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Evolving The Emergency Management Enterprise to Meet a New Operational Reality: A State Perspective

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Background

In November 2022, the Belfer Center, with support from McKinsey & Company, brought together a diverse group of leaders from the emergency management community to discuss the evolving nature of emergency management, the challenges the enterprise faces, and solutions and strategies to better prepare for the new, poly-crisis climate. Among those leaders were Homeland Security Advisor (Colo.) Kevin Klein¹ and State Coordinator and Deputy Homeland Security Advisor (Va.) Shawn Talmadge.² They graciously agreed to participate in a facilitated dialogue with Belfer Center Fellow Nate Bruggeman³ to further explore the themes and issues discussed in November 2022.⁴

- 1 Kevin Klein is the director of the Colorado Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management in the Department of Public Safety and the Governor's designated Homeland Security Advisor.
- 2 Shawn Talmadge serves as the Virginia State Coordinator of Emergency Management and Deputy Homeland Security Advisor. Prior to this position, he was the Deputy Secretary of Public Safety and Homeland Security and the Governor's Homeland Security Advisor.
- 3 Nate Bruggeman is a Fellow at the Belfer Center's Homeland Security Project and the Executive Editor of its Homeland Security Policy Paper Series.
- 4 The participants engaged in an initial interview. The facilitator and participants edited the transcript of the interview for clarity and completeness.

Nate Bruggeman (NB): Can you describe the nature of the relationship among federal, state, and local governments with respect to emergency management and how those relationships, roles and responsibilities have been evolving?

Kevin Klein (KK): The perception is that the federal government, FEMA [the Federal Emergency Management Agency], is going to be there when an event exceeds state and local capabilities. They are there as a safety net and that they're going to be there, write a check, and make everybody whole. But that's really not true. Ultimately, trying to make people whole, or as best as you can, really comes through the states and down to local jurisdictions. What we're up against with the increased frequency and severity of disasters the safety net needs to get bigger.

Our overall model was established to be a big effort, on an infrequent basis because disasters were few and far between. It is different now, and we have to figure out how to do a big effort on a sustained basis addressing concurrent disasters. That challenge is particularly difficult at the federal level given everything they're called on to do. But it also is happening at state and local levels where we're getting concurrent disasters and poly-disasters—the disaster within the disaster. For example, COVID running through a fire camp. Flooding associated with wildfire that's occurring simultaneously. Not only are we seeing these things more and more frequently, the disasters are increasingly complicated.

Our new model needs to take these changes into account. It is no longer the case, especially in some of these mega fires and post-fire flooding, that they're separate incidents. They're the same root cause. But our current approach attempts to keep them separate. We're never going to catch up until we actually evolve the model to meet the current environment.

Shawn Talmadge (ST): I love what Kevin's talking about. We have this saying in emergency management and crisis leadership that “disasters begin and end locally.” We have to remember that the entity having the greatest opportunity to improve response, recovery, and resiliency overall is the locality. And then you layer in support, but you have to recognize that the state and feds are not there to make them whole.

It's really about coordination; it's supporting the effort our locals are executing and focusing on the potential gaps they have in response. There are a couple of key things happening here causing this change in expectations nationally. The role of social media when an emergency occurs: it's almost instantaneous in how it shares information across a state, nation and globe. That increasing level of information sharing has incredible ramifications, sometimes making a local disaster become an

event of national importance much quicker and more often than ever before, which is not a huge problem since we want to know when disasters occur. However, social media is a problem when impacts are exaggerated or when it contains misinformation.

There also are community expectations implications, which are, “Hey, I expect immediate emergency response. I expect an immediate recovery. I expect to be whole following a disaster.” Nobody’s educating our public saying that’s just not how it works.

And, finally, FEMA’s doing an incredible job of improving their processes, and what I really appreciate is they’re open to feedback and their intent is good. But remember, their primary role is supporting the states. And folks like me and Kevin, we have to coordinate very closely with our localities to understand their gaps so we can effectively coordinate with FEMA. FEMA can’t respond to an emergency and have resources on scene tomorrow. We have to plan ahead and understand our gaps, particularly at the local level, so that we can template what support we may need from the federal government and get those resources at the right place at the right time.

KK: To piggyback on Shawn’s point, we put a lot of emphasis on FEMA. We need to talk more globally about the interagency and how FEMA can come together with other recovery and resilience programs. Whether it’s economic recovery, infrastructure, or housing. I think there’s a larger role for a whole of government approach, particularly to long-term recovery.

FEMA does a great job at running projects, and we’re used to working with them. What we are not used to tapping are those other federal agencies that have existing programs that we might be able to repurpose to a recovery project or building resiliency. A real interagency approach to recovery and resilience is important to start looking at as we move forward. That is going to take a concerted effort and leadership from the very top to bring those other executive departments together and say, “How do we do this?” The usual players tend to do the usual stuff.

NB: Can you describe what the initial steps in this broader approach might look like?

ST: We should be asking how can we prepare for the recovery as the event is starting. Those conversations should be fully integrated in a response plan so that we can transition very rapidly. We should be asking things like, “Tell me about the community? How do they communicate so that we can put out announcements so we can get disaster recovery centers established at the right place and they have the right resources to engage the community.”

The point about linking response, recovery, and resiliency together is critical, and we've got to start doing that using a more holistic approach. Working or beginning to plan resiliency projects for long-term resilience building is so critical and, I applaud the executive branch for taking some first steps. They're trying to figure out how to leverage FEMA processes to manage non-Stafford Act events because the federal government wants a process to deal with those. It is essentially a consequence management working group composed of the deputies of relevant agencies with FEMA as the lead. The White House makes the decision when to activate this group and for what. This is a fairly new idea so I'm interested in seeing how it plays out.

This process is the federal government's attempt to fill that void. But notice what I said, it's to address consequence management only. The shortcoming is, "hey, we're going to activate this working group for a response and then we're going to deactivate it when the fire's out." But the work's not done at that point. We need to be planning, we need to be preparing, we need to be building resiliency everyday, using a coordinated effort.

That's why I really think we need to elevate FEMA and use them more as a response, recovery, and resiliency type organization. But I know that's going to be a tough initiative for the White House, Congress, and policymakers to adopt.

KK: That's the Bob Fenton⁵ role, right? Something unusual has happened, call Bob Fenton. The point is you need to call somebody who knows how to manage a situation even when it's not a traditional disaster setting. For example, I'm helping coordinate the response for housing and shelter for migrants arriving in Colorado. It's not a disaster, but it requires crisis leadership. It calls for the same tools and the same skillset that we need to manage disasters and emergencies and bring together a bunch of different agencies to deal with it. You might call it mission creep, but it really is just a different situation calling for the tools that we've built to be able to organize and respond.

I think the other element that is important is when there's a handoff, a return to steady state operations. Whatever the situation is we get to that point where a state or locality can handle it without FEMA or emergency managers. Getting to that position to go forward is important, and you should be thinking about it beforehand like Shawn was saying, baking that in pre-event so we know what to expect. We should know what we're going to do following an event, and we know who the players are.

5 Bob Fenton is the Regional Administrator for FEMA Region 9. Mr. Fenton has often been called upon to lead a federal response in unusual and difficult disaster and crisis situations.

NB: While this expanded approach should be a goal, it still isn't easy to accomplish, right?

ST: One of the struggles we're having is to leverage the whole of government approach and partner with all the different agencies at the federal level. They have different submission dates, different rules, different sharing cost. That's been a real challenge.

If there's a way that we can get the federal programs to better align, I think, for me, it would be fantastic because it would enable a conversation at the state level to allow us to share resources a little bit easier. We're trying to make as much progress as we can with the different groups that we have to coordinate with; but I'll be honest, some of the stove piping presents challenges. Through these different grants I'd love to be able to leverage them and synchronize them in a way to, to really get after community resilience.

KK: Overcoming these stovepipes can be done. A good example of this is uniform grant management. When that started it was the end of the world for the different federal agencies if they all had the same grant management. Once they instituted the same standards for the applicants to work with, we knew what our playing field was regardless of whether we're dealing with the Department of Transportation or DHS or another department.

We need to take the same approach to other areas. For example, if we're using FEMA and HUD funding for a recovery project, the rules should be the same. Right now, the rules are different like with prevailing wages. It is unnecessary hoops and policies states have to jump through. We can maneuver through the differences, but it just makes recovery all the more difficult when agencies aren't aligned.

Finally, I'll just throw in here that we need to rethink how we're building resilience. How do we get to that next step where we've had a disaster, and we need to figure out how we'll build back better. That is easier said than done at the federal level. It doesn't really make sense to say to local communities after a disaster, "we want you to build resilience in, but you've got a 25% match on it," when they're just trying to get back on their feet.

NB: Presumably these types of challenges are going to become even more difficult given the changing disaster environment and climate change. Are we effectively addressing climate change and its impacts in our planning and processes?

ST: Look, it's the environment that we live in. The point of the matter is our environment is changing and we've got to work together to understand those changes and anticipate what our future looks like.

A big part of dealing with our future environment requires that we make investments today. We already know that \$1 today yields a \$6 or \$7 resiliency mitigation benefit in the future. But we're still not taking into account what our future looks like and preparing today. One example is building codes. We're not even willing to change our building codes because that's additional cost to building construction. But in planning for this, we have to have a holistic approach and you're going to have to make decisions. We may need to move some communities. Or put some very expensive mitigation projects into place. Those are going to be tough decisions, but they have to be made. And it isn't just government decision-making but also individuals. A big concern I have is with underinsured homes, but we also need to recognize that our public wants the control to make fiscal decisions for themselves regarding insurance coverage until they face a disaster.

My point is we're struggling with basic mitigation efforts much less dealing with the challenges we face in the future. We do need to put in a lot more effort and synchronize these programs at the federal and state level. The good news, we are seeing many states having the conversation and slowly making progress. Some states are just doing fantastic work in that space, and we can learn from them.

KK: I'd say that it is like us sitting at the shore watching the tidal wave come in. We've got a lot of good data that say we need to do more. But translating that into some of the more effective things like land use and building codes that Shawn was talking about is hard. That's where we need to move from—"the tidal wave is coming, you figure it out"—to actually leading.

For example, I can tell you that if we start with really strong land use and building codes, like Shawn mentioned, we're going to save houses. We're going to decrease our overall risk. We're going to be more resilient. But when we address one problem, sometimes we affect other problems. How do we provide housing, address affordable housing, at the same time that we're hardening our homes and increasing the cost of housing in order to build resilience into homes. Are we going to price more people out of the market and make the affordable housing problem and homelessness worse?

It doesn't mean don't do it. What we need is to come together with cities and communities, developers and home builders, and policy makers to start talking about balancing these considerations and what solutions, such as increased housing density, might be. Then we start decreasing costs on housing and, at the same time, we can start building in more resilience. The point is that, as we're addressing these issues, we need a bigger effort to bring in stakeholders who may not always be aligned. And if that's our goal, we can get a bunch of big brains together and start thinking about ways to do it where stakeholders have their interests addressed, as opposed to somebody getting something and somebody losing something.

It is a matter of leadership and bringing people together with different equities to start talking about how do we meet the challenge and build a more resilient future for ourselves.

NB: Beyond traditional natural disasters, we've seen the emergency management community be called upon to address various other crisis—the fentanyl epidemic, homelessness, the southwest border crisis, COVID. How are your jobs changing?

ST: This idea of crisis leadership is basically about expectation and the need to protect our communities. What's really awesome about emergency managers or crisis leaders and crisis management teams is the coordination structure and planning framework we bring to the fight. People like me and Kevin, we're not in charge. We bring the experts to the table and facilitate a conversation to solve complex problems and develop shared objectives.

We ask them, "Let's analyze our situation. Develop some objectives and get after the problem." Our process and approach don't have to be applied only to a "natural emergency disaster." It can be anything. A civil unrest. A pandemic. It's a problem-solving tool, and we have a toolbox full of capabilities that we can bring to bear. It's about information flow, organizing a response, and allowing senior leaders to make well-informed decisions.

Are we emergency managers? Or are we crisis leaders? I love that term. Leaders implies that we're flexible; we're nimble; we're forming teams; we're building the capacity to more dynamically solve complex problems.

KK: A key thing to remember is that the emergency manager's role in interagency work is to bring different agencies together, force conversations, and force prioritizations. It's not that crisis management is necessarily a unique skill to emergency management, but it is one that we do every

day. So bringing us in on some problem to help other agencies figure it out is becoming more and more common. As time goes on, I think others will pick up on how we can help lead. If they're not already, they'll start asking us to do more of it.

NB: Can you talk a little more about community outreach and involvement in these processes? There has been a fair amount of discussion about making emergency management more inclusive and more fully involving disadvantaged communities. What does that really mean?

KK: On the idea of equity, one important point to remember is that those communities that are least able to recover are the ones that we end up spending a lot more time on. Ideally, we try to get in front of that. Obviously if we can build them up beforehand, that's the best approach, which means we need to think about how do we invest those mitigation dollars to build the resilience we've talked about. How we fund that is a big challenge.

The communities least able to afford a community mitigation project might be the ones that need it the most. FEMA is trying to do that with BRIC,⁶ but it also requires that a community have skin in the game, an ability to not only fund the project, but guide it and manage it. We at the state level and the federal government can do more to involve these communities, all the way back to even helping provide resources and capacity to apply for programs. I don't think we can say the federal government is the one that has to do that. There is opportunity for us at the state level to come in and help lead, but there will be some choices that have to be made.

Let me give you an example. There was a wildfire hazard mitigation project in Summit County, Colorado. The Buffalo Fire comes roaring in, hits the treated area and stops. There was a row of multi-million condos that were saved, but those were primarily second homes, vacation homes.

Compare that to doing a mitigation project for a mobile home park along the South Platte River. We can probably protect a lot more homes, primary residences, but we don't have anybody that's going to sponsor it. The utility is greater in that in that smaller community than it is in Summit County, which isn't to say they don't need to be protected either, but it is a question of where do we make those investments and how does that fit in with our equity goals?

⁶ BRIC refers to FEMA's Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC), which is a program to support jurisdictions undertaking hazard mitigation projects.

ST: I think effective emergency managers have been addressing these concerns for decades. It's about knowing your community. How do they communicate? What are the language barriers? What are physical and access and functional needs of that community? For example, one of our most effective large city emergency managers knows where he needs to pre-stage buses when an evacuation is required. He knows what part of the communities are transportation dependent.

What's important here is that folks like me and Kevin know our communities, and we're providing the right services at the right place, at the right time so that we can be effective. It's about saving lives and reducing suffering and understanding our communities and connecting with them. Being trusted agents is how we become effective emergency managers, and it starts at that local level.

Of course, at a state level, you have this diverse set of communities you need to understand. We have small towns and big cities. We have seven tribes in Virginia. Eastern shore culture is completely different than the mountains, and each has their own unique characteristics. The bottom line is we need to know them. We need to connect with our communities to serve them best.