

Donald Duncan's Disaster Preparedness Checklist

Emergency Management begins and ends at the local level. If you want the most out of FEMA or your state emergency management, you must be ready to take advantage of it at the local level. The municipal or county manager sets the tone.

The following is a checklist that a local manager can take and modify for their own use as they see fit.

This is by no means comprehensive, so modify to suit your needs. These are in no particular priority and yet these are some of the things you should be doing well before a disaster strikes all the way to the 48 hours before. Many of these also work for man-made disasters even though they have little or no warning versus a storm event that may have a week's notice.

1. Emergency Preparation is the best response. I advise all managers to have all staff take the online courses for the Incident Command System. 100, 200, 700, and 800. These are easy and give you a basic vocabulary for emergency management in the United States and our western allies. These are easy upgrades to your resume as well.
2. For middle management and up to Director level, 300, and 400 level classes. These will need to be in person in a group setting with diverse teams for maximum impact. Different: departments, agencies, sexes, ages, and races. Directors and Executives must take these. Then onto more advanced courses like 3050 if you would like to deploy and assist a fellow agency or community.
3. Practice makes perfect. Tabletop exercises are great. A good tabletop takes at least 2 days of exercise and weeks of planning to be realistic and can be stressful and fun. 2 days away from the office, even though you are working for your community seems like an eternity.

Therefore, I invented the 20-minute tabletop. During leadership team meetings, take the last 20 minutes and run a scenario. If you need one, ask your local Emergency Management Team to build one for you.

Typically, these are in two or three parts. Start with the first and add another at a subsequent meeting then add in additional scenarios or complications. My favorite one and most complicated; the internet is down for an unknown reason. No details as to when it will return. What all does that affect? You still have power and you still have to provide services to your citizens. What do you do? Can you go back to pen and paper?

4. Build relationships now. Munis and Counties must work together. During this event and others, I have seen disastrous consequences for citizens when munis and counties are not cooperating during blue sky conditions. What happens to those relationships during a disaster? If you want the best real-world lesson, read the postmortem on the Charlottesville riots; Albemarle County did fantastic work breaking it down. It is a masterclass on what not to do.

5. Balance is key; Fund Balance that is. In NC munis and counties are required to maintain a minimum fund balance of 8%. Since 9/11 that has been steadily increasing to respond to natural and man-made disasters. Just like response, expect to be able to be on your own for at least 72 hours before help arrives. Money takes much longer.

In many cases you will have to wait 2-3 years before being reimbursed. Expedited funding from FEMA can take 4-6 months. In recovery you can expect to spend many thousands per day. As an example, Caldwell County, NC is spending more than \$30,000 per day just in debris removal and staff time. We are a small county of 80,000 people and have a 20% fund balance.

6. Everyone has a role to play.

My EDC found buildings and negotiated contracts for shelters and warehousing supplies, Librarians were organizing and vetting volunteers, the intern became the Governmental Affairs Officer, Tax Assessors became damage assessors, Agricultural Extension Agents became an operation chiefs for feeding livestock out of the back of helicopters, and the County Clerk took charge of organizing non-profits and churches to disperse donations to those who had lost everything, Public Health tested wells, checked on nursing homes, and made sure food supplies were safe because we had no electricity for weeks, Sheriff Deputies started rural search and rescue programs using ATV's to take supplies to those who were trapped, EMS became an oxygen supply and medicine distributor, and Animal Care Officers became community liaisons for FEMA.

Hence the reason for number 1. NIMS and ICS are critical.

7. For large event storms you may have a week or more warning. Yes, the forecast and track may change but these are opportunities to train and prepare.
 - a. Check on your people, begin with all hands meetings;
 - b. Define the problem; start off with forecasts or describe the threat, then start simple tasks. (NWS-State Police, FEMA, State EM, Governor, or FBI may participate in a portion of the briefing)
 - c. Announce when the State of Emergency will go into effect, if/should you need it,
 - d. Set orders for checking equipment, generators, chainsaws, trucks, plows, dozers, early warning systems, etc.
 - e. Check infrastructure, roof drains, stormwater, generators, etc.
 - f. Have quick reference guides for electeds, staff, and citizens,
 - g. Invite local governments utilities, state agencies. They may have similar meetings as well. try to coordinate with each other.
 - h. Also have quick reference guides for electeds, staff, and citizens.
 - i. All this activity will reset the mood and establish an emergency management mindset.
8. "All Hands-On Deck" meetings; these should start 72-48 hours prior to an event.

- a. Initial meetings can be online but once the power goes out and the "fit hits the shan" establish a daily meeting on site if possible.
 - b. Example: I did mine every night at 6:00pm for three weeks, then to twice a week and then once a week. I know the Town of Black Mountain told all the residents show up in town every day at 2:30pm and did the old town crier model. It ain't stupid if it works.
 - c. Set task/goals every day to work on the following day. Start off simple and achievable.
 - d. Invite electeds, utilities, DOT, and non-profits to attend. Recognize the parties in the room, give everyone a chance to speak but set the tone. This should be focused on moving forward, not a bitch and blame session.
 - e. Every meeting had four elements. We opened, we prayed, we said the pledge of allegiance, then the briefings from every participant. (for some that really seems to help, that may be the only normal thing they did that day)
 - f. I closed every meeting using the following;
 - i. Celebrate every win, no matter the size,
 - ii. Show appreciation and gratitude to all team members,
 - iii. Be attentive to employee well-being. Use this every day, not just in crisis.
9. Recovery is a long process. You should understand in a large multi-state disaster it will take many years. As a teenager I helped to respond in aiding family during Hurricane Hugo in 1989. 13 years later as a rookie town manager, I did the closeout paperwork.
10. Shelter and shelter management, might be the worst job in a disaster. That's why we need good people doing it.

There are tons of rules and regulations about shelter management. The main things you should know are this. The American Red Cross is a wonderful organization, but like most civic organizations, they are ageing out and have few resources and fewer staff. So, the task will be left up to local governments.

If you are a local government manager and you really want to help, offer to set up and staff a shelter. If you are not on the edge of the crater or in it; meaning, if your community was not hit, this is one of the most impactful things you can do. Think about it. Your community is hit with a Hurricane you don't have the ability to respond, rescue, house citizens, take care of your employees, and recover all at the same time. Use transit systems and surrounding counties to establish regional shelters.

11. What are D-SNAP benefits? These are essentially disaster benefits via Social Services to replace food lost due to power outages or the storm, they are available to a much broader economic sector. So, when it arrives, in a short window after the event, your community will be flooded with requests and the stores will be empty.

Therefore, relationships with other DSS agencies outside the disaster are critical to expedite signups. It's like Thanksgiving and Black Friday at the same time and it lasts a week or more.

Relationships with food distributors and stores are critical. Imagine pumping millions of dollars for food purchasing into your economy to some of the poorest people.

12. Managing volunteers can be worse than the disaster itself. They come from all over the planet. Most have good intentions; some do not. Many of the worst are right in your community and look to become disaster profiteers. Require volunteer check ins and background checks if feasible. Using satellite communications we were able to set up in the libraries and eliminate some potential threats. Local law enforcement did the background checks and libraries matched need to volunteer services. Once word gets out they will move onto other communities.
13. Scams and disinformation is a plague. With the advent of social media it has become more prevalent. Please work with your localities and have all PIOs coordinate with State and Federal agencies to warn against mis/dis-information. If you don't have a PIO because you are too small, contract one or beg a larger agency. I had four staff in Public Information and it still wasn't enough.
14. You need professional help.
 - a. Unless you are lucky enough to have dozens of Emergency Management staff with decades of experience you will need an Incident Management Team. They typically will arrive anywhere from 48 hours to one week after the event to aid in response and begin recovery. Do not turn them down.
 - b. Grants management, FEMA reimbursement management, and Hazard Mitigation Programs will essentially be another department for a few years. Think of it as a long term seasonal employee, 18-36 months or longer. I have hired both internal financial auditors and contracted grants management staff to keep everything on task. This is critical cause you and your team still have to do their normal jobs. **YOU NEED HELP**
15. Managing expectations of the public and your board. I cannot say it enough, and it will never be enough. Social Media can assist, but I have found in the immediate days after a disaster, that local radio, and Reverse 911 systems help a lot. Then of course print media. Get other members of your community, Municipal Managers, Pastors, those who are on the front lines to do radio spots and tell their personal stories to convey essential information. Then load those onto websites, social media, and turn them into messages for print media.
16. Pre arranged debris contracts. These are essential if you do not have one, get it now. Your state may have pre arranged debris contracts. These are a lifesaver but nothing like having your own.

If feasible, you should do them countywide with all the municipalities participating. It is great when you can work together and have the same plan. Make them good for 2 years and renew with updated costs every two years. Yes you will have to procure, but dammit it's worth it.

17. Debris Collection Sites:

- a. Every county and its munis (working together) need to have at least 6-8 sites, or more if you are a large county. These need to be 8-10 usable acres. In mountainous areas this is almost impossible. Any muni or county who has 8 usable acres is probably going put industry or housing on it. Hear me out.
 - b. Treat these areas as multi use facilities.
 - i. On blue sky days, these can be open space.
 - ii. In disaster preparedness, they can be pre-staging areas for equipment or training.
 - iii. In disaster response, they can serve as Landing Zones, for big green helicopters. Our Title 10, Reserves, and National Guard are amazing. They need places to work and operate.
 - iv. Long term recovery, they can become tent cities, or even areas for FEMA trailers.
 - v. For post disaster recovery they can then turn into Debris Management Centers. Debris management will be your biggest and most important headache. The single most effective thing you can do is clean up your community after a disaster. It is a visible sign your community is making progress. You can alleviate a significant mental strain on your citizens and your electeds by getting the place cleaned up.
18. Start a list of things that need to be fixed. Once the disaster begins, many will get frustrated and start blaming others. Every time I heard someone be condescending or complaining I took them into the next conference room put a dry erase marker in their hand used a whole whiteboard to start a list. It was cathartic and showed the team we took the problem seriously.
19. Bring in mental health professionals, pay for it, start with first responders (5-10 days in you will start to see burn out), then open it to all staff, then to the public. When you walk out of your home and see the world is permanently changed, the mental health consequences manifest quickly and in strange ways.
20. Set up a community call in line. When phones were working, we could head off a lot of problems and kept our 911 dispatchers from going insane.
21. Emergency Communications.. Rule number one in all emergencies, ESTABLISH COMMUNICATIONS. If you lose Comms you are useless. Redundancy is everything, 800mhz, UHF/VHF, HAM radio, SMS, text, and yagi antennas are all important. Copper lines, satellite internet/phone and redundant fiber is essential. TEST YOUR BACKUPS, pull the plugs on your main systems and let your staff learn in a controlled environment. Have the procedures written down, and all staff should review and train on them quarterly. (whatever a PlumCase is you probably need one.)
22. Interpersonal Relationships: if you do not know your school superintendent, the directors or key people in all utilities, gas, electric, telecom, water sewer, state emergency

management, Governor's office, Congress, etc. Trying to meet them during a disaster is too late. Get to know these people, have all their numbers, break bread with them. I cannot emphasize enough. Your interpersonal relationships will save you when you need it.

23. Pre-planning and logistics. Pre plan some disasters, have pre-arranged contracts, for engineering, food distribution, heavy equipment, fuel, back up comms, flyovers the list is endless.
24. Volunteer Air Force, this is truly a first world problem. Our country is so rich and powerful that we have people who show up by the hundreds with personal aircraft. They were invaluable and created a massive problem no one was prepared to handle. Aviation Fuel and JP-4 are expensive. The air traffic over WNC and East Tennessee was immeasurable. I cannot thank them enough for their efforts. We need to create a volunteer guidance and supply chain for civilian aircraft response.
25. Airports. If you are fortunate enough to have an airport in your community, make them a priority in disaster response. Include them in disaster prep. Communications were so bad that we did not know that more than 2/3rds of all airports in the path of the hurricane were unserviceable for days because of loss of power, lack of communications, or inaccessibility by road. Thereby overloading airports on the periphery and creating chaos. Backup Comms, fuel storage, forklifts, generators, and prioritizing access to your airports is a must. Establish warehousing and have heavy equipment available to offload and store materials.
26. Take stock and record your experience. Instruct your team to document their stories, what they did, how they felt, write it down or better yet record digitally. This will be invaluable one day and may help with closure.