"Cross-Sector Collaboration During Emergencies is No Longer a Best Practice; It is a Necessity"

By: Thomas Henkey, Posted on: May 14, 2018

With extensive recovery from the record-breaking hurricane season of 2017 still very much underway, it is sobering to consider that the 2018 season for the Northern Hemisphere is already upon us. With no fewer than 17 named storms, and four hurricanes – Harvey, Irma, Maria, and Nate – making landfall over the United States, the past season was especially active.

As the tumultuous 2017 ground to a close in November, the hurricane tab stood at $203 billion in the U.S. alone. Consider that this staggering figure does not include other nations impacted by a particularly active tropical storm season, but also excludes a majority of the recovery-phase costs associated with Maria and other late-season storms.

Not surprisingly, the severity of this exceptional storm season seriously strained traditional response and recovery models. In recent years, professionals within the related fields of disaster science and emergency management have cited cross-sector collaboration as a best practice. 2017 made it clear that such collaborative interactions are an absolute necessity.

The fact is that no individual organization has the capacity and bandwidth to respond to disasters of this scope and scale. While

hurricanes provide a particularly stark example of this phenomenon, in the United States alone, 2017 also included widespread wildfires and mass shootings that exceeded the capacity of a single governmental jurisdiction. Collectively, and in practical terms, this range of hazards means that emergency managers from the Gulf Coast to the Las Vegas Strip to California wine country must be prepared for high-impact, mass-fatality incidents.

These crises have very different causations, and different lead times. Yet they each exceed the response and recovery capacities of a single governmental jurisdiction. In the U.S., this means requesting the assistance of state and federal assets, as per the established procedures dating back to at least 1989 and the implementation of the Stafford Act. The hurricanes, wildfires, and mass shootings of 2017 did have one very important element in common: the absolute requirement that nonprofit and private-sector assets be a part of any successful response and recovery efforts.

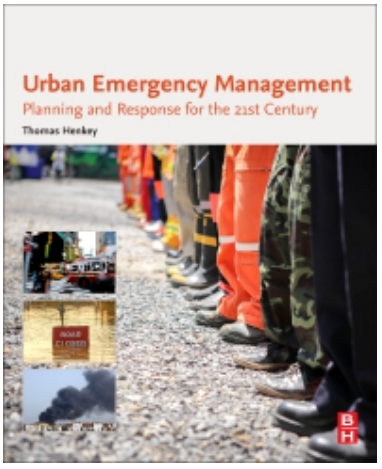
Perhaps the most visible example followed the unprecedented 50 inches of rainfall that Hurricane Harvey delivered to the already flood-prone metropolitan area of Houston, Texas. As the relentless rainfall created ever-expanding areas of serious flooding, the capacities of local and state resources were undeniably outstripped. Que the “Cajun Navy” – a ragtag but capable group of volunteer small-boat owners who descended on Southern Texas from neighboring counties, and from parishes across the border in Louisiana. The entire operation was coordinated by a volunteer leadership aligned with the existing emergency management structure and communicating internally on smartphones and tablets via new messaging applications (or apps).

This deployment by non-governmental resources is not unprecedented. Within two weeks of Hurricane Katrina making landfall in 2005, the American Red Cross had deployed 75,000 trained volunteers to the Gulf Coast region. By way of

comparison, a total of 7,500 federal troops were activated within the same region at the time the storm came ashore.

This model will not be the exception going forward, but rather the rule. Regardless of causation – natural, human-caused, or hybrid – mounting a successful response and recovery to widespread or mass-casualty emergencies will require resources from across all sectors. Richard Sylves defines intergovernmental relations as the interaction of federal, state, and local officials and officials of the private and nonprofit sectors, as they collectively implement public policy. This provides a fine example of cross-sector collaboration through the academic lens.

My text *Urban Emergency Management: Planning and Response for the 21st Century* seeks to provide additional operational context on the topic as well. It notes that the most important role that an emergency manager can play is that of Collaborator in Chief – the connective tissue that holds together disparate interests and stakeholders before, during, and after a disaster. It is almost never easy, and rarely publicly acknowledged. And yet this liaison role fills a critical void between other professionals, and in the best of circumstances, will motivate them to align behind a common set of goals and objectives.



It is a rapidly evolving world of hazards and threats, and in order to minimize the loss of life and property, the twin fields of disaster science and emergency management must stay ahead of the curve. Collaboration will provide a crucial resource in achieving this overarching objective.

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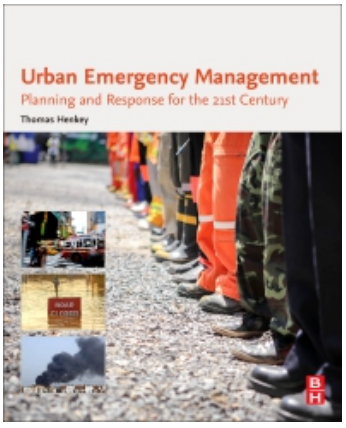
About the Book



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About the Author

Thomas Henkey served for six years as Senior Emergency Management Coordinator for the City of Chicago, where he was responsible for disaster planning and response, as well as special events, physical-security, infrastructure, transportation, and antiterrorism analysis. He has a dozen years in private-sector security management, now serving as Director of Emergency Management at Titan Security Group, where he guides emergency and crisis planning and response for a range of commercial and governmental clients.

Mr. Henkey is a Certified Emergency Manager (CEM), a Certified Institutional Protection Manager (CIPM II), and a member of the International Association of Emergency Managers, the ASIS Cultural Properties Council, and the Chicago Council on Global Affairs. He is an adjunct instructor at DePaul University and the Fraternal Order of Police, and serves in leadership roles with the Chicago Cultural Properties Security Group and the Building Owners and Managers Association Preparedness Committee. Mr. Henkey holds undergraduate degrees from St. Louis University, and a Master's Degree in Emergency and Disaster Management from American Military University.