November/December 2008

FEMA

On Call

Disaster Reserve Workforce News

EMI Plays Matchmaker

Matching Curriculum to Skills

EMI, Emmitsburg, MD is the lead national emergency management education, traning and exercising institution with courses and programs that focus on emergency response, recovery, preparedness and mitigation.

In a concerted effort to make sure that coursework stays fresh, engaging and on target, as the Disaster Reserve Workforce Division (DRWD) and the Emergency Management Institute (EMI) continue to lead the agency in developing cadre specific credentialing plans, a comprehensive curriculum review of FEMA's Disaster Operations and Recovery training is underway.

Since April, Reservists assigned to the Disaster Field Training Organization (DFTO) cadre have been aligning skills detailed in the newly developed position task books with EMI's curriculum.

The task books are the foundation on which the partner credentialing element is constructed. To date, more than 40 courses designed for the DFTO, Environmental and Historic Preservation, External Affairs, Individual Assistance, Logistics, Public Assistance and Security Cadres have been reviewed. Some 160 additional courses are scheduled for assessment.

"FEMA's workforce continues to grow. We're taking steps to develop standardized credentialing plans and to line up training with the key responsibilities of our staff. This will move us closer to achieving our goal of having a professional force that is consistent and equally prepared to

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FEMA's BEST Wants You!

In just three to five minutes, Disaster Reservists can let the Agency know what they think will help build a stronger, more vibrant workplace.

FEMA is preparing to launch the first step of the Building Engagement, Strengths and Talent (BEST) workforce development program unveiled in August, which will solicit input from all employees to make FEMA a better place to work.

The first part of BEST is the Workforce Initiative Survey, conducted by Gallup. The brief and confidential survey will be available to Disaster Reservists through Gallup's toll-free Interactive Voice Response System, 24 hours a day from December 8 to December 31, 2008.

Since the disaster workforce does not have ready access to the Agency intranet when not deployed, Reservists should call the regular toll-free automated Deployment Database (ADD)

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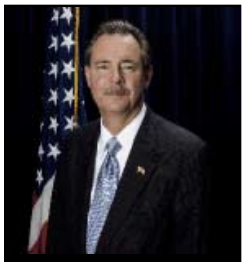
The Administrator's Corner



Administrator
R. David Paulison

A Salute To You

In this final opportunity to address you here, I am honored to have worked with the dedicated FEMA staff in the Disaster Reserve Workforce. I am optimistic about the changes on the horizon for this community and I know you are poised to take advantage of new opportunities.

The changes already implemented such as the creation of the first office built solely around the unique needs of a Reservist workforce, and providing paid holiday time while on disasters, are only a small representation of the gratitude the Agency has for the hard work done by Reservists.

In September when the unavailable Reservists were needed in the field, they stepped forward at my request and went back to work. FEMA is obligated to provide these staff members the same effort in return.

As the prospect of enhanced benefits for the Disaster Reserve Workforce makes its way through the U.S. Congress, I hope Reservists feel this Agency is giving its best effort back to you.

I appreciate the fine work you do every day in the field for FEMA and, wish the best for you in the future.

Letter from Donna M. Dannels, DRWD Director

To our Reservists,

As we approach the end of calendar year 2008, I want to talk about about the good news, reflect on the no news and share my thoughts about expectations.

The good news corner is crowded. An October 8 memo from the Administrator authorized holiday pay and administrative leave for Reservists in deployment status in anticipation of Columbus Day and Veterans Day, plus Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays. The interim policy reflects limitations.The USDA National Finance Center (NFC) system pay codes for Reservists are limited. Holiday and admin leave pay cannot be entered as overtime, regardless of the amount of time worked. Also, at FEMA, someone is always working – so while the policy is inclusive in spirit, disaster operations dictate the work schedule. You may have to work the federal holiday "this time," but know that now, there will be a "next time." My office is working with both the Human Capital Division and NFC to address the pay code limits. The specifics about the new policy are on the DRWD web portal.

Earlier this year, a 2-year CORE position in each region was authorized to support regional cadre management and the reserve workforce. Nine positions are filled - eight from within FEMA, including former Reservists.

Significant strides have been made moving the agency-wide credentialing plan along.You can read more about the credentialing plan in the Readiness Branch section on page 6.

Two paths are paved for information flow. In June DRWD mailed more than 8 thousand information packets that included usernames and passwords for access to our web portal from home computers. We also opened the DRWD inbox, which has proved to be very successful – we receive and respond to your comments and concerns daily. Communication remains a challenge. We're working with IT to get our information posted to the web portal more quickly, and as we increase our staff, we will improve our ability to communicate with you.

The fact that we've yet to reach staffing potential affects progress on many fronts: most notably in our capacity to put a viable stakeholders' advisory group together, and to implement and update internal policies that address benefits such as sick leave.

In the no news corner: Bill HR6658, with the provision to allow Reservists access to the federal health care and retirement systems, is still awaiting full consideration in Congress. Our Congressional Oversight Committees continue

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Donna M. Dannels, DRWD Director

EMI Matchmaker, con't

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support the Nation when disasters strike," said Administrator David Paulison. Teams of up to six Reservists are involved in the review and assessment process. To assure consistency and validity, course content is compared against associated task books by at least two members of the team.

"EMI's disaster workforce training approach is focused on building capabilities in line with the credentialing plans" said EMI Superintendent Dr. Cortez Lawrence. "The curriculum review, position task books and credentialing process are interdependent components that must be in sync as we move forward to develop a ready national workforce capable of responding when disaster strikes."

Once it is determined the course material addresses the skills required in the task books, the information is linked to the corresponding tasks in the position task books. Ultimately, the credentialing plan, including the position task books, will be available online showing the linkage to the training needed to build capabilities and meet the credentials for the tasks they perform.

The curriculum review process against the position task books will continue. As each cadre credentialing plan is developed, the information will be utilized to develop a process and curriculum that fully supports an increasingly stronger and more professional FEMA disaster workforce.

Intergovernmental Affairs (IGA) DR-1750-GA outreach at the Georgia State Capitol. (L to R) Sen. Emanuel Jones; Bob Merrill, IGA specialist; Chuck Ruoff, R4 IGA DAE; Lt. Gov. Casey Cagel; Sen. Nan Orrock; and Sen. Vincent Fort.

IGA: Innovative and Far-Reaching

Chuck Ruoff, R4 IGA DAE

Recent Intergovernmental Affairs (IGA) operations in Georgia and Iowa proved to be dynamic, multi-dimensional exercises.

IGA efforts were initially hampered in DR-1750-GA with the entire legislature in day-long, deadline budget sessions at the statehouse; so, IGA struck a deal with legislative aides to allow IGA representatives on both floors of the legislature to share information with disaster-affected members.

IGA representatives were introduced publicly by the leader of both Georgia houses and conferred with legislators in the chamber aisles.

The announcement by the Lt. Governor *and* the House Speaker that "FEMA was in the House" triggered a round of "thank yous" and a generous applause of approval by legislative members.

During DR-1763-IA, IGA addressed elected officials at Iowa Council of Governments seminars, Iowa Association of Counties forums, Metropolitan Area Mayors workshops and the Iowa League of Cities annual conference—which drew some 500 elected officials attended.

IGA shared the dais with Maj. Gen. Ron Dardis, selected by the governor to lead the Recovery Iowa Operation.

The creative efforts by IGA described above ensured the means for an exchange of information among federal, state, territorial and local partners, and established relationships with senior level officials, while reinforcing FEMA's programs, initiatives, policies and operations.

IS 101: Deployment Basics Online For You

Federal Disaster Workforce Readiness Independent Study Course 101 is accessible from your home computer. IS 101 provides practical tips and advice for deployment assignments. During this 90-minute course you will learn how to prepare for deployment, how to check into an assigned location, how to complete the check out process, and more. No prerequisites required. Go to the DRWD web portal at https://portal.fema.gov and enter your personal access ID. Click on the DRWD Training link on the right side of the page. (Note: also check out the deployment checklist available to you through the Deployment Guide link on the right side of DRWD's web portal page).

Holiday/Admin Leave Pay for Disaster Reservists!

Lynda Westcott, R10 DAE

To borrow words from a Crosby, Stills and Nash album: *"It's been a long time coming."*

But, effective Oct 8, 2008, just in time for Columbus Day, Reservists in deployment status were officially authorized by Administrator Paulison to receive holiday pay when their assigned office or worksite closes for a federal holiday and the Reservist does not work; and, when Administrative Leave is authorized at an assigned worksite – such as leave granted before or after a holiday, or during inclement weather.

Because it is rare to find a disaster work site completely closed on a federal holiday, and because Reservists work outside the regular 40-hour workweek box, and because holiday/admin pay cannot be paid at an overtime rate, the interim policy that followed the announcement prompted a flurry of emails and telephone calls to DRWD asking for clarification.

DRWD Director Donna Dannels followed up with an All Hands memorandum that outlined in great detail what the interim policy does and does not provide. This is available at DRWD's website https://portal.fema.gov.

Yes, this policy has been a long time coming and upon arrival generated not only excitement, but a wave of "what ifs."On the excitement side, R6 DAE Win Henderson's email response expressed it best: "Woo Hoo!"

Tomas Rivera (on right) R1 DAE, Assistant External Affairs Officer for Community Relations (CR) and Daniel Magee, Mississippi Emergency Management Agency's (MEMA) Individual Assistance Officer/CR Liaison, brief MEMA staff on CR training at the FEMA/State Hurricane Gustav JFO in Long Beach, MS. *Photo: Jim Henrie, R4 External Affairs DAE*

CR Raises the Bar . . . Again

Jim Henrie, R4 EA DAE

There are partnerships and there are partnerships, but the partnership between the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Mississippi Emergency Management Agency (MEMA) during DR-1794-MS has developed to a new level of cooperation.

With MEMA's concern about developing Community Relations (CR) staff and providing the best possible training for those positions, it seemed only natural to carry this partnership beyond the usual standards of operation. What better way to learn FEMA's standards and policies than to have a FEMA Community Relations Specialist do the teaching. And what better teacher could they find than Region 1's Tomas Rivera who was serving as the DR-1794-MS Assistant External Affairs Officer for Community Relations.

Rivera, a city planner in private life, is a veteran of more disasters than he cares to recall. He understands the intricacies of community relations during recovery from a disaster; not just the academic side, but the "real-world" dynamics of helping people recover from a major disaster.

Although CR personnel at the FEMA Headquarters and Regional level along with EMI offer training for state community relations people, this was a case of Rivera being singled out by MEMA officials to provide training to MEMA staff working Gustav recovery on the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

Rivera quickly accepted the task, realizing that not only would this training serve to enable state staff to respond better to major disasters, but by helping the state develop their own CR function and capacity they will be developing a procedure by which to better deal with state and local emergencies.

The training reinforces a basic framework of current CR information for MEMA staff to advance through further development and training programs through Region IV and EMI courses.

DRWD Program Management Branch

COE Clause Invoked

In the September issue of this newsletter I talked about the Conditions of Employment (COE) and its description of Reservist responsibilities, specifically the paragraph describing obligations during periods of extraordinary circumstances.

This was a timely piece since within a week of that article, the Administrator placed all FEMA employees on alert for possible assignments in preparation for storms coming in from the Gulf and Atlantic Coasts. COE responsibilities and obligations were put to the test.

For Reservists, this meant honoring the extraordinary circumstances clause within the COE that prompts mandatory availability within 24-48 hours from notification by the agency. While it does not guarantee deployment, it does require you to become available or provide justification for remaining unavailable.

To solicit availability, DRWD established a callout center and a process to vet justification to remain as not available.

By the end of the week-long callout campaign, 54 percent of Reservists contacted made themselves available, and 59 percent of that number deployed. Many more have deployed in the following weeks and DRWD continues to receive a steady stream of justification for those needing to maintain their not available status.

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DRWD Deployment Branch

When Myth Crosses the Golden Path to Deployment

Are you a DAE-in-waiting? Then let your fingers do the walking! Call 888-853-9648 every 30 days . . . ***not*** to ask if you can be deployed or if a deployment request exists for you or for your position, but to *keep your availability information updated* in the Automatic Deployment Database (ADD). That routine call is your golden path to deployment.

Deployment requests originate from current staffing needs at duty stations, not the Deployment Branch. The formal request flows through ADD to those who have skill sets that match the needs . . and are available.

A recent inquiry through the DRWD mailbox* suggests there lives still a myth about a master availability list. The question, which has surfaced before, implied that the Deployment Branch maintains an ongoing list of available DAEs, and a DAE might determine where he/she falls on this master list at any given time, securing a heads-up for possible deployment. There is no "master list."

When a standard deployment request is created, a roster of available employees with *specific* needed skills is system-generated by ADD at that time. Those who hold the requested job title, proficiency level and/or specialty become candidates for that job-specific assignment. Callouts are made from this skill-specific group, *beginning with the employee who has gone the longest without a deployment*. Callout priority for those identified per needed job title, proficiency level and/or specialty, is determined based on last deployment date.

The ADD system is non-static - updating and processing information by the minute: deployment requests, deployments in progress, deployments completed, rotation requests, and changes in availability status.

Your regular calls to keep your availability status and contact information current pave the path to deployment. When a request does exist for you, we'll let our fingers do the walking, and call you.

*FEMA-DRWD-Program@dhs.gov

FEMA's BEST, con't

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number, select option 2, and listen for instructions that enable them to participate by telephone. The access information provided through the ADD recorded message is for Reservists only.

The Gallup Survey Help Team is available if there are questions about access to the survey. The team can be reached by calling 1-800-788-9987 from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. EST Monday through Thursday; from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. EST on Fridays; and by sending an e-mail to surveyhelp@gallup.com.

FEMA's BEST wants you to participate to ensure that the entire workforce shares in the building of a better Agency.

DRWD Readiness Branch

Paul Geiger, Readiness Branch Chief

Credentialing Update

The Agency-wide credentialing initiative has made significant progress since September.

DRWD drafted the plan, facilitated development of several cadre-specific credentialing plans, and created a credentialing guidance document to assist with implementation.

DRWD worked with Public Assistance, Security, and Disaster Field Training Operations cadres to draft their cadre-specific plans.

The Executive Credentialing Committee (ECC) will review these plans and validate them during their next meeting.

A tabletop exercise is scheduled the first week of December to evaluate the entire credentialing process, which includes the draft agency-wide credentialing plan, a cadre-specific plan, and a credentialing guidance document.

The next set of cadres that will develop cadre-specific credentialing plans is expected to include the Attorney, the Environmental and Historic Preservation, and the External Affairs cadres.

DRWD leadership will provide a more detailed overview of the credentialing initiative and the impact it will have on all Disaster Workforce employees over the next few months.

COE Clause, con't

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Your response has been tremendous in providing documentation for non-availability. For those who did not respond or for those we were unable to contact based upon their ADD information, DRWD mailed letters requesting they become available or provide justification for their status.

Because of the dynamic nature of the exercise there may be crossover between follow-up letters mailed and supporting documentation sent by you or received by DRWD.

If you received a letter but did submit a response, become available or deployed, please note this on the acknowledgement letter received, and return it in the postage paid envelope that was enclosed. Your response acknowledges that you recognize that this proactive outreach invoking the extraordinary circumstances clause within the COE was not a test.

Many of you were in a virtual abeyance status for deployment until the Administrator ended the period of extraordinary circumstances October 24 and your dedication is greatly appreciated. Our ability to demonstrate that the disaster workforce honors its COE responsibilities provides further support that Reservists should receive consideration similar to other employees within FEMA.

Layne Smith, Program Branch Chief

Letter to Reservists, con't

(Continued from Page 2)

to follow this and to work with additional authorities that would permit FEMA to strengthen its Reserve workforce.

Segue now into my thoughts about expectations. Because all of us want 'it' now, we may forget how far we've come since the March announcement that launched my office. I want to re-state what I shared during my first executive brown bag lunch, in June: This is going to be a very long-term transformation. It's not cheap and not fast and it's going to take time. While the road to 'it' is long, the good news is . . . we have our road, and we're moving forward.

Your Travel Matters

Holds placed on your credit card by hotel and rental car agencies can artificially push your available credit limit to its max – especially when merchants fail to remove the hold after your actual charges are posted. Avoid problems associated with an artificially maxed card limit during deployment by calling the 800 number on the back of your card and ask if there are authorized holds against the card, and how much. Contact the merchant and ask that the hold be removed to free up your available credit. Voucher every seven days instead of the standard fourteen to keep account payments current. If this is a persistent problem during deployments, contact your regional POC to request an increase on the monthly credit amount.