Building on Success

FEMA Evolutions in Recovery Programs

The Federal Emergency Management Agency's response to the extraordinary series of storms during the 2004 hurricane season was the largest mobilization of emergency response and disaster recovery resources in the history of FEMA – exceeding operational responses to the 1994 Northridge Earthquake and the September 11, 2001 Terrorist Attacks.

The four hurricanes that hammered the eastern United States one year ago were the most wide-spread and intense series of disasters in FEMA's 27-year history. FEMA responded to a record-setting 27 total major declared disasters for hurricane-related damage in 15 states, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands (an area of more than 600,000 square miles). Florida alone was hit by four hurricanes and Alabama, Delaware, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia were also declared disasters due to storm damages.

The historic 2004 hurricane season challenged FEMA's Individual Assistance recovery programs like never before. As is the case after every major disaster, FEMA immediately conducted federal-state-local meetings, in January 2005, to identify areas for program improvements as well as successful procedures that should be institutionalized and used nationally. These sessions resulted in several innovations documented in FEMA's "Building on Success" best practices in response programs (released in May 2005) and the "Building on Success" evolutions to recovery programs listed below. Additional input from Congressional and Inspector General reviews of FEMA response and recovery to the 2004 hurricane season contributed to these evolutions.

FEMA takes seriously the responsibility to continually examine and improve technologies and techniques to help communities respond and recover from the devastating effects of hurricanes or any disaster – wherever or whenever they strike. The agency's overriding responsibility is to the victims of disaster. FEMA will continue to work closely with our partners in emergency response and recovery and the state emergency managers across the country. FEMA and the states must always keep in mind the necessity of responding efficiently to the needs of disaster victims when making programmatic changes.

Following are key elements in FEMA's "Building on Success" plan for Individual Assistance recovery programs: ***(Both "Building on Success" documents available at www.fema.gov/media)***

Introduction of an Online Individual Assistance Center — FEMA's online registration system (www.fema.gov) launched during the 2004 hurricane season has been enhanced with the secure capability for applicants to check the status of their case on-line 24 hours a day as well as to update phone numbers, address, and insurance information.

Prepared National Processing Service Centers (NPSCs) — FEMA has simplified the registration interview for individuals and made 1,000 call center operators available to receive registrations during large scale disasters. In addition, the NPSCs have coordinated with the Internal Revenue Service concerning surge staffing, and are prepared to bring contract call centers on-line as needed.

Deployable Mobile Disaster Recovery Centers (DRCs) — FEMA has 20 mobile units fully outfitted and ready for deployment. These units serve as FEMA's "one-stop recovery shops," where area residents can meet in person with representatives from FEMA and its federal partners, state and local governments, and voluntary agencies to learn about available recovery resources. These mobile centers are able to move into otherwise hard to reach communities to provide immediate assistance.

STRENGTHENING THE INSPECTION PROCESS

Use of Photo Verification — FEMA's contracted housing inspectors are now outfitted with digital cameras to visually document eligible disaster damage. FEMA presently uses these photos to verify the inspector's visit and ensure the quality of the housing inspections. In place since February 2005, the visual documentation process will only become more valuable as it is further piloted in the field.

Clarified Procedures and Documentation Requirements for Disaster Related Damage — FEMA has worked with its contract inspectors to define how damages should be more clearly identified and documented, further clarifying the relationship between damaged personal property and disaster as the cause. For example, inspectors will only record "power surge" as a cause of damage to items such as a refrigerator when it can be documented that a power surge has occurred (i.e., there is water in the fuse box; several appliances exhibit electrical burns and are beyond repair). This documentation requirement applies to automotive damages as well. FEMA has directed inspectors to provide detailed comments describing the types of automotive damages to a vehicle, and fully explain the basis for determining it as disaster-related. Additionally, FEMA continues to develop and test upgrades to inspection software and processing systems that will further reinforce accountability.

Strengthened Documentation Requirements for Real Property — FEMA is providing further guidance to contracted housing inspectors on how to provide more specific data documentation when a home has been determined uninhabitable (FEMA"s "home unsafe" determination) due to a disaster.

Upgraded Training Standards — Both inspections contractors are currently enhancing their web-based training systems to include online testing of inspectors prior to field assignments. FEMA is continuing its existing policy requiring that experienced inspectors accompany new inspectors in the field (to ensure that they are meeting FEMA standards) before they are allowed to complete inspections on their own.

Enhanced Quality Control — FEMA has coordinated with its inspections contracting companies to augment their capabilities to review inspectors' work prior to submission to FEMA. Software used by inspectors in the field to immediately and automatically check their work cannot be disabled for any reason unless agreed to by FEMA. FEMA also continues to develop and test upgrades to its own edit-checking capability within its processing system. These checks ensure that inspector findings are reviewed prior to processing payments to applicants.

Encouraging Excellence through Contracts — FEMA currently assures the quality of inspections through performance incentives and disincentives in contracts. The development of inspector contracts, to be in effect for Fiscal Year 2006, will include upgraded performance incentives and increased personnel capacity requirements for supporting large-scale incidents. New mandatory performance requirements will be added in addition to re-emphasizing existing requirements on background checks for inspector subcontractors.

Enhancing Professional Standards —FEMA has re-emphasized to inspection contractors that it is a conflict of interest for inspectors to inspect the homes of relatives or friends. In addition, FEMA is in the process of working with inspection contractors to modify their automated "edit check" systems operated in handheld devices to add a checkbox for the inspector to personally certify that no conflict of interest exists for each inspection they perform, in order to continue to maximize the quality of home inspections.

UPDATES TO INDIVIDUALS & HOUSEHOLDS PROGRAMS – Housing and Other Needs Assistance

Strengthened Rental Assistance — Applicants for FEMA rental assistance will not be eligible for rental assistance, even if they have disaster related damage, if there is no documented need to relocate while repairs are being made. In addition, FEMA will now reduce rental assistance from two month increments to one month, with additional assistance subject to proof of relocation.

Updated Direct Housing Operations — FEMA has enhanced its operating plans for the procurement, deployment, and disposition of manufactured housing units (mobile homes and travel trailers) to quickly and effectively meet FEMA's proprietary standard for emergency housing needs in large scale events. First used in the 2004 hurricane season, these organized Housing Task Forces work directly with key local officials to expedite emergency housing.

Streamlined Personal Property Assistance — As part of FEMA's review of the two-year-old Individuals and Households Program and the "generic room" concept, FEMA determined certain personal property items should no longer be considered eligible as "necessary expenses and serious needs." This modification streamlines the items included per room in the "generic room" models better capturing the "necessary expenses" eligible for reimbursement from FEMA. It is an interim measure towards the possible implementation of an itemized loss methodology, requiring inspectors to record necessary expenses and serious needs item by item rather than by the "generic room" concept. FEMA will coordinate and consult with state partners before implementation of this itemized methodology.

Refined Award Basis for Personal Property Grants — FEMA has further refined the types of eligible personal property items, and ensured that awards are fully documented to be linked to disaster-related needs. For example, FEMA has revised clothing award inspection guidelines to only record damages to clothing that is clearly destroyed, physically gone (e.g. blown or washed away), or contaminated by chemicals, sewer backup, etc. It is expected that clothing that is soaked by wind-driven rain or flood waters will be cleaned by the applicant.

Policy Clarification on Funeral Assistance — FEMA has made mandatory what was heretofore offered as guidance on how FEMA and state staff substantiate, document, and process funeral assistance requests. Applicants are required to prove that they are legally "next of kin;" provide signed documentation from an authoritative state or local entity (such as a licensed physician, medical examiner, or coroner) attributing the decedent's death (or injury causing death) to the declared incident; provide a Death Certificate; provide confirmation that funeral expenses have not been met by other resources. Furthermore, as a joint Federal-state program, all payments for funeral expenses will be approved by the Joint Field Office and require the signature of both FEMA's Federal Coordinating Officer and the state's State Coordinating Officer. All appeals will be adjudicated by FEMA's Recovery Division Director or his/her designee.

Development of a National Transportation Assistance Value — Historically, states have differed widely on the appropriate set reimbursement rates for citizens for transportation needs in the case their vehicle is damaged or destroyed by disaster. Since a nationwide consensus has never been reached on this matter in this federal-state joint cost assistance program, states currently establish award levels related to vehicle repairs or replacement under ONA. FEMA is currently researching the feasibility of establishing a nationwide cost-basis. Additional information will be coordinated with FEMA's state partners.

Augmented Eligibility Guidelines for "Miscellaneous Other Items" — In September 2004, FEMA developed and implemented a new policy on "Interim Guidance for Processing Miscellaneous Other Items in the Other Needs Assistance Provision of the Individuals and Households Program." In addition to standard eligibility guidelines, ONA "Miscellaneous Other Items" (such as generators, dehumidifiers, and chainsaws) must be purchased within a specific timeframe following a disaster declaration, meet a verified need, and be based on FEMA's standardized pricing system. In support of this policy, inspectors will review and validate receipts in order to document evidence of a disaster-related need.