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

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This paper is part of a continuing publication series for the **Global Crisis & Resilience Forum** led by Juliette Kayyem, Faculty Chair of the Belfer Center's Homeland Security Program. The forum is supported by McKinsey & Company. The ideas in these papers are the independent product of the discussants.

## 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 former FEMA Administrator Pete Gaynor<sup>1</sup> and former Deputy Administrator Rich Serino.<sup>2</sup> They graciously agreed to participate in a facilitated dialogue with Belfer Center Fellow Nate Bruggeman<sup>3</sup> to further explore the themes and issues discussed in November 2022.<sup>4</sup>

- 1 Pete Gaynor is a former Administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and Acting Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security. He currently serves as Senior Vice President and Director of National Resilience, Response and Recovery Programs at GEI Consultants Inc.
- 2 Rich Serino was the 8th FEMA Deputy Administrator and served as Chief at Boston EMS where he served for over 36 years. He was also the Assistant Director of Health for the City of Boston. He is currently a Distinguished Senior Fellow in Harvard's T.H. Chan School of Public Health.
- 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 how emergency management has evolved since you entered the profession?

**Pete Gaynor (PG):** When I talk about the profession of emergency management to other people, I try to remind them that we are a young, immature, not fully developed field. Think about other public safety professionals like police and fire. They've been around hundreds of years, while emergency management has been around for maybe 50 or 60 years. Police and fire professionals have lots of history, lots of trial and error, lots of evolution. We have a long way to go to catch up to our fellow brother and sister public safety partners.

But that said, since 9/11, and definitely since COVID began, the emergency management field has grown leaps and bounds to become more professional, more action oriented. The pandemic allowed the public to see what emergency managers really do. Their understanding may not be perfect, but they have a better feeling about what we do and our importance to their lives.

Although people are more familiar with what we do, there is still a challenge in getting people to take to heart some of the things we've been asking for years like preparedness. This isn't a one-sided equation where it's all on government or it's all on emergency managers to prepare the community. It is incumbent on all of us to have a role in having a more prepared community. When a disaster is knocking on their door, I believe many citizens are inclined to take actions that protect their family and property. But if you ask them to take some action that will improve their preparedness six months ahead of time, they have other priorities that get in the way. We have made some headway over the past decade or so, but we still have a long way to go before we create a universal culture of individual preparedness in this country. It's a process, but I believe we will get there.

Lastly, as a profession, emergency managers have to talk more about what we do for our community, whether that community's a tribe or a territory, state, local county, or the federal government. We need to take ownership and take some pride in what we do. I'm not sure as a profession we do that well enough.

## **NB:** What does the new operational environment look like for emergency management, and why is its evolution presenting challenges for emergency managers?

**Rich Serino (RS):** As we look at the current environment for emergency management, we must understand the concept of “poly-crisis,” and the idea of a billion-dollar disaster happening every 15 or 20 days. These large disasters are now happening frequently. That pace of disaster is challenging for national, state, local, tribal, and territorial emergency managers.

In addition to the frequency of disasters is the change in the types of issues to which we’re being asked to respond. It’s not just floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, and wildfires anymore. Emergency managers are dealing with fentanyl, homelessness, immigration, cyber, biosecurity, and terrorism. Those types of issues are not things that emergency management has typically been involved in. So, on top of the poly-crisis, we’re starting to see certainly domestically that the issues emergency managers are dealing with are changing, in particular at the state, local, tribal and territorial levels.

Emergency managers are being asked to coordinate or lead, which is justifiable because they can bring people together. Emergency managers do that better than anybody else. But it is changing the face of what emergency management is and what emergency management does. And a significant problem is that emergency management doesn’t have the resources to handle the poly-crisis, let alone all of these new issues.

When we talk about building stronger emergency management systems, we can’t do that in our silo or cylinder excellence. We have to look at strengthening related systems, for example, stronger public health systems and stronger public safety systems. Emergency management cannot replace all of those related systems and their unique capabilities.

**PG:** We are evolving from being a traditional emergency manager to something more in line with a crisis manager. The word emergency now sounds generic, and we’ve evolved from the generic emergency manager dealing with one event at one time that is familiar to us, like a flood or tornado. Now, we’re increasingly a crisis manager in the poly-crisis environment that Rich described. These events are intertwined and happening at once, or sometimes stagnant and never ending. With that transition we need to expand our traditional skills sets, skills like the expertise in how we understand and manage the supply chain. Resolving emergencies, disasters, and crises is all about our ability to pour critical resources into the problem at the right time. If we don’t understand our supply chain, even our best efforts will fall short.

We need to reframe who we are and our value to the community. We don't do just emergencies, we do crises. There isn't a clear lane for us anymore, as we are managing every kind of crisis. Look at FEMA managing aspects of a public health emergency like COVID. It isn't in the statutory FEMA mission. It's a health and human service mission by law. But FEMA comes to own part of it and many other issues like Afghan resettlement. Why would national leadership pick FEMA to do that, but they did because of the fact that we are the nation's problem solvers. So, you need to reframe the emergency manager role, what it was, what it is, what it is going to be in the future. We have a lot of growth ahead of us.

The nation is not going to stop asking FEMA and other emergency managers to respond. Whether FEMA is on fumes after COVID or is busy handling routine matters, when the president calls on the agency to lead, the answer is yes. Our culture says that we're going to go do it and we'll get it done. We are the nation's premier problem solvers. It may not be pretty, but it will get done. That's what is so admirable about the culture of emergency managers. After us, who are you calling? There's no one else to call.

**NB:** Do the traditional ways in which we've organized federal, state, and local responsibilities still make sense in the current environment and for the future?

**PG:** It sometimes seems like the answer to, "who do we call," is simply the people with "emergency" in their title. Why wouldn't we call them when they're responsive and effective. At the same time, we must learn that's the old model of being reactive. So, if emergency managers are going to be called more and more to do more complicated things, let's have a national crisis strategy and put on paper, into law, what everyone's role is. This isn't just about FEMA; this is about the integrated role of all of government (and our partners) in a national crisis.

This should move us beyond being reactive, as happened with COVID. We must be proactive, so when the next national crisis happens, we know who is going to do what and who is in charge. What we had during COVID was ad hoc; it worked, but we were constantly reimagining our approach. What we had developed didn't survive the first 48 hours. We need to get smarter as a nation before the next crisis strikes. Congress needs to proactively recognize the need to adapt and formalize our national approach to a crisis in law.

**RS:** Emergency management is complex to begin with, and when you are operating at the federal level, it becomes even more complex. What we need to do is begin to simplify—make it easier for the

survivors, which doesn't just mean people, but communities. We have to find ways to make it easier for folks to get the help they need.

Within that, we have to have clear roles and responsibilities. We both have called for a National Emergency Management Strategy and agree that a national strategy would be very helpful. FEMA has a great strategic plan. It's great for FEMA, but we have to look broader to more of a national emergency management strategy. How we're able to bring people together so people can understand and align roles, responsibility, and resources.

I'm not talking about a 300-page document. Consider, for example, the national strategy for cybersecurity, which is 34 or 35 pages. Canada's national strategy for emergency management is about the same length. The key is that we set a tone for where we need to go and what the roles and responsibilities are to do it. We're at a point of transformation for emergency management, a crossroads. We can't keep doing things the way we have been doing them.

**PG:** No one likes change, as most people prefer the path of least resistance and the way it used to be. Our biggest threat as emergency managers right now is returning to the status quo where we haven't embraced any of the lessons we observed and endured during our response to COVID-19. I think, as a profession, it's the worst trap that we could allow ourselves to fall into.

When it comes to finding additional capacity, under persistent funding and budgetary constraints, we have to look internally into our organizations. Are there things that we're doing that have no apparent value to the mission? Activities that we've been doing for the last 25 years because we have always done it that way. If you stopped doing it today, would people notice that you don't do it anymore? I'm sure all of us could find extra capacity in our organization by repurposing resources that no longer have value to the organization.

There may be things organizations need to shed that aren't really about the core mission. I'll pick a controversial item: Could FEMA shed its insurance mission to some other agency, to a standalone agency, or to the private sector? I'm not saying to do it or not do it. It's not that it's not important to the general mission of FEMA, but does it help the agency be more effective in managing the next national crisis. We shouldn't be afraid to ask the question and then, depending on the answer, act on it or at least seriously consider it. We must look from the bottom to the top and evaluate whether what we are doing moves the needle when it comes to managing a national crisis or some multi-regional crisis.

**NB:** When you're talking about a national strategy, where do other actors such as the private sector and non-profits fit in?

**RS:** Coordinating among governments entities is itself a challenge, and then adding in the private sector brings its own challenges. The goal is to have the private sector not just be observers, not just to be people who want information from us, but instead become real members of the team. The truth is that you can't achieve everything just through the government. It has to involve the private sector across the board.

Then you also have to involve the faith-based community and nonprofits along with academic-based research. Academia has a huge role to play; how do we ask them to, essentially, think big thoughts about our problems. If you look at public health and medicine, academia does a lot of that. They are looking at the science and data to support those fields. Emergency management doesn't have as much of that. The research into what emergency management can do is very minimal. We need to start getting out of our own emergency management silo, our cylinder of excellence to broaden our perspective.

And then the most important part is bringing in the public, the people, which we tend to still forget, even though they're the most important part of what we do. I see that as part of the national strategy.

I want to stress that it isn't a FEMA national strategy. It's an emergency management strategy. FEMA has some great strategic plans, but this is broader than just FEMA.

**PG:** I think our traditional view was that our primary partners were organizations like the Salvation Army and the Red Cross. Don't take this in wrong way, they still are critical to how we respond as a nation, but after COVID I think we have widened the aperture of the importance of the private sector. Historically emergency managers have tried to be good partners with business, but those partnerships weren't always clear. Fast forward to COVID-19 and when you're talking about finding resources, a lot of people assumed the federal government would just have everything that we needed. There must be warehouses across the country filled with every kind of resource you can imagine.

In some cases, the federal government had warehouses, like the Strategic National Stockpile, full of critical supplies. But when you apply those resources to a national crisis like COVID, it turns out that our resources were wholly inadequate or non-existent. Like a slap to the face, you then realize the federal government doesn't have the depth. You quickly realize that the answer is the private sector.

The private sector might not have exactly what you want or can't immediately deliver what you want, but they have the ability to flex and adapt. There are hundreds of amazing examples of how the private sector rose to meet the demand. Everything from the production of complicated medical devices like ventilators to the simple like medical paper masks. The power of the private sector came to our rescue during the pandemic, and I'm not sure many people realize this.

Let me give you a quick example. Early in the pandemic, FEMA was tasked to find personal protective equipment across the world; where it was, scour the globe and go find it. How does FEMA do that? We don't directly. We call our partners like Federal Express, UPS, and Radiant to help find it. For example, we had a lead on PPE in Shanghai, and we call Federal Express and ask, "Can you give us a 747 and go to Shanghai tonight to pick up the PPE?" They said, "Sure, we'll go." They did it on a handshake because we had a partnership.

The private sector is an important element of our national response that needs to be deliberately woven into our national crisis strategy. You have to have those relationships both locally and nationally with some of these private partners because when the really bad thing happens, the government's not going to have enough of what it needs.

**NB:** Related to the national strategy is whether we have adequately factored climate change and its implications into our planning and preparation.

**PG:** No, but I think we're starting to get there, for example in the last administration's creation of FEMA's BRIC grant<sup>5</sup> and the current administration's Infrastructure Act. These and other programs are starting to put some money behind the rhetoric, money for mitigation or pre-disaster investment.

The climate is changing. It's gotten worse, and we can't avoid that. I tend to look at climate change in two ways, one is the policy that drives change and the other is the more practical, operational component of implementing those tangible projects that improve our resilience as a result of climate change. For me as an emergency manager, I have always been concerned with the more practical, operational elements of climate change. If you believe the climate is changing, then operationally how do we actually fight against that.

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

In some cases, I believe we have diluted our efforts by overusing words like resilience. As I reflect on the meaning of resilience, it seems to have lost its meaning because we seem to use it in every conversation. If you want to change the direction we are headed, then you need actionable items we can do as a nation or in the smallest community. We need to talk about those things in more concrete terms, in ways that have real meaning to a local community. I'm interested in the action part of making the nation, making communities, more resilient to climate change. I think we're getting there, but I think as emergency managers, we need to be more specific and action oriented.

**RS:** We have a long way to go, and we need to broaden our thinking about it. For example, I was recently working on a white paper looking at the health effects of climate change. A big point for me with the team, which was a number of public health folks, was that we can't just be talking to health people about the health effects of climate change.

The point applies across disciplines. We can't just be talking about the effects of climate change on the environment. Or how it affects disasters. Our thinking needs to go across the spectrum. It's much broader, and so we need to start linking in and bringing different groups of people together. If we treat it as just an EPA problem, or just an emergency management problem, or just a resilience issue or health concern, people will end up addressing it in their own silos. And that's not going to work.

The first step is to bring people together, start having conversations, but then to move to the actions that grow from that based off reliable research, science, and data.

## **NB:** Can you describe some of the more particular challenges facing the emergency management profession?

**PG:** As a starting point, most Americans and probably the majority of leaders in government believe that there will be another national crisis, whether its COVID part two or some national multi-region power outage or something we haven't even contemplated yet. If you believe that the next crisis is inevitable, then you have to ask yourself, "how are we going to redesign ourselves to meet that challenge?" Congress is going to have to mandate some action. It must be passed as a law, and it has to be funded.

You can't just say do it, especially for FEMA. Consider this: when someone asks how many employees does FEMA have, we say 20,000. The truth of it is we only have 5,000 full-time employees. The balance of those employees are reservists or what are called the Cadre of On-Call Response/Recovery Employees (CORE). We have 5,000 full-time emergency managers working



for FEMA to manage all these different disasters and crises. It hasn't been enough, and it won't be enough for the future.

One particular gap we need to address is logistics and supply chain management. If you look at DOD, they have a long-standing, detailed understanding and grasp of the supply chain for the military. They have acquisition, procurement, supply chain, and logistics professionals throughout every service and the joint staff. They spend their whole career in the military doing nothing but making sure that industry produces the things we need as a nation to go to war with. FEMA doesn't have that skillset. Honestly, no one on the civilian side of federal government has that depth of knowledge or grasp of what I call the "civilian" supply chain. We don't really understand supply chains or acquisition at a national level to a high degree. That's a huge gap for the next national crisis, as we learned during COVID, and it is something the agency and Congress need to address.

So, if you want to change the way we do business, you're going to have to change the law. The emergency management community needs to better educate Congress. FEMA tries, but FEMA's only one element. The thing that we lack as a profession of emergency managers is a national platform articulating our priority issues. Once you have agreement on what is important to emergency managers across the nation, you take those specific issues to Congress and actively lobby as a cohesive unit of emergency managers from state directors to tribes to territories to local counties. We need to do better as emergency managers to get Congress to be helpful and take action that moves the needle. If you never tell Congress what the problem is, then guess what, they're not going to help solve that problem.

**RS:** Money is always a constraint, and how do we make sure the political leadership understands what emergency management is and then have the public understand its importance too? Elected officials at all levels are seeing the benefit of emergency management because they're giving them, as I mentioned earlier, responsibility or a role in a host of new issues. While it is great that they turn to emergency managers, they have to give them the resources to do the jobs they are being asked to do.

We also need to be thinking about how do we start developing people's trust. Government in general has lost trust. Public health has lost a lot of trust, for example. I don't think emergency management has lost as much trust as other areas. We had a huge loss after Katrina. It took about 10 years to rebuild that trust. As we saw, trust is fragile. We need to still be thinking about how we build trust, bring people together, and then in turn help build resiliency.

**NB:** Loss of trust is a significant challenge. What are some of the particular actions or approaches emergency managers should be considering to address it?

**RS:** Trust is hard to build, easy to lose. For example, following the train derailment in East Palestine, Ohio, the different actors started pointing fingers at each other. It's the federal government. It's the state government. It's the local government. Emergency management. Environmental agencies. Transportation officials. It's this one, it's that one. That kind of response erodes trust across the board, not just in Ohio, but all across the country. That was a major incident, but it wasn't a catastrophic one. Imagine the same response in a real national disaster.

We also need to be conscious of the emergence not just of misinformation, but purposeful disinformation. It's reached a whole new level. There are nation-states trying to exploit events, including incidents like East Palestine, to sow distrust and erode faith in our government. So how can we not only be conscious of the purposeful disinformation, but also put ourselves in a position to be able to combat it. That's to say nothing about the challenge posed by artificial intelligence.

To build trust, we need to take opportunities where they come along, where emergency managers are unifiers. A good example was after Hurricane Ian hit Florida, and the President and Governor DeSantis came together. They were polar opposites, but they came together at a time when people needed to see action and a unified purpose.

If disasters are happening every 15 or 20 days, that's a lot of opportunity to bring people together and be a unifying voice. Is it easy? No. It can't just be bottom up. It has to be bottom up and top down, engaging with the public at all those levels.

**NB:** What's your advice for the next generation of emergency management professionals?

**RS:** We have to build the next generation of emergency managers. Unfortunately, we don't have enough people coming into emergency management as a career. We have to have a system, jobs, and funding. I was recently at FEMA, and the message I was hearing was "We need people. We need more good people." And it isn't just at FEMA. We need people in our public health agencies and public safety, and other public service jobs. At the same time, there are a lot of young people saying, "We're trying to find jobs, but we can't." So obviously there's a bit of a disconnect, and we need to find ways to bridge that disconnect.

At the leadership level, one area that requires more attention is creating the conditions that allow more new people to come in, which is something we haven't done a good job at. One of the things from my time at FEMA I'm very proud of was creating FEMA Corps for 18-24-year-olds. They do a year of service to the country. They aren't paid a lot, but they get experience they can't get anywhere else. And then when they finish, they get money put towards either paying college loans off or paying for education—and that lead to full time jobs.

It's a great program and, thousands of people have gone through it. But now imagine a world where we have something broader, something beyond a one-year commitment. Let's make it into a jobs program for emergency managers. Or even broader a jobs program for emergency managers, public health jobs, public safety. When we build the next version of the enterprise, we have to start thinking much broader about how we bring people in.

We can make it easier for people coming into these professions because, right now, we make it hard. We put out job postings, but you need seven years' experience. Where do people get that experience? I think we have to step back and think bigger about how we're going to support the profession's growth. Personnel issues are one of the biggest issues that people are dealing with now, from recruiting new talent to dealing with issues like burnout, especially after COVID.

**PG:** I want young emergency managers to think and believe that someday they will be in senior leadership roles across the nation. If you're truly a professional, and you want to stay in this business, you need to believe that you're going to end up in a critical decision-making position. The field is narrow, and there aren't many of us. There's a high likelihood that, if you're talented enough, you're going to rise to a prominent position. When you believe in that possibility, then you do everything you can to make yourself ready for that day.

I do this leadership class, and I tell the story in Ernest Hemingway's book *The Sun Also Rises*. Two of the main characters, Mike Campbell and Bill Gorton, are discussing Mike's finances. Bill asks him, "How did you go bankrupt?" Mike answers, "Two ways. Gradually, then suddenly." That's the nature of this business. How did I find myself as the FEMA Administrator? As the Acting Secretary of Homeland Security? It happened "two ways. Gradually, then suddenly."

Do everything in your professional world to become the best emergency manager that you can, take on every challenge there is. Don't say no to a really tough job. A tough job no one wants to do is an opportunity to prove yourself and become known for solving really difficult problems. Challenge yourself along the way because someday you are going to be in the hot seat.

**RS:** I'd reiterate for the new professionals or people interested in emergency management to take opportunities when they come along. Do internships sometimes, hopefully paid, but even if they're not paid. Take tough assignments. Make connections. Go to conferences. And make sure you're building skills that the profession needs. For example, work on becoming a good writer and understand the technology that's coming out. I don't just mean simple technology. We need people that understand GIS, and now AI and applications such as ChatGPT. We need to shift how we think about these tools, and that's going to require people who really understand the technology inside and out, and how we can apply them to emergency management.