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The principles as the foundation of emergency management

William L. Waugh, Jr., PhD

The process that began in early 2007 to define the profession and practice of emergency management produced a set of eight principles, as well as a new definition, vision, and mission statement. The group of local, state, and federal emergency managers and academics that met at the Emergency Management Institute in Emmitsburg, Maryland, tried to identify the values that underlie modern emergency management. The group included individuals drawn from IAEM, NEMA, the NFPA 1600 committee, the EMAP (Emergency Management Accreditation Program) Commission, the private sector, the academic community, and other groups. The objective was to identify the core values and functions that have been learned over the past 50 years as emergency management evolved from its narrow Civil Defense focus to a more comprehensive, all-hazards focus. The impetus for the effort was not just the poor response to Hurricane Katrina. It was frustrations built over many years as lessons had to be learned over and over again. The events on the Gulf again demonstrated that many public officials, the media, and the public did not understand the role and function of emergency managers and too often confused them with first responders. In fact, emergency managers themselves had difficulty explaining their own functions. As a consequence, best use was not made of available expertise.

The objective of the group was not to create principles for emergency management; rather it was to identify those already accepted by the profession and in common practice. Many of the principles were based upon costly lessons. For example, the failure of command and control systems in major disasters was a lesson drawn from decades of experience dealing with hurricanes, earthquakes, wildfires, terrorist attacks, and other major disasters. The necessity to integrate

nongovernmental organizations into disaster operations required new mechanisms of coordination and more collaborative decision processes. The need for flexibility and scalability also required new approaches. The emergency manager facilitates disaster operations and promotes risk reduction. The line between emergency response and emergency management is often difficult to discern, because many communities do not have professional emergency managers and the role is filled by part-time officials drawn from the fire or police department. Some communities simply do not have anyone filling the emergency manager role and coordination in large-scale operations can be a serious problem. It is essential that the role and function of emergency management and the need for qualified professional emergency managers be well understood. The Principles of Emergency Management can provide a foundation for that understanding.

According to the Principles, emergency management is or should be as follows:

Comprehensive: Comprehensive emergency management involves all-hazards, all phases or functions, and all sectors. The broad view of the role fits the scope of "programs" as defined by NFPA 1600 and the EMAP standards and the assumptions that underlie the Certified Emergency Manager (CEM©) program.

Risk-driven: Emergency management, to be effective, has to focus on real, measured risk. The first priority of emergency managers is to protect their own communities. Therefore, planning, resource allocations, and policy priorities have to address the

hazards that pose the greatest risk to communities.

Integrated: Emergency management involves bringing together all levels of government, the private sector, and nongovernmental organizations, as well as volunteers, and making them part of the effort to deal with hazards and disasters. Links to nongovernmental organizations and the private sector and receptiveness to volunteers are essential.

Coordinated: Emergency management focuses on organizing all stakeholders behind a common purpose. The coordinative role is evident in emergency operation center functions. It also reflects the notion that emergency managers coordinate, rather than direct, emergency operations.

Collaborative: Emergency management is based upon genuine collaboration, rather than command-and-control. Genuine collaboration is a process of relationship building. Mutual trust and open communication are critical elements of those relationships.

Flexible: Emergency management requires adaptability, innovation, and improvisation. Inflexible plans and organizational

structures reduce flexibility and, therefore, should be avoided.

Progressive: Emergency management requires learning to anticipate and prepare for future disasters. Disaster resistant and disaster resilient communities are goals.

Professional: Emergency management is a science- and knowledge-based profession. Ethics, education, training, experience, public stewardship, and continuous improvement are essential to the practice of emergency management.

The eight principles have largely been accepted within the profession. But, they are not written in stone. There is a process for reconsideration and revision of the principles. Future lessons may well suggest other principles and it is critical that emergency managers reexamine their assumptions and improve their performance. Effective program management is also critical and emergency managers need expertise in planning, organizing, coordinating, evaluating, and resource allocation, as well as some knowledge of the science of natural and man-made hazards, including terrorism. Educating officials, the media, and the public about the importance of emergency management and the role of emergency managers is a starting place.

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