



Lucien Canton is a nationally recognized expert on strategic planning for crisis and disasters. A popular speaker and lecturer, he is the author of the best-selling *Emergency Management: Concepts and Strategies for Effective Programs* used as a textbook in many higher education courses.

Prior to starting his own practice, Mr. Canton served as the Director of Emergency Services for San Francisco and as an Emergency Management Programs Specialist and Chief of the Hazard Mitigation Branch for FEMA Region IX.

Lucien G. Canton, CEM (LLC), is a management consulting firm specializing in helping managers lead better in crisis.

Lucien G. Canton, CEM (LLC)
783 45th Ave
San Francisco, CA 94121
415.221.2562
415.520.5218 FAX
LCanton@LucienCanton.com
www.LucienCanton.com

You may reprint this paper provided you include my copyright, the source, the author, and "reprinted with permission."

Will Defunding Police Defund Emergency Management?

5 Ways to Defend Your Budget

The recent events in the United States have led to an outcry of, "defund the police," probably the worst slogan for a movement ever created. The term does not actually mean eliminating police departments but rather demands re-envisioning how communities deal with public safety.

Unfortunately, as can be expected in such cases, local politicians are jumping on the bandwagon to show immediate progress. Immediate progress means, in many cases, making immediate cuts to department budgets without developing a strategy for how departments will cope with the shortfall and how those funds will be used.

The city of Oakland, CA, for example, has proposed a cut of \$12 million to the police department in response to a city councilwoman's proposed budget amendment for a \$25 million cut. New York has proposed a \$1 billion cut to their \$6 billion budget. Minneapolis has gone even further; the City Council has announced plans to disband its department in favor of

a community based public safety program.

Rethinking how we provide public safety is a laudable goal. However, a quick rush to judgement that leads to significant budget cuts will have unintended consequences.

The question is how do you trim budgets that are already stretched because of the COVID-19 pandemic? It is unlikely that the public will accept cuts to response time or services. The city of San Francisco is proposing to stop police response to non-criminal calls and instead dispatch teams like those in Eugene, OR that include a medic and a social worker. Whether a program that works in a jurisdiction of around 149,000 will be cost effective in a city of almost 900,000 (1.5 million in a typical workday) remains to be seen.

Ultimately, cuts like this fall not on high visibility programs but less visible elements such as existing vacancies, training, administrative services, and community outreach. Unfortunately, for many jurisdictions, these may include local emergency management programs.

The Police-Emergency Management Connection

While it is more common for emergency management offices to be associated with fire departments, a number fall under law enforcement agencies, typically sheriff's departments. In the state of California, for example, the county sheriff is the de facto director of emergency services under state law and most emergency management offices in the state are associated with the sheriff's office.

Association with a department has both advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, the emergency manager may have access to more resources than would be available to a stand alone agency, to include the reputation of the department. On the other hand, emergency management offices are not always considered part of the core business of the department. They may be small, one-person or part-time offices or an additional assignment.

All which suggests that if "defund the police" and COVID-19 demand drastic cuts to departmental budgets, emergency management offices associated with law enforcement may well find themselves downsized or eliminated.

Mitigating Budget Threats

While surviving a budget crisis is never easy and may well be a lost cause, there are a number of strategies that can help.

- **Zero-based budgeting.** Now is the time to take a hard look at your budget and identify essential elements. By building your budget from the ground up, you may be able to identify line items that can be sacrificed if you're forced to make cuts. Being able to justify essentials and to offer budget items for elimination puts you in a stronger position in budget negotiations.
- **Review grant requirements.** Although there are risks in tying program budgets to federal funding, federal grants usually have matching requirements. If these are hard matches (i.e. requiring a cash match), they can be leveraged to safeguard at least a portion of your budget.
- **Demonstrate your value.** I have written extensively elsewhere about the need to demonstrate emergency management's value to the community beyond just "we write plans." Emergency managers are an integral part of the community's risk management strategy and should be viewed as trusted advisors to senior decision makers. You need to be able to articulate the value you provide to the community.
- **Muster your constituents.** One of the problems with emergency management is that we have little political clout. But that doesn't mean we can't muster community support. Volunteer groups like Community Emergency Response Teams, Red Cross volunteers, and radio amateur clubs all have an interest in emergency management and may be willing to provide support at budget hearings.
- **Consider a new home.** While this may be extreme, being under a law enforcement agency (or a fire department, for that matter) almost guarantees that you're viewed as a technician and not part of the jurisdiction's decision-making team. Emergency managers are most effective as trusted advisors to the senior elected official. A severe budget cut may present an opportunity to reposition your office as part of the senior leadership team. 