

## **Coordinating Intergovernmental Policies on Emergency Management in a Multi-Centered Metropolis**

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*In the intervening years since Hurricane Andrew in August 1992, there have been studies by federal agencies and the Academy of Public Administration, changes in Florida statutes, assessments of the affected counties, a strengthened directive of the Federal Emergency Management Agency in training activities, and legislative and executive orders to link the levels of government. The emerging problem is how to effect cooperation in a multi-centered county with multiple municipalities, more communities seeking incorporation, and only unincorporated areas under direct county control. The problem is not for the threat of hurricanes alone. It is for the many potential disasters, natural and man-made, which may be addressed with incident command systems at the local level, but may also need mechanisms to coordinate county, regional, state, or national responses. The counties in southeast Florida are a true megalopolis and officials are slowly recognizing that intergovernmental cooperation is imperative. This article examines the issue and provides data on local support for regional efforts in southeast Florida.*

Emergency management involves a complex coordination of public and private organizations in a hierarchy of government levels; consequently, it is a very challenging task for officials at all levels. Not only is there a question of who governs but also of how decisions are made and how efficiency and effectiveness can be assessed. Using research directed at all the elected officials in southeast Florida, the following analysis detected many disparities. However, there was fundamental agreement among the elected and appointed administrative officials who responded to a mail survey on the desirability of a multi-county or regional approach. These findings highlight the need for an amendment to the 1995 Florida statute, Chapter 252: Emergency Management Act, to facilitate and encourage regional cooperation.

Before addressing regional emergency management concerns, the individual county's efforts must be effective. Even coordination of efforts within counties is a challenging assignment, and it is made all the more difficult because two home-

rule counties of the four covered in this study are multi-centered metropolitan areas with many local governments and unincorporated areas. In addition, the trend toward local incorporation is rampant. Therefore, the key issues are: how to connect state offices to local agencies effectively and in accordance with Federal requirements for damage assessment and assistance; and how to coordinate and integrate local efforts.

## **A Brief Background on the Governments Concerned**

### **Federal Responsibilities**

There has always been some reliance upon the federal government to provide legislation, executive orders, and regulations to facilitate state and local actions in the event of a disaster. Congress passed and President Jimmy Carter signed the Federal Emergency Management Act in 1979 which greatly centralized the responsibility for all-hazard rules and regulations under the direction of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Prior to that action, the National Governors' Association had identified some 100 federal laws relating to emergency programs of all categories. Since that time, FEMA has tried to develop mechanisms to coordinate federal programs in order to meet state and local needs. The results have been mixed, and efforts have been made to improve the national emergency management system. The poor federal responses to Hurricanes Hugo and Andrew forced Congress and the president, Bush then Clinton, to reexamine the role and function of FEMA and to consider fundamental reform.

Sylves (1994) has outlined the recommendations for reform in studies by the National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA) and the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO). Charles A. Bowsher, Comptroller General of the U.S. and head of GAO, was particularly critical of the Federal Disaster Response Plan as being "inadequate for dealing with catastrophic disasters in south Florida." The GAO report went further in suggesting the strengthening of FEMA. In the same issue of the Public Administration Review, Waugh (1994) advocated the use of counties as the source of maximum effectiveness in administering emergency management systems and as the most logical conduit between local governments and the state and federal levels. At about the same time, in an article about FEMA management, Wamsley and Schroeder (1994) described the atmosphere within FEMA as one of intense conflict and political expediency, especially in the aftermath of Hurricane Andrew. Because of the oversight by so many congressional committees, the authors concluded that the super-agency has a "mission impossible".

As a result of the criticism, FEMA management was tightened and politi-

cal control in the Clinton administration was placed in the hands of James Lee Witt, who had been director of emergency management for the state of Arkansas. There are still a multitude of federal programs to coordinate, but most fall under the FEMA umbrella and the agency is charged with providing rigorous training, disseminating information to state and local levels, and providing financial and technical assistance. Florida, for example, has had both national hurricane conferences and governors' conferences in the past several years. Director Witt has become a familiar face and a powerful proponent of emergency management programs in the state.

### **State Responsibilities**

Governors of each state have been charged with providing leadership in getting emergency plans in place and strengthening the link between the federal and local levels. Each governor has also appointed a state emergency official to oversee the state's emergency management system. Florida Governor Lawton Chiles set up the Division of Emergency Management under the Department of Community Affairs, and Joseph Myers was appointed to lead the emergency program, as per FEMA guidelines.

The most significant change in Florida emergency management has been Chapter 252, the Emergency Management Act, which amended Florida statutes to provide broad powers for the governor to order evacuations and to demand mutual aid agreements between counties, municipalities, and the state. Each local government must also prepare an emergency operations plan, and the municipalities must align all planning and operations with their respective county agencies. In effect, the Florida Emergency Management Act now empowers counties to approve not only the plans, but any request for aid by municipalities. Compliance, cooperation, and coordination are mandated by the state.

The coordination of state and local efforts has been enhanced by the state director of emergency planning whose office provides an extensive training program in each county at central emergency operations centers. These three- and four-day seminars are attended by fire, police, public works, and transportation officials as well as by representatives of volunteer organizations. The seminars offer simulations so that teams can learn to solve problems together to prepare for and respond to emergencies and to assess and assist in recovery operations. With the inclusion of Miami as a site for a portion of the soccer playoffs for the 1996 Summer Olympics, a special course in terrorism was added. There have also been exercises in the field dealing with nuclear radiation leaks and hazardous materials spills. Added to these training methods are the real incidents encountered as agencies deal with massive brush fires and tornadoes. As a result of these changes, the capabilities of state and local agencies have been expanded, and the capacity of the statewide system to handle major disasters has been enhanced tremendously.

### County and Municipal Responsibilities

The central players in a potential disaster scenario today are the emergency operations centers (EOC) in the various counties. "An effective functional EOC is the key to successful emergency response and recovery operations" (Eberle 1996). Local government employees conduct their daily business from offices that are widely dispersed. However, when a major emergency or disaster occurs, centralized management is needed to enable coordinated response by the policymakers, other emergency personnel, and representatives from any other organizations that have emergency responsibilities. Critical management and coordination is accomplished under emergency conditions by providing a single site from which key officials and staff can operate. The EOC also focuses advance planning and coordination efforts as the landfall of a hurricane threatens and helps officials trigger successive levels of activation before actual landfall takes place. All preparations and emergency procedures should be carefully orchestrated in advance.

Miami-Dade County, with a population of over two million residents (one seventh of Florida's population), has responded by greatly enhancing its own Office of Emergency Management. In addition to the county EOC, there are seven divisional centers maintained by local emergency managers in the cities of Miami, Hialeah, Miami Beach, North Miami, North Miami Beach, Coral Gables, and Homestead. These divisional EOCs also cover other smaller municipalities in their plans. The city of Miami, for example, includes four smaller contiguous communities, El Portal, Key Biscayne, Miami Shores, and North Bay Village, in the planning, training, and other functions of the city's EOC. Fire Chief C. A. Gimenez, who heads the emergency operation for Miami, the largest municipality in Dade County, commented in response to our survey that "during the threat of Hurricane Bertha . . . , we were able to perform a preliminary test of this new organizational structure, and it appeared to work well."

Despite the new efforts, some counties and many other local governments had not completed an emergency management plan as required by the state under Statute 252, although all counties were issued compliance criteria when the statute took effect in 1995. And few municipal and county charters, as the following survey data indicate, were amended to implement the state procedures. Although the statute does not require municipal governments to amend their charters through passage of an ordinance, this action would clearly delineate the power and authority of a designated official in the event of a disaster and would provide for continuity of government. Counties were to have completed and submitted their emergency plans to the state by the end of September 1996.

### Changes Can Be Made to Improve Regional Cooperation

Emergency management in the state of Florida may be improved by the establishment of a coordinated county system with the participation of all municipalities in a regional council in which each constituent government has equal representation. This kind of system has been functioning in San Diego County, California, and has been considered a model of metropolitan area emergency management by professionals in the field. This organization, with its administrative and functional task groups to coordinate and manage regional efforts, is a model that could be emulated easily in south Florida and elsewhere in the state. The San Diego council is financed half by the county and half by municipalities, based on population and tax base. Each municipality and the county have one vote and together elect a Disaster Council which operates under a Joint Power Agreement. In addition, the San Diego organization is complemented by California's "operational area" concept and coordinated by state staff which facilitates communication between county councils both for emergency operations and administration and for planning.

There is a precedent in Florida for a regional approach. State Regional Planning Councils, which originally reviewed developments of regional impact under the old A-95 Federal grant review process, were retained by the state of Florida in the form of district councils representing elected officials within three-county regions. The councils have professional staff who monitor and analyze regional issues. In fact, the District XI Council, which includes Monroe, Dade, and Broward Counties in south Florida, recently concluded a major study of evacuation routes. Moreover, the Emergency Planning and Community Right-to-Know Act of 1986 requires Local Emergency Planning Committees (LEPCs) to provide consolidated plans for dealing with hazardous materials. The plans must also meet the approval of the Florida State Emergency Response Commission before being sent to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the National Response Team. The plan is intended to provide policy direction for all government agencies, organizations, and private facilities as well as to provide detailed operating procedures to be used by "first response" public safety agencies charged with the need to protect the public's health and safety from discharge or release of extremely toxic materials. A special task force of emergency officials from District XI produced the detailed plan. One of the participants in the planning effort was Assistant Chief Charles Lanza of Dade County, who has been director of the Dade County Office of Emergency Management since August 1995.

Also, "Eastward Ho!," a study involving the South Florida Regional Planning Council in conjunction with the Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council, was in response to an initiative of the Governor's Commission for a

Sustainable South Florida. The study was funded by the Florida Department of Community Affairs, the parent agency of the state's emergency management division. The report focused on economic revitalization and infrastructure improvement as well as on the protection of south Florida's wilderness areas, and included an assessment of the coastal ridge in the three county area that offers a natural defense against flooding associated with storm surges during hurricanes.

A companion study and action program was concluded under the Southeast Florida 2025 Project. This initiative seeks to create a comprehensive vision of the region's future by building partnerships and collaboration among the four southeastern counties in the state. And, finally, a four-county organization, the South Florida Regional Disaster Medical Assistance Team (DMAT), was created by Chief Lanza. The DMAT can deliver emergency medical services wherever needed in the region and can deploy a field hospital if needed. The bylaws of the DMAT call for a seventeen member board of directors to represent interest groups ranging from fire services, communications offices, trauma centers, and the South Florida Hospital Association.

These illustrations of regional organizations and agencies demonstrate that a regional approach to emergency management can be implemented in the state of Florida and can be valuable in coordinating emergency management efforts among jurisdictions whether the association is voluntary in nature such as the DMAT or is mandated by the state. The advantage of using the regional planning councils is that the existing organizations are already in place and have professional staff who could be augmented in number and technical skills with the increase in responsibilities. Another alternative would be to place emergency operations within the parameters of Project 2025, with the Department of Community Affairs. This higher level regional council could be elected from the representative county-level councils.

There are potential problems in terms of:

1. Conflicts regarding the Division of Emergency Management's responsibilities under Statute 252 "to maintain a comprehensive statewide program of emergency management, coordinate with the efforts of the Federal government, with other state departments and agencies, and with county municipal governments, school boards and private agencies that have a role in emergency management" (Florida Statutes 1995).
2. State statutes that permit each political subdivision to have power and authority "to appropriate and expend funds and to request state assistance or invoke emergency-related mutual aid by declaring a state of local emergency if only affecting one political subdivision" (Florida Statutes 1995, p. 16).
3. The necessity to change local government charters to establish clear

direction for emergency management efforts by placing the responsibility in the hands of a designated official and stating the procedures to be taken, including clearance with the county emergency operations center.

4. Incorporation of even more municipalities in Dade and other counties which will further fragment the intergovernmental system and complicate coordination.
5. Development of additional neighborhood planning and zoning councils in unincorporated areas of Dade County which will further devolve planning responsibility and fragment authority over land-use regulation, building codes, floodplain management, road planning, and public access—thus complicating mitigation efforts.
6. Development of channels of communication to assure effective coordination of emergency planning and operations, adequate provision of information to the public, and appropriate cooperation among elected officials.

### The Survey

To determine the willingness of elected officials to consider a regional plan, questionnaires were sent to all elected officials in 97 municipalities in the four counties popularly called the Florida Gold Coast as well as to the boards of commissioners in each county. Questionnaires were returned anonymously or signed by the respondent. The survey was sanctioned by officials in the Dade County EOC, although the research was an individual effort sponsored by St. Thomas University. Those who responded personally (one-third of the total surveyed) indicated near universal acceptance of the regional cooperation concept. It should be noted that the survey was purposely targeted at elected officials, although it was passed on by twenty-two elected officials to the emergency coordinator in their community. The coordinators were 100 percent in favor of a regional organization.

A letter of request and an explanation of the survey were mailed to 533 elected officials at the peak of the 1996 hurricane season in August. One hundred and seventy-five officials responded, representing 82 percent of the 97 jurisdictions, for a response rate of 32.8 percent. The highest rates of return were from Monroe followed by Broward, Palm Beach, and Dade Counties (in that order).

**Table 1. Attitudes of Local Officials in South Florida  
Toward Emergency Management (in percentages)**

Statement	Percent in Agreement					
		All	Broward	Dade	Monroe	Palm Beach
(E=Elected Officials, A=Administrators)						
Emergency management preparedness is crucial	(E)	99	100	100	100	98
	(A)	100	100	100	100	100
Our local emergency plan is completed	(E)	80	91	72	71	75
	(A)	68	78	67	100	33
We have adequate agree- ments for mutual aid	(E)	77	85	55	86	79
	(A)	74	89	50	0	100
Our community may need additional outside aid	(E)	68	57	86	71	68
	(A)	74	78	83	0	67
We have an individual who heads emergency operations who is empowered to take action	(E)	94	98	86	100	93
	(A)	95	100	83	100	100
We have an official who will formally (A) request assistance if this is necessary	(E)	97	98	97	100	96
	(A)	100	100	100	100	100
Our community is in a state of readiness	(E)	71	89	62	71	58
	(A)	79	78	83	100	67
I believe a regional plan for disasters is imperative	(E)	97	98	100	100	93
	(A)	95	100	100	100	67
I would welcome (E) additional cooperation	(E)	86	94	90	100	75
	(A)	89	89	83	100	100
All four southeast (E) counties may be affected	(E)	82	82	83	100	79
	(A)	89	89	100	100	33
Our municipality/county has made provision for a declaration of emergency	(E)	84	94	72	71	81
	(A)	84	100	83	100	67
Our charter has been amended accordingly	(E)	38	45	28	29	37
	(A)	37	44	50	0	0

One of the first things evident from the survey data is that 99.4 percent of the respondents thought emergency management to be crucial. As the following table illustrates, 80 percent of the elected officials believed that their local plan was complete, while only 68 percent of the administrators thought that the task had been completed. That pattern is consistent with the responses to the other statements in the survey. Most of the elected and appointed officials believed that adequate agreements for mutual aid are in-place and their jurisdictions are in a state of readiness. By and large, both groups generally agreed on the factual questions of whether there is a designated individual empowered to act in emergencies and someone who can formally request assistance. The support for regional coordination and planning was very strong in both groups, although only about two-thirds of the administrators from Palm Beach County indicated support for regional planning.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

Other than the mayor of a smaller community in Palm Beach County who stated that he was not interested in the county, state, or federal governments, nearly all the comments on the survey indicated interest in receiving more information and participating actively in any future regional undertakings. The salience of emergency management as an issue was manifest in the responses. However, because local elected officials are primarily part-time and government is run on a day-to-day basis by professional public administrators, some community officials had little time or perhaps little inclination to respond to the survey. No responses were received from seventeen communities. On the other hand, the mayor of a Dade County community instructed his legal staff to contact the survey source for further information so that they could develop an enabling ordinance dealing with emergency management.

San Diego County officials strongly suggest an executive course for all elected officials, including school board members, as well as other public administrators. The course should enable those who make operational decisions and policy to understand the full scope of emergency management and the laws mandating compliance. Because requirements and technical capabilities relating to disaster planning do change, refresher briefings are also necessary. And, as all involved in major catastrophes will testify, every public employee may be drafted into service, and all should understand their roles. Moreover, if a unified county council concept were to be adopted, the training should stress the organizational levels and functions and the general need for executives to support the state requirements and the basic operating requirements for emergency centers.

Emergency management is of paramount importance in the functioning of

government and the health and safety of their constituents. Florida's Chapter 252 is a step in the right direction, and with a little fine-tuning can be used to create an emergency management coordination and communication structure with a regional component. Given the responses to the survey here, such a strategy would be welcomed by local government officials. The state also needs to follow up on non-compliance by local governments with Chapter 252 requirements. It is possible that the statute needs to be amended to give county governments the authority to assure that municipalities complete their plans and implement necessary programs. Unified councils might also be required by statute to provide for coordinated regional action.

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