

Recovery Is Now: Navigating the Transition

By Jenny Novak, CEM, Emergency Services Coordinator, California Governor's Office of Emergency Services, and Randy Styner, Director of Emergency Management, University of California-Irvine

Over the past two years, California has suffered its largest, most destructive, and most deadly wildfires in state history. During the smoke-free calm of California's spring, there is no subject more pertinent to discuss today than recovery.

Despite a recent increase of recovery inclusion in emergency management dialogue, it remains the least understood and least exercised phase of the disaster cycle. While exercising response is fast paced and high adrenaline, recovery is slow, filled with politics and paperwork. When faced with the challenge of planning for such a complex, long-term process, it is understandable that many emergency managers shy away from

recovery planning or exercises. With everything else we already have on our plates and the ongoing need to be ready for critical life safety responses, why bother to discuss recovery now? We can figure it out during response anyhow, right? Where would we even begin?

The fact is, for a successful recovery, jurisdictions must begin their planning early and with a focus on the transition from response to recovery. This is the most active period, where pre-planning can have the greatest impact on whether you set your course toward a successful, smooth recovery or stall it with roadblocks that could have been cleared in advance.

Pre-Designated Personnel

The lowest hanging fruit in planning for the response to recovery transition is pre-designating key personnel who can guide recovery activities. Your jurisdiction will need a recovery director who is authorized to lead the overall recovery effort. Often, the emergency manager may be inclined to want to fill this role. However, remember that you will still be engaged in some response and/or EOC actions at this point, and recovery coordination is a full-time job. Additionally, recovery will involve personnel from throughout your organization who have little familiarity with emergency management and may not have

worked directly with the emergency manager previously. Look toward the county executive office, city manager's office or, other office with high-level authority and the ability to direct recovery operations across many different organizational functions, to fill the role of recovery director. At the state level, the state coordinating officer fills this role and will work directly with the federal coordinating officer throughout the recovery.

The initial task of the recovery director should be to develop task forces and chairs around the key recovery functions that will address the disaster impacts on your organization. For wildfires in California, these have often included:

- Housing
- Debris management
- Watershed (debris flow mitigation)
- Cost recovery/finance
- Public health
- Public information
- Schools

Best practices have shown that these task forces are most effective when they involve representatives from multiple agencies that are involved in the response. For example, if there are cities within a county impacted by the disaster, the county would lead the recovery effort but would include city personnel as well as key NGO's within housing/human services.

Local Assistance Center and Other Facilities

If people are displaced due to the disaster, a Local Assistance



Point of origin of the Holy Fire, which burned more than 23,000 acres in Orange and Riverside counties, Aug. 9, 2018.

[continued on page 17](#)

Recovery Is Now

continued from page 16

Center (LAC) location will need to be established. LACs will provide a one-stop shop, where disaster survivors can access local/state resources to help jump-start their recovery, such as:

- State-issued driver's license/identification cards.
- Birth/marriage certificates.
- State/local tax records.
- Local property assessor's office to notify them of loss of home & value of property.
- State Department of Insurance and access to insurance providers.
- Information on finding established contractors and how to avoid contracting fraud during disaster.
- Local building/planning office to provide any information on any potential streamlined processes unique to the rebuilding process for the disaster.
- Nonprofits that may be providing cash assistance.
- Access to local public representative offices.

While sizable open areas will be needed, the LAC should not be colocated with any ongoing sheltering operations. It's a good idea to have many pre-identified potential LAC locations and ensure there is no conflict with possible shelter locations. Most LAC's will be open for approximately five days to two weeks depending on the scope of the disaster. Pre-identified and trained staff is a must.

If FEMA individual assistance has been granted for your disaster, FEMA will look for similar space to open Disaster Recovery Centers (DRCs) that will provide access to federal agencies—these will be longer term (60+ days following the disaster declaration). If it's possible

to transition your LAC into a DRC, this will avoid complications and survivors having to adapt to the change.

If you've received the Major Disaster Declaration, you will also begin to receive requests for facility recommendations from FEMA. An early request may be a place to park their Mobile Communications Operations Vehicle (MCOV) which will often serve as the FEMA recovery ICP. FEMA will also seek longer term, larger office space for a Joint Field Office (JFO) or Area Field Office (AFO) to coordinate recovery. The FEMA command structure will likely include a Branch Director or Division Supervisor deployed to your area, along with their State counterparts.

Public Information and Community Healing

As response transitions into recovery, involving and engaging your community with updates and information on recovery efforts and community resources is key. Setting up a schedule of town hall meetings early in the recovery process will greatly enhance your community engagement and provide a level of trust that will serve the entire recovery process. If you do not take a lead in providing information, other entities will fill the void and their approach may not be as constructive or positive.

If you have established your task forces, involve the leads for the various functions in a panel-style town hall communicating the steps being taken and the goals for the various functions of recovery. Work with elected officials to 'host' the town halls. You should also include responder representatives to discuss response actions and decision making during the incident. It is critical to show a unified front to the community. Make sure to identify

venues convenient to the impacted areas, like high schools auditoriums, churches, community centers, or large fire stations. Since many representatives may be sharing various web resources, having a handout with the web links is an established best practice. It's important to allow time for questions. However, you may want to organize a comment card approach where questions can be collected and organized in advance rather than simply providing an open microphone.

Establishing a recovery website specific to the event and separate from your emergency notification page is a critical communications piece. This website will serve as a hub for all the resources supporting the disaster. Include the latest press release information here, and link to FEMA's Individual Assistance program if you have been granted that assistance. You can also host a mechanism for users to sign up for email updates on the recovery.

Establish Communication and Coordination with VOAD

While it will be an extremely busy time for government agencies responsible for response and recovery, your local nonprofit organizations will also be incredibly busy and may also be working on some of the same initiatives as you. It's important to establish communication and coordination with the local Volunteer Organizations Active in Disasters (VOAD) group early on. The state and/or FEMA will designate a Voluntary Agency Liaison (VAL) to the recovery who will work directly with these groups to provide survivors with coordinated individual assistance. Establishing a long-term recovery group comprised of the various nonprofits as well as private

continued on page 18

Recovery Is Now

[continued from page 17](#)

sector interests and government representatives is a best practice that should be initiated in the beginning phase of recovery. This will also help you to stay tuned into the community needs and healing process, with information shared on vigils, fundraisers and other community events important to the community.

If FEMA's Individual Assistance program has been activated, Disaster Survivor Assistance Teams (DSAT) will deploy into impacted areas and will attend any community events associated with the disaster to register survivors for assistance programs and provide recovery resources. They will look toward the local jurisdiction for guidance on where to deploy.

Additional Recommendations

While there are many other considerations when planning for recovery, jurisdictions should

develop a plan for these critical functions of the response to recovery transition, so that you may alleviate some of the chaos that will naturally ensue during any major disaster. Additional planning should include: a debris management plan; planning for health emergencies associated with disasters; understanding what you will need from your governing body during recovery; cost recovery planning; rebuilding process development; and long-term housing plans as survivors transition out of shelters. While recovery is a behemoth of a process that you will not soon be done with, you will find that any planning or discussion that you are able to have before the disaster will provide you with confidence, assuage unnecessary stresses, expedite your recovery, and bolster your community's resilience. Whether it's simply a bulleted list of possible facilities and task force leads or a comprehensive recovery plan, your planning will most certainly pay off when disaster strikes. ▲

New EM Programs in Schools

[continued from page 15](#)

could all be performed by emergent citizen groups, thus relieving government agencies and permitting local, state/provincial, territorial, and/or federal governments to concentrate on more intricate issues.

Conclusion

The very concept of an emergent citizen group's spontaneity would not have to change into a structured organization. The core essence of these groups – *their spontaneity* – would simply benefit from having voluntary emergent citizen group members accountable, systematic, knowledgeable, and appropriately equipped to work in unison with organized emergency response service providers. ▲

Connect through the IAEM Jobs Board!

<https://jobs.iaem.com>

We are still accepting articles honoring EM mentors

Do you wish that you had honored your mentor by writing an article about their impact on your EM career for the IAEM Bulletin? It isn't too late.

[Email the editor](#) for details.

Share the March 2019 Bulletin with your EM colleagues

Have you shared the current sample issue of the IAEM Bulletin with your colleagues? It can be downloaded at <https://iaem.org/Bulletin>.

Subscribe to the IAEM-USA Government Affairs Update

IAEM members can subscribe to a free, added member service...

...and receive periodic email updates from IAEM-USA Government Affairs Director Thad Huguley, focusing on legislative and regulatory news impacting the EM profession.

[Log into your IAEM member profile](#), scroll to "Communication Preferences," and check the box next to "Subscribe to IAEM-USA Government Affairs Update."