



FEMA

Interagency Recovery Coordination

CASE STUDY

Locally Executed, State Managed, Federally Supported Recovery

Hurricane Irma Recovery in Florida

Learning Objective: Review and analyze the community-focused coordination approach the State of Florida utilized to improve collaboration and expedite recovery efforts following Hurricane Irma.

Keywords: Recovery, Major Disaster Declaration, Hurricane, Local Government, State Government, Management, Operational Coordination, Planning, Capacity Building, Response/Recovery Nexus, Partnerships, Staffing, Innovation, Sustainability, Hazard Mitigation, Resilience

PART ONE

Background

On September 10, 2017, Hurricane Irma made landfall as a Category 4 hurricane on Cudjoe Key, Florida, forming 21 tornadoes, causing extensive damage from storm surge, heavy rain, and high winds, and killing seven people. The president signed a major disaster declaration for Florida on September 10, 2017. The state experienced severe damage, with many homes destroyed and uninhabitable, widespread power outages, and significant impacts to natural habitats and agriculture.

Florida has 1,197 miles of coastline vulnerable to hurricanes. Recent notable storms include Hurricanes Charley (2004), Ivan (2004), Jeanne (2004), Dennis (2005), and Wilma (2005). According to the National

Hurricane Center, Hurricane Irma is the fifth-costliest hurricane to impact the United States to date, behind Hurricanes Katrina (2005), Harvey (2017), Maria (2017), and Sandy (2012). In the wake of the 2017 hurricane season, Congress passed three supplemental funding bills to aid recovery.

After a major disaster, community organizations and local governments need to make complex recovery decisions in a compressed timeframe. Consequences of these initial decisions can impact the recovery outcomes in the near term, and a community's preparedness, cohesion, and resilience far into the future.

Directly after Hurricane Irma, state officials recognized the importance of developing an issue-based recovery strategy in advance of upcoming state budgetary decisions to ensure that support would be available to expedite critical recovery projects identified at the local level. The state had already implemented capacity building recommendations and exercises after previous hurricanes and was well equipped to implement new tactics following Hurricane Irma.



Figure 1: An aerial view of damage to the Florida Keys after Hurricane Irma. Source: FEMA Media Library.

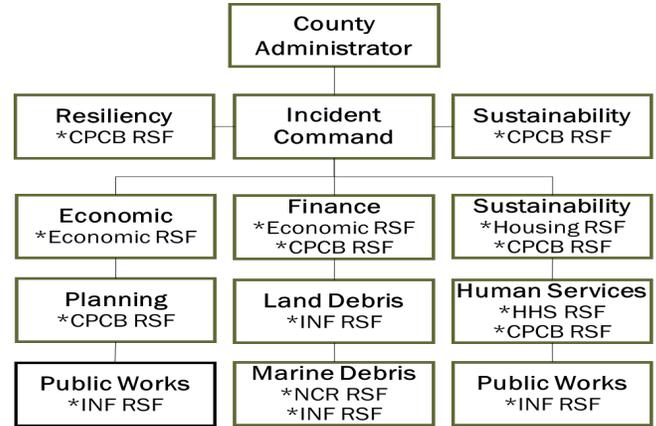
Numerous conversations with local partners and prior lessons learned prompted the State of Florida to request localized, community-based recovery support from federal subject matter experts (referred to as “place-based teams”). This was an innovative coordination practice that enabled the state to collaborate with county governments to utilize on-the-ground federal support to advance recovery.

Challenges

- Staffing.** Determining the state and federal staffing requirements that could best support the county governments was a challenge. Some counties reported having too many place-based team members with general skillsets, but not enough individuals with the specific skills and knowledge to effectively address county priorities. For example, while Hendry County was focused on hazard mitigation projects, Monroe County focused more on housing issues. Ensuring the place-based teams had staff with the right skill sets and experience to meet county needs required a collaborative process with local leadership, including frequent feedback sessions and real-time course correction, as needed.
- Workload Integration.** County officials particularly noted the difficulty of effectively integrating place-based team staff with local staff given the numerous demands for both short- and long-term recovery needs. As a result, some place-based teams were underutilized or had periods of inactivity pending staff engagement. Establishing clear lines of delegation and communication was key to addressing these integration challenges.
- Timing.** The place-based initiative was implemented prior to the opening of most federal funding programs (PA, Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP), etc.), requiring leadership and teams to plan and select projects without a firm understanding of funding availability. Though funding is always an essential element of project implementation, the place-based teams were focused on developing strong, feasible projects – not simply helping counties to obtain project funding. Team members had to be flexible, open-minded, and supportive of local needs in order to find a balance between local partners’ anticipation of quick recovery progress and a deliberative process that would result in long-term, enduring projects. The place-based teams’ focus on developing projects to address pre-identified challenges, including analyzing existing plans and identifying resources for implementation, also helped to ensure that the federal support was effective even though it did not always align with funding program timelines and county expectations for recovery progress.
- Scoping.** The limited scope of the place-based teams was another challenge that impeded effective recovery outcomes. Counties worked with the state to select recovery projects based on existing planning documents, which the place-based teams then supported. A broader engagement strategy that integrated other partners, such as county health departments or public works agencies, could have resulted in projects that addressed community resiliency and unmet needs not specifically detailed in existing planning documents.

Key Partners

- County Officials
- Florida Department of Emergency Management
- Florida Department of Economic Opportunity
- Federal Recovery Support Functions (RSFs)



Example: Monroe County Org Chart

Monroe County Team Members in bold
*Embedded Place-Based Team Members

Figure 2: An example of how place-based team members were embedded into the organizational structure of Monroe County, Florida.

PART TWO

Actions

The magnitude of the storm and its substantial impacts on historically lower-capacity communities called for innovative approaches to disaster recovery. The State of Florida and FEMA implemented the **Coordinated Place-Based Recovery Support (CPBRS)** initiative after Hurricane Irma, a new support mechanism to develop and prioritize place-based solutions to complex recovery needs and provide local leadership with the tools to effectively execute their own recovery. The goal of the program was to provide a framework for organizing and delivering federal, state, and private sector recovery resources in support of local recovery leadership, outcomes, and goals.

CPBRS Mission

Support and assist local leadership to:

- Develop and implement post-disaster recovery plans and projects;
- Create an expedited and organized decision-making process;
- Develop adequate capacity to successfully identify and implement recovery projects; and
- Identify critical steps and resources for project and strategy implementation.

State and federal personnel collaborated to identify recovery needs in the hardest-hit communities. All impacted counties were categorized into three “tiers,” with the highest need (Tier 1) counties selected for the CPBRS program. The team designated four counties - Collier, Hendry, Lee, and Monroe - as Tier 1 to receive place-based support from an embedded team of FEMA personnel that worked alongside local staff for several months. Place-based support provided technical assistance specific to county needs, with an aim of increasing local recovery capacity and resilience.

The place-based teams were comprised of state recovery officials and federal subject matter experts. Team members were curated based on the needs of each county and included a Community Planning and Capacity Building (CPCB) Liaison, a Mitigation Liaison, an Environmental Planning and Historic Preservation (EHP) Liaison, a Sustainability Advisor, and a Public Assistance (PA) Advisor. Following initial assessments of disaster impacts to guide recovery efforts, the teams provided direct technical assistance focused on developing actionable and locally-driven solutions. Team members all placed an emphasis on hazard mitigation and resilience. State and federal leadership remained actively involved, overseeing progress and removing obstacles as they occurred.

County Highlight: Monroe County

In Monroe County, the place-based team provided guidance on funding programs, training on recovery resources and damage determinations, and subject matter expertise on projects to update the county shelter policy, improve the electrical grid, and repair and upgrade evacuation route infrastructure.

Housing was a top priority in Monroe County for several reasons:

- Existing housing stock is expensive;
- Building additional housing is costly because of the county’s geographic limitations; and
- Permitting requirements and construction methods on coral-based islands create a lengthy process.

The place-based team in Monroe County clarified and assisted as the county applied for FEMA funding and additional grants from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

County officials reported feeling better prepared for the next disaster as a result of the place-based teams, including gaining a greater awareness of partners, available resources, and a better understanding of the recovery process.

Each place-based team worked with county staff to review existing comprehensive plans and other planning documents and identify previously planned projects with high recovery and resiliency value that could be implemented as part of the community’s recovery timeline. While place-based teams provided organizational support, subject matter expertise, and project management, the strategies and deliverables were driven by and rooted in local priorities.

County Highlight: Hendry County

Hendry County had significant recovery needs following Hurricane Irma. Like many communities, the county’s budget for post-disaster needs was mostly dedicated to response efforts, rather than long-term recovery activities. This limited funding, combined with the fact that approximately 50-percent of the county tax base is tax-exempt, resulted in fiscal constraints for long-term recovery projects.

Recovery projects in Hendry County included:

- Improvements to the water/sewer system;
- Upgrades to the county communications network;
- Restoration of the county courthouse;
- Expansion of the workforce development program;
- Evaluation of housing solutions; and
- Guidance on funding opportunities, infrastructure upgrades, and public safety.

The place-based team contributed to these projects in various ways, including:

- Facilitating an architect to design a county courthouse conceptual plan that was used for a grant application;
- Leveraging the courthouse conceptual plan to obtain contractor cost estimates; and
- Facilitating the creation of a welding program to strengthen county trade education.

Results

After reviewing existing plans and initiatives and identifying projects that would have a positive impact on recovery, actions with feasible strategies and adequate funding and resource opportunities were prioritized to drive recovery progress. As the federal staff were not personally affected in the same way as local representatives by the aftermath of the storm, federal place-based team staff were able to bring a different perspective informed by previous disaster experience to the decision-making process. To ensure all actions were appropriate and beneficial to the community, decisions were driven by local counterparts and supported by the state and federal partners.

A wide variety of projects were planned across the four participating counties, including projects and studies related to internet connectivity, hydrology, housing and sheltering, and debris removal. A Project Development Strategy tool was utilized by county staff to document complex projects in a systematic way that included potential environmental considerations. Place-based teams facilitated local trainings to help increase capacity and preparedness of local staff and ensure they could successfully manage recovery projects after place-based teams demobilized.

County officials reported a number of benefits gained from having place-based teams embedded with county staff, including a greater understanding of grant and funding opportunities and requirements, localized hazard mitigation strategies, and tailored assistance in creating realistic goals and prioritizing actions. Place-based teams elevated county concerns to the state level and provided greater representation during the state recovery planning process. Likewise, federal staff recognized the value of creating linkages between federal interagency partners and local representatives and highlighted the positive impact that place-based teams had on long-term recovery goals.

Lessons Learned

- Initial decisions made during a response mission can have significant impacts on a community's long-term recovery success. Having recovery personnel embedded early-on helped communities understand the purpose and benefits of federal support, consider long-term rebuilding strategies, and achieve desired recovery outcomes.
- Disaster recovery moves at a different pace for every locality. The timing of place-based team integration requires close coordination and communication among all partners to calibrate support based on recovery support needs, foster an inclusive recovery planning process, and achieve desired recovery outcomes.
- Integrating the right mix of subject matter experts at the county level early on ensured that environmental, historic, sustainability, and resilience considerations were integrated early in the recovery process, from project formulation through implementation.
- Establishing clear expectations and channels of communication can help communities to understand the recovery timeline, level of effort required, and project management steps that go into an effective, whole community recovery.

Additional Resources

- [National Hurricane Center Tropical Cyclone Report: Hurricane Irma](#)
- [FEMA Hurricane Irma Information Page](#)
- [FEMA Hurricane Irma Disaster Recovery Summary](#)
- [FEMA News Release: Federal Help for Florida's Recovery from Hurricane Irma](#)
- [FEMA News Release: Coordinated Place Based Recovery Support](#)