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Series of Natural Disasters Underscores Governments' Need for Sound Continuity of Operations Plans

Having an effective emergency management blueprint is essential for public entities big and small to successfully rebound from a catastrophic event.



In 2017, major natural disasters including hurricanes, tornadoes, wildfires and floods disrupted everyday life for many across the U.S., including its territories and possessions.

A large portion of the country’s citizens had to endure at least one night by candlelight. Many lost their homes or were evacuated. These disasters prompted a surge in generator sales, a modest investment that helps us to take some control over our circumstances and allows us to continue basic, day-to-day functions.

This year, we’re seeing more examples of nature’s wrath, including volcanic eruptions – [Kilauea in Hawaii](#) and the [Volcán de Fuego in Guatemala](#) – and a barrage of high-impact winter storms that [pummeled the East Coast](#).

A [new study has also found](#) that tropical cyclones worldwide are moving more slowly over land and water, dumping more rain as they stall. You saw that firsthand with Hurricane Harvey last year.

They all serve as important reminders for governments big and small not only to be prepared for the next natural disaster or other crisis but also to be able to function during and after an event.

Protecting, mitigating and responding to threats and hazards

Although coping with natural disasters has been front and center in recent years, efforts to keep governments operating during crises actually originated during the Cold War. President Eisenhower’s executive order outlined measures to ensure that the federal government would continue to operate following a potential nuclear attack. This plan was originally known as “continuity of government.” Each successive president has issued executive orders pertaining to emergency preparedness, such as mobilization of resources, reorganization and creation of federal departments.

The 9/11 terrorist attacks brought the need for a continuity of operations plan back into sharp focus for the executive branch. It became United States policy to maintain a comprehensive and effective continuity capability so that essential functions and services would remain available to citizens.



Local government efforts to stay operational

Although it's not mandated, the federal government recommends local governments develop continuity of operations plans as well. And rightly so.

Having a local continuity of operations plan provides for the uninterrupted flow of essential functions while enabling rapid response to an emergency. Such a plan documents what steps are taken, how quickly they must occur and who participates.

An administrator of a town devastated by a tornado offered this advice: "When your workplace is in ruins and you are responsible for providing critical services, that is not the time to start thinking about continuity of operations."

Four pillars that provide a framework

FEMA's [Continuity Guidance Circular 1 \(2013\)](#) provides an outline for continuity of operations plans. The circular identifies the four pillars that support an organization's capability to perform its essential functions: leadership, staff, facilities and communication systems.

- **Leadership** provided by local officials is critical to support sound continuity planning, an effort that must be driven from the top down. Without direction from leadership, staff are not able to be fully effective during emergency events.
- **Staff** must also be sufficiently trained and cross-trained to perform duties in a continuity environment.
- **Facilities** must be adequate, and backup locations should be designated to ensure the execution of essential functions.
- **Communications** systems and technology must be interoperable, robust and reliable.

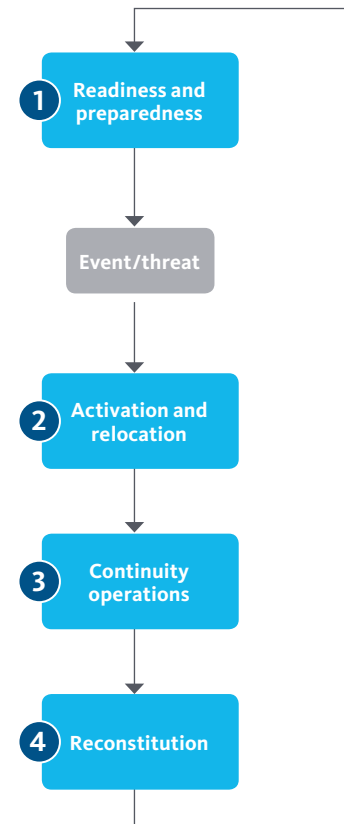
The FEMA circular also identifies the four phases of a continuity plan: readiness and preparedness, activation and relocation, continuity operations, and reconstitution.

- 1 **Readiness and preparedness** refer to the ability of an organization to respond to a continuity event. Although readiness is a function of planning and training, it is ultimately the responsibility of leadership to ensure that an organization – through normal procedures or with a continuity plan – can perform its mission-essential functions (MEF) before, during and after an emergency or disaster.
- 2 **Activation and relocation** are steps for attaining operational capability at continuity of operations sites as soon as possible – within 12 hours at most – and with minimal disruption to operations. Organizations should identify essential functions that must be continued without disruption and ensure that they can be conducted under all conditions. The process should include the activation of plans, procedures and schedules for the continuation of essential functions, as well as for the personnel, vital records and databases, and equipment involved with these functions, with minimal disruption.
- 3 **Continuity operations** are activities performed to continue essential functions. This phase includes accounting for all personnel, performing essential functions, establishing communications with organizations and constituents, and conducting recovery activities.
- 4 **Reconstitution** is the process of resuming normal operations. Functions that were discontinued during the emergency should be reconstituted first. Once this is done, most essential functions should be transferred back to normal operations. Reconstitution often runs concurrently with recovery efforts.

Continuity program management cycle



Continuity of operations implementation



The continuity program cycle

The continuity program cyclic-based model that incorporates planning, training, evaluating and implementing corrective actions gives leaders and essential personnel the baseline information, awareness and experience necessary to fulfill their continuity program management responsibilities.

The process should be standardized, establishing consistent performance metrics, prioritizing implementation plans, promulgating best practices and facilitating consistent cross-agency continuity evaluations.

Continuity plans should be evaluated before and after an event, tested or exercised, and assessed during the development of corrective-action plans. Objective evaluations and assessments developed from tests and exercises provide feedback on continuity planning, procedures and training.

This feedback in turn supports a corrective-action process that helps to establish priorities, informs budget decision making, and drives improvements in plans and procedures. The continuity program management cycle should be used by all organizations as they develop and implement their programs.



Elements of a continuity plan

The FEMA circular identifies the following 10 essential elements for a viable continuity plan:

1 Determine essential functions.

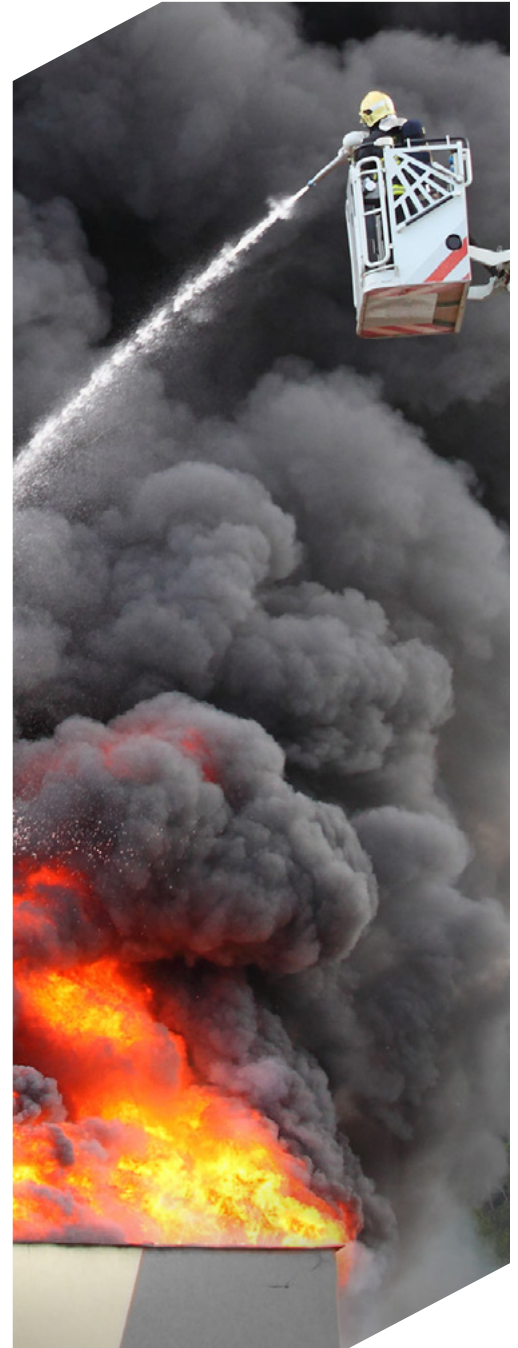
Essential functions are those that enable a public entity to provide vital services, exercise civil authority, maintain public safety and sustain the economic base. In a nutshell, essential functions are the business functions that must continue with minimal or no interruption. Identifying all organizational MEFs is a prerequisite for continuity.

This step establishes the parameters that drive the organization's efforts in all other planning and preparedness areas. The [National Continuity Policy Implementation Plan](#) includes an MEF initial screening aid, although public entities can develop their own template as appropriate.

Steps that should be taken to identify and analyze MEFs

- Review the organization's functions as directed by applicable laws and statutory authorities.
- Conduct a business process analysis to identify and map the functional workflows, activities, personnel expertise, systems, data and facilities inherent to the execution of each identified MEF that should be performed – whether it requires no interruption, minimal interruption or immediate execution – under all circumstances in an emergency. For example, define how each MEF is performed and executed using a business process flow map.
- Identify those MEFs that provide vital interdependent support to an MEF performed by another organization or by an emergency support function.
- Identify those MEFs that require vital support from another organization to ensure the execution of their mission and identify when and where the particular interdependency is executed within the business process flow.
- Have each organization head validate and approve the identified MEFs and business process analysis.

These steps allow local governments to refine their essential mission, while also supporting the continuity efforts of state and federal agencies.



2 Develop orders of succession.

In the event a local government's leaders are unavailable, debilitated or incapable of performing their legally authorized duties, roles and responsibilities, it is critical to have an orderly and predefined assumption of senior agency duties.

Not only should succession orders be a part of continuity planning, but they should also be developed to support day-to-day functions.

A town in the northeastern U.S., which was hit hard by a severe ice storm, addressed succession in its continuity of operations plan. Echoing comments from many of the risk professionals I have spoken with, the local risk manager told me: "We annually amend the succession planning portion of the document. Dealing with succession issues is always preferable when there is not an emergency to deal with at the same time."

3 Delegate authority.

Delegations of authority are formal documents specifying the activities that may be performed by certain individuals authorized to act on behalf of an agency head or other key officials. Such documents should outline the legal authority for officials to make key policy decisions during a continuity event. This ensures continued operations as well as rapid response to an emergency.

4 Determine continuity facilities.

Continuity facilities allow local governments to continue operations away from primary operating facilities in the event the latter are unavailable. These backup locations should be located far enough away from the primary facility that they're not impacted by the event.

In 2010, a tornado ripped through western/central Massachusetts, hitting a number of small communities. In one town, the tornado struck the town offices, where the majority of its department heads worked. Of particular concern were public safety offices, which were relocated – but not without challenges. Although the police department worked briefly out of a condemned building and moved to a trailer within a week, the department was not fully functional until six weeks after the tornado.

Continuity plans should also identify alternates to continuity facilities in the event that they, too, are affected. Special consideration should be given to alternate power sources (e.g., generators) and sanitary facilities for employees.

5 Determine continuity communications.

Ensuring effective communications is a critical aspect of continuity plans because this is often an area that breaks down during an emergency. Continuity communications must be redundant, available within 12 hours, and be sustainable for up to 30 days or until normal operations can resume. Local governments should consider other forms of communication such as satellite phones and internet access.



6 Manage vital records.

All local governments have documents, files and other materials that are vital to the organization and its operations. Vital records fall into two categories: emergency operating records and rights and interest records.

- **Emergency operating records** are those required for an organization's performance of essential functions.
- **Rights and interest records** are critical in carrying out the organization's essential legal and financial functions.

A vital records program is mandatory for federal agencies and strongly suggested for nonfederal organizations. Using cloud storage for digital documents can be an effective strategy for assuring vital records are preserved and accessible as soon as alternate operating locations are established.

7 Summarize human capital.

Human capital is the accumulation of talent, energy, knowledge and enthusiasm that people invest in their work. During an emergency, local governments may be forced to perform essential functions with reduced staffing. For this reason, all personnel who will be performing essential functions need to be adequately trained and cross-trained. Critical elements associated with human capital include designating those who will be engaged in emergency operations, communicating with and providing guidance to all employees, and determining the best uses of continuity personnel.

8 Implement a tests, training and exercises program.

Tests, training and exercises are the best ways to promote consistency and uniformity of continuity plan functions. Local governments need to measure their capacity to support the continued execution of essential functions throughout an emergency event.

An effective tests, training and exercise program will provide training in areas appropriate to mission readiness, as well as opportunities to acquire and apply the skills and knowledge needed for continuity operations.

Following an extreme weather emergency, many public entities realize they do not have built-in redundancy in case someone designated as responsible for a task is out of town and unable to respond. Non-public safety personnel may lack adequate training to meet expectations in an emergency.

9 Implement a devolution plan.

Devolution is the ability to transfer statutory authority and the responsibility for essential functions from an agency's primary operating staff and facilities to other employees and facilities.

10 Outline reconstitution procedures.

The processes by which organizations resume normal operations should be outlined to make a smooth transition from a relocation site to a new or repaired facility.



Evaluation, corrective action and support

Evaluations and after-action reports are important parts of the continuity program cycle. Organizations need to document the results of their continuity activities. Those reports should form the basis for corrective-action plans, which is the fourth phase of the continuity cycle. Corrective-action plans incorporate specific response information from an event into the broader continuity of operations plan. After-action reports may indicate, for example, a need for redundancy in key positions. This should be a part of any continuity of operations plan.

Numerous support functions dovetail into a continuity of operations plan. Identifying threats, assessing vulnerability, implementing measures to prevent or reduce the impact of incidents, and evaluating results are basic principles that should be applied to all operations and serve as critical support elements of a continuity of operations plan.

Assessing financial needs, family support

The financial aspect of continuity planning should not be overlooked. An effective process for ensuring the timely procurement of equipment, supplies and services can reduce the administrative burden during a continuity event, allowing the local government to focus on emergency response and restoration activities.

Another important element is family support. Employees may be deployed for a number of days either locally or at a distance through mutual aid. It's important to ensure that the families of these employees are not left vulnerable. Effective communication between the employer, employee and family can be a significant factor in reducing anxiety for family members at home. Employees that may be activated during a continuity event should ensure that provisions and resources are available for their families.

Most municipalities have the emergency response part of a disaster down to a science, but it is the continuing function of government operations that may set a community back.

There are costs associated with a prolonged shutdown – financial costs as well as decreased morale and a tarnished reputation. Such costs can be minimized with effective continuity planning. It's worthwhile to take an honest look at your operation's risks and take steps now to reduce them before an emergency cripples your organization.

Local governments need sound continuity of operations plans to persevere in case disaster strikes. Is your community ready?



About the author

Bob Marinelli, ARM, CPSI, RSSP, is an experienced public sector risk management consultant specializing in providing risk control services to local government agencies across the United States. He has spent much of the past 18 years helping cities, towns, school districts and police departments recognize and deal with critical risk issues.

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