered-based violence. Post-disaster, the sudden economic instability, employment losses, and rapid deterioration of living conditions embolden traffickers to exploit disaster victims for commercial sex and forced or exploited labor.

Nefarious Opportunities in Disasters

Traffickers are likely to exploit disaster victims or profit from the recovery efforts. Human trafficking exploits others for profit through force, fraud, or coercion, which decimates lives, fractures families, and exploits victims’ bodies and labor as renewable resources. Seeking vulnerable populations, traffickers use physical and psychological abuse, fear, and intimidation to exert control over their victims. Some may keep victims shackled, while others use less obvious methods, including debt bondage,

wherein victims feel honor-bound to satisfy dubious debts.

Human trafficking is commonly considered the second-largest criminal enterprise worldwide and one of the fastest-growing criminal activities. The [International Labor Organization](#) estimates this enterprise generates \$150 billion annually worldwide. Preexisting factors in disaster-prone environments increase individuals' susceptibility, with the most prevalent indicators being gender, economic disadvantage, displacement, and newfound orphan status to exploit the victims' psychological state.

Disasters push the impacted region into a state of heightened vulnerability, of which emergency managers and disaster responders must be conscious. The instability and destruction of the economic and social structure post-disaster drive [ecoviolence](#) insofar as malignant bad actors seek opportunities to prey on those most impacted. While the research on this nexus emerges, experts are starting to examine how well-trained responders can play a positive role in a [“whole-of-government” counter-trafficking response plan](#). The [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services](#) identified emergency management personnel as uniquely positioned to identify and report suspicious behavior that could indicate potential human trafficking or related activities.

Generally, scholars analyze victim vulnerabilities through the [“Push and Pull” migratory framework](#). “Push” factors consist of events that would cause an individual to leave his or her current location and seek safety or overall educational/economic betterment elsewhere. Some of the common “Push” factors include widespread poverty and unstable political structures. “Pull”

factors are events or opportunities that would cause an individual to migrate to a specific location. Some typical “Pull” factors are access to education, access to higher-paying jobs, and upward social mobility. A [destination country’s](#) demand for inexpensive labor is often a driving dominant “Pull” factor. Driven by profit margins, underpinned by a globalized economy and buyers of sex, traffickers can leverage the “Push” and “Pull” factors as vulnerabilities in their victims to exploit. The following case studies demonstrate these factors and how exploiters deploy them in a disaster setting.

Case Example: Worker Exploitation During Hurricane Katrina Rebuild

Procedural safeguards in the United States deter labor exploitation in government-funded contracts, but they leave safety gaps when not fully enforced. The U.S. government’s primary tool is the [Davis-Bacon Act](#), which applies to federally funded contracts for repairs, alterations, or construction of public works or buildings that exceed \$2,000. This legislation mandates that contractors and subcontractors must offer their laborers comparable wages and benefits to similar projects in the area. In addition, when workers exceed 40 hours per week, employers must pay them one and a half times their regular pay on contracts exceeding \$100,000.

The other safeguard requires employers to provide proof of citizenship or eligibility-to-work documents to the Department of Homeland Security for their workers. These laws were designed to be symbiotically entwined to ensure taxpayer funds support legitimate work and provide stable and livable wages. These wages then would be infused back into the local economy to help rebuild

and revitalize the affected area. Without one or both of these legal tools, recovery times would lengthen, and the likelihood of exploitation increase.

After Hurricane Katrina decimated the Gulf Coast region in 2005, President George W. Bush [suspended the Davis-Bacon Act](#) to help increase the recovery pace by removing *bureaucratic* paperwork. The suspension of the act eliminated the requirement for federal contractors to match the prevailing wages, which repelled local workers but attracted migrant workers accustomed to lower wages. Additionally, the Department of Homeland Security suspended the requirement that federal contractors provide proof of their workers' citizenship status or eligibility to work. Although the Davis-Bacon Act was suspended for only two months, reenacting it did not include a review of the executed contracts or retroactive requirements for those months. As a result, federal contractors continued employing those migrant workers at bargain rates.

After Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, Defendant Signal International ([Signal](#)), a ship construction and repair company, experienced a significant decline in its workforce. Agents for Signal fraudulently recruited nearly 500 workers from India through the H-2B guestworker program. These recruiters used fraudulent inducement and coercion tactics that primarily consisted of false promises of lawful U.S. citizenship. Upon arrival, the recruiters confiscated the workers' visas and passports, convinced them to pay exorbitant recruitment, travel, and immigration processing fees, and threatened legal action and bodily harm if they did not work for Signal. Once employed, Signal subjected the guestworkers to labor camps with unhealthy living conditions while enduring psychological abuse and being defrauded of

their hard-earned wages. Upon conclusion of this civil case, the jury found Signal International, the attorney in the scheme, and the Indian recruiter [guilty of labor trafficking](#), racketeering, and discrimination.

Case Example: Sexual Exploitation in the Wake of Hurricanes

A failure within the disaster life cycle of hazard mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery can increase personal and property damage and delay recovery. Failing to properly understand or fully identify a hazard makes crafting a mitigation plan inert. For example, the City of [Houston](#) learned lessons after Hurricane Katrina in 2005 that prepared communities when Hurricane Harvey made landfall in 2017. After-action reports for Katrina showed that the sudden influx of evacuees from New Orleans to Houston brought with it an [increase in violence and property crime](#), with some evacuees falling victim to sex and labor trafficking. Additionally, the desire for an expedited recovery attracted low-wage laborers, some of whom became victims. With the 12 years of knowledge Houston agencies gained between Katrina and Harvey, they were better positioned to counter-trafficking efforts.

The day after Hurricane Harvey made landfall, representatives from the mayor's office assessed the disaster shelters' landscape and communication capabilities. The Houston anti-trafficking task force distributed materials that illustrated the displaced persons' vulnerability to being targeted and indicators for recruitment at shelters. That large-scale operation involved a "cot-to-cot" strategy of speaking personally with over 4,000 evacuees in their native languages. Following a steep decline in online sex advertisements during

Hurricane Harvey, a significant surge occurred after the storm subsided:

A number of factors could explain this massive uptick, including attempts by traffickers to recoup income lost during the storm, individuals entering or returning to prostitution because of loss of housing or income due to Harvey, or an influx of ads in anticipation of an increased population of male workers in the Houston area for storm recovery related work.

The causation may be debatable, but the City's foresight and proactive measures were well-informed.

Disaster Responders' Unique Positioning

Emergency response units occupy real estate at a critical juncture of public health, safety, and homeland security. These units frequently include civilian Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) members or professional emergency managers. Their emergency access gives them unique admittance to environments otherwise inaccessible to law enforcement or social service organizations. Emergency response personnel enjoy a level of community trust that some law enforcement and other personnel do not. Public perception is more likely to portray disaster responders as helpers rather than incarcerators, which facilitates personal contact and disclosure not typically bestowed upon law enforcement or federal immigration agencies. As such, these responders are well-positioned to interact with and support many of the vulnerable populations that traffickers prey upon. In keeping with the duty and obligation to protect vulnerable populations, emergency responders should be knowledgeable of ancillary predatory behavior they are likely to encounter, specifically human trafficking.

Adapting to Address Human Trafficking and Exploitation

Research indicates that the most effective means of curbing trafficking results from applying a comprehensive and holistic whole-of-government approach. The definition of comprehensive evolves as experts learn more about these operations and their exploitative tactics. A comprehensive strategy should enhance not only penal sentences but also the design of victim service parallel with legal advocacy programs and law enforcement training to ensure the curriculum includes victim-centered, trauma-informed care strategies. As research develops articulating the nexus between disasters and trafficking, emergency management agencies should be brought into the comprehensive counter-trafficking definition.

*Under pressure, you don't rise to the occasion,
you sink to the level of your training.*

—Anonymous Navy Seal

Anyone who works in emergency and disaster response should have a basic awareness of suspicious activity. However, many are undertrained and under-skilled to identify this type of criminal activity correctly. In 2020, research submitted to the University of Chicago's Master of Science in Threat and Response Management program focused on "Human Trafficking Awareness for Disaster Responders." That study found survey respondents overwhelmingly (92%) believe that education on human trafficking is "very important" or "extremely important" to disaster support administration. However, only 40% of the same respondents reported receiving any level of trafficking-related training from their employers. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has begun recognizing this nexus, but emergency

management still lacks a comprehensive training curriculum to build awareness.

Updating State and Federal Agencies' Hazard Mitigation Plan

As emergency management agencies across the country collaborate with law enforcement activities, there needs to be a better appreciation for the disaster-exploitation connection. Anti-trafficking resilience and mitigation planning must be integrated into the disaster planning process. Addressing this current knowledge gap provides emergency response agencies an opportunity to demonstrate their dedication to public safety and community support.

The FEMA National Advisory Council (NAC) advises the FEMA administrator on all aspects of emergency management: preparedness, protection, response, recovery, and mitigation for natural disasters, terrorism, and other human-caused emergencies. The NAC has six [sub-groups for 2024](#). As human trafficking and exploitation best fall under

the Gender-Based Violence Subcommittee's jurisdiction, they will be discussing and exploring best practices on how to integrate this threat stream into the national disaster response structure.

Conclusion

As impacts from natural, human-caused, technological, and other emergencies continue exacerbating existing vulnerabilities, understanding of these threats must evolve. With this understanding, response strategies should evolve to address known or anticipated cascading impacts. Increased insight into the nexus between natural disasters and exploitation provides agencies the knowledge to update their response mechanisms, awareness, reporting, and mitigation measures to contemplate and plan for human trafficking. Expanding and refining a community's awareness and identification protocols can help thwart trafficking operations and reduce the number of people traffickers prey upon after a natural disaster.



Benjamin Thomas Greer, J.D., M.A., is a subject matter expert in the field of human trafficking and child sexual exploitation at the California Governor's Office of Emergency Services (Cal OES). Before joining Cal OES, he served as a special deputy attorney general with the California Department of Justice – Office of the Attorney General. He led a team of attorneys and non-attorneys in a comprehensive report for the California Attorney General entitled "The State of Human Trafficking in California 2012." He has published numerous Law Review and International Journal articles on various aspects of trafficking and has presented or lectured in 12 counties. He is a federally recognized human trafficking training expert by the Office for Victims of Crime (OVC-TTAC) Training & Technical Assistance Center and Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA-NTAC) Training and Technical Assistance

Center; helped California draft and negotiate Memoranda of Understanding with the Mexican Government, draft and lobby anti-trafficking legislation (both domestically and internationally), and plays a prominent role as a contributing or advisory board member on two international peer-reviewed Anti-Trafficking Journals. Aside from his work with Cal OES, he is a Research Associate for the University of Cambridge's Centre for Applied Research in Human Trafficking and recently graduated from the Naval Postgraduate School's Center for Homeland Defense and Security Master's Degree Program, where his thesis, "Connecting the Dots of an Opaque Crime: Analyzing California's Human Trafficking Task Force Information Sharing Framework and Practices," was a finalist for Outstanding Thesis Award, Cohort 2001/2002.

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