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Politics and the Emergency Manager

"I'm just an emergency manager. I do my job and stay out of politics." How many times have you heard someone say this? How many times have *you* said it? I know I have. We like to think that in the provision of disaster relief, we are apolitical, and that politics doesn't come into it. However, the truth is that no matter how we may wish otherwise, political awareness and participation in the political process is an integral part of an emergency manager's job.

The presence of politics in emergency management is most obvious on the national level. There are quite a few research papers that demonstrate a correlation between presidential disaster declarations and election years and battleground states. Further, consider the recent threats by President Trump to withhold relief funding for the wildfires in California and the delay in the provision of relief funding to Puerto Rico.

One would expect politics to influence national disaster relief policy. But does this mean that a local emergency manager needs to be involved in politics? The answer is most definitely. "Yes."

Political Awareness

There is a difference between what is commonly referred to as "playing politics" and being aware of the impact of political decisions on emergency programs and having the capability to influence those decisions.

Emergency managers are at a disadvantage when political decisions are made in that we have no constituency to influence politicians. Unlike agencies such as police and fire, we have no unions or associations with strong political clout. Consequently, we need to build local constituencies from among interested citizens and local organizations.

This also means we need to build relationships with local elected officials and their staff. This allows us the ability to educate them on what we do and position ourselves as experts who can be consulted on relevant legislation.

One of the areas in which this coalition building becomes important is when legislation directly affecting our programs is being considered. A principal example of this is the annual budget. The nuances of federal grants, particularly specific grant requirements, are not always well

understood by political staff nor is the importance of continued funding for specific emergency management programs or the need for additional staff or resources.

Influencing Legislation

Issues affecting the emergency management program are important, but the real value of coalition building comes when there is a need to influence proposed legislation that can have a negative impact on the community.

A well-meaning member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors proposed legislation to curtail the regular testing of emergency generators in the city on the theory that this would help reduce pollution and conserve fuel. While we provided a lot of information on why this was a bad idea, my office alone would not have had sufficient political clout to prevent the legislation from passing. Fortunately, the local hotels recognized this as a bad policy decision, and we were able to work with their lobbyist to get the legislation withdrawn.

Following a series of residential hotel fires, we were able to work with local non-profits, the fire department, and a member of the Board to pass legislation that helped mitigate some of the conditions that caused the fires.

Thinking Beyond Your Community

So far, we've been considering local legislation and policy. But what if the legislation is on a state or national level? While these may seem outside the scope of the local emergency manager, if proposed legislation will have an impact on your local emergency management program, you need to have the ability to provide input on it.

There are generally three ways you can do this. The first is to write a personal letter expressing your support or opposition to the legislation and your reasons why. Personal letters carry weight with legislators, but you need to remember that your letter is personal and not representing an official position of your company or jurisdiction.

Having your organization take an official position is the second method for influencing legislation. There is normally a process that you will need to follow to gain official approval of your position. In San Francisco, I needed to appear before a committee of elected officials and key members of the mayor's staff to make my case for why we should support or oppose proposed legislation. The rewards were worth it: in addition to official correspondence from the mayor, our state and federal lobbyists were actively engaged in supporting or opposing the legislation.

One final method gets back to the idea of coalition building: participation in state and national emergency management organizations. Over the years, the International Association of Emergency Managers has grown into highly effective political advocacy group that is respected and regularly consulted by Washington policy makers. The California Emergency Services Association fulfills the same role for us in my state.

And before you say, "But this is not my job." Let me suggest that it is. The [Emergency Management Accreditation Standard](#) specifically requires in §3.5.2 that *The Emergency Management Program has a process for identifying and addressing proposed legislative and regulatory changes.* 