

Eric's Corner
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What's the Best Place on the Organization Chart for Emergency Management?

It is a continuing issue of where to locate an emergency management program in government and also in the business sector. The two major options are to either have it operate independently under the chief elected official, or be part of a larger department. While this is being debated for FEMA now, the same issue is always under consideration in governments and businesses across the nation.

Many individual emergency management programs have been located in several different settings. I know one that was under the mayor, then the fire department, then general administration and finally law enforcement has had its turn at having the function. The history of King County emergency management has seen it be under the sheriff, under the county executive and then in an administrative department. This movement in the placement of the program is not that unusual.

The "book solution" has always been that the best place for the emergency management function is directly under the chief elected official so that there is a personal connection and the authority of that office to support the accomplishment of the necessary program elements during all phases of emergency management.

There are "upsides" and "downsides" to each option, even the one of being directly under the chief elected official. For example, you could find yourself in the position of working for someone who doesn't know or care about the emergency management function. Most elected officials live in the here and now, worrying about something that "might happen" is not natural for them. Another issue for a stand alone organization is that when budget cuts come, there is no parent organization to protect you. You most likely will have to take your cut along with the rest of the departments reporting to the executive. Lastly, when you are close to the political leadership, you can get caught up in the political issues of the jurisdiction. If you are closely aligned with the elected official others may not want to play ball in retaliation for some perceived offense that has nothing to do with your own program.

The other alternative is to be part of a larger organization. Many states for example have emergency management aligned with their National Guard organization. In this particular case it might allow you have a closer working relationship with the Guard and have faster access to some of their specialized resources like helicopters that come in handy during disaster response activities.

Being part of a larger organization also provides the opportunity, but not the guarantee that when budget cuts have to be taken you could be protected. Personally I

experienced this several times when Animal Control raised their fees for pet licenses due to declining budgets, and because of their action our Office of Emergency Management was protected from taking a budget cut for the next year.

There are also downsides to being part of a larger organization. If you are placed in an administrative department they may not have a good understanding of your function and mission, especially when it comes to disaster response. I've been stymied by a larger organization when we needed to do emergency purchases during a disaster response and they were intent on following all the typical bureaucratic rules that must be followed for normal operations. Additionally, they might not provide any significant support for your program in assisting with influencing other organizations to participate in planning and disaster exercises as two examples.

Another issue to recognize is that your program will be influenced by the parent organization. If you are associated with law enforcement than it is possible that you will have a stronger terrorism focus over one that is natural hazards focused. National Guard organizations are strong on disaster response, but they are back cleaning up their equipment during disaster recovery.

In reality emergency management can function well in many circumstances. The key issue is the leadership and support that it is provided either by the elected official directly, or through the auspices of a parent organization. Good leaders will provide guidance and mentorship, resources. They will run interference, and buffer you from extraneous issues so that you can concentrate on making your community disaster resilient.

Remember that the grass or the funding is not always greener on the other side of the org chart!