Mark Peterson - Host:

I'm Mark Peterson, and this is "Before, During, and After: A Podcast from FEMA." In addition to our ubiquitous role in responding to and recovering from disasters and emergencies, FEMA also administers numerous grant programs aimed at increasing the capacity of the nation's emergency management system. Part of that administration is understanding the challenges our state, local, tribal, and territorial partners face when applying for and successfully accessing these grants. On today's episode, we'll talk with Pam Williams, assistant administrator for FEMA's grant programs directorate about FEMA's outreach initiatives with America's tribal nations, including three recent tribal consultations and how FEMA is working hard to improve our delivery of grants to tribal nations.

By and large, the public sees FEMA through our recovery, and response programs - the way that we interact after a major event that they see on the news. But there is so much that we do in support of our state, global, tribal, and territorial partners through our grants programs. And, in order to talk a little bit about how we're improving the delivery of our grants programs, specifically to tribal nations, we have Pam Williams joining us, the assistant administrator for FEMA's Grants program director. Pam. It's great to hear from you.

Pam Williams:

Thank you. Thank you for having me. I'm excited to talk about how we are building capability and capacity across the country, including with our tribal nations through our grant programs,

Mark Peterson - Host:

And, we are definitely doing that. And, we're gonna talk a lot about how you and your director are working specifically to engage and improve that delivery with the tribal nations. But before we do, you know, I'd be remiss not to just highlight for a second, what a thrill it is to talk to you again. I mean, obviously we have worked together in the past, but you have this really unique, long and diversified career in emergency management. You'd been in the private sector where you've advocated for resiliency programs. You've worked on Capitol Hill for the House Transportation Infrastructure Committee as one of our main authorizing committees. But then, you've also worked in policy and legal, here at FEMA. And so, you know, with this, you know, incredible varied experience, I really think is unique. How do you think that has contributed to your focus and your approach to tribal outreach and collaboration for grants?

Pam Williams:

Well, first and foremost, I started a career that I never thought would truly last a lifetime in disaster law and policy in local government. And directly after graduate school, I went to the city of Des Moines, Iowa in the wake of the 93 floods. And so, I saw a local government start to recover from disasters and I learned how intimate that conversation needs to be and what the people on the ground need to not only recover from disaster, but then to build that resilience to mitigate from disasters. And that truly laid the foundation for a lifetime of passionate work on disaster law and policy. So, when I came to FEMA in 2002 and I started, truly, in intergovernmental affairs, I learned that not only are state and local partners critical to the work that FEMA does, but truly our tribal partners are critical to the work that we do.

And, it was then that I really saw how underserved our tribal partners are and how the law did not take care of them and did not address their needs. And, it really wasn't until, honestly, around the 2009, 2010 timeframe that, FEMA really started to look at how their policies and their programs were not addressing the needs of their tribal partners. So, it really was around that timeframe that FEMA started to look hard at the way - not only their programs, but the organization as a whole, addressed the needs of tribal partners. And, we really dedicated a lot of resources to addressing the needs of our tribal partners to making sure that we were building those relationships, dedicating robust regional resources to our tribal partners and making sure that the tribal nations had someone that they could interface with at the regional level. And, I thought that was a very, very important move, but there was so much more to do. So, when I left and went to the Hill, as you mentioned, to really look from that authorization standpoint, again, just looking at what the law authorizes, it was very clear that just the resources that were dedicated to tribes weren't sufficient. So, after a brief stint in the private sector, continuing to advocate for those resources that are dedicated toward building local and state and tribal capability and capacity, when I had the opportunity to come back to FEMA and, particularly in the grants world, because, you know, grants are truly, a key tool to what we can give all of our partners to helping build that resilience to helping them not only withstand but bounce back from the next inevitable disaster, regardless of cause. And so, now I'm in a position to truly help engage with tribal partners and understand where those gaps still exist and to take that perspective that started all those many years ago and try to help continue to build those efforts that were started back in the two thousands and really help tailor our programs and where needed. And, I'm pretty excited to talk a little bit more about this if needed, adjust our legal authorities so that we can better meet the needs of our tribal partners.

Mark Peterson - Host:

You know, before we get into how we're working to really understand the unique aspects of tribal nations as they work to apply for grants. Maybe you could just, kind of, talk through the many different areas of grants that FEMA has within our portfolio. Maybe, I mean, is there a way to bucket them and, you know, sort of summarize that? Cause there's a lot of them.

Pam Williams:

There are a lot of them. And, so, as you mentioned, people are most familiar with our disaster grants. You know, those grants that come into play in the wake of a disaster - those resources that help communities recover from, rebuild after a disaster. So, we'll bucket those as disaster grants, and those are the ones that people are most familiar with. I'm gonna talk a lot about those grants that came into play, particularly after 9-11. We're gonna call those preparedness grants. Those are non-disaster grants and those help build capabilities. They truly are not only preparedness so, help address, kind of, terrorism hazards, but also a multitude of other hazards, right? Those can be used for everything from communications and equipment, emergency operations centers, but truly help build a capacity across this country to help prepare for the inevitability of disasters.

But we also have other non-disaster grants, like fire grants. So, we help our first responders and our fire community, even in the most rural of communities, build capacity through equipment training, even research and personnel, that really do help our fire and first responder and emergency communities. And then we have a large bucket of resources going to mitigation, which is truly at the core of building resilience. So how do we help identify risk and then draw down that risk through various investments, whether that's removing people from harm's way or strengthening people against the inevitable harm. And so, there's a wide variety of investments through grants in that mitigation area.

Mark Peterson - Host:

So, in thinking about all of those different programs, and then also thinking about our FEMA strategic plan and our focus on instilling equity in all levels of emergency management, You know, Pam, can you talk about the importance of why we are, at least in this conversation, focused on, you know, making these programs more accessible to tribal nations?

Pam Williams:

Absolutely. And so, I also wanna mention that, you know, FEMA's grants go to our state and local partners, our tribal partners, and a variety of non-profit partners that perform, kind of, inherently governmental functions. They go to key law enforcement, to our first responders and to various state agencies that manage critical infrastructure - and those people that are doing yeomen's work in creating resilience and protecting our country. And so, they're key partners in addition to our tribal partners. But, as you mentioned, our strategic plan really does have three goals that are aimed at addressing the ever-increasing severity and complex nature of the hazards that our country is continuing to face. And, it really is targeted at addressing issues of equity and resilience.

So, our first goal is to instill equity as a foundation of emergency management. Our second goal is to lead the whole community in an approach to climate awareness and resilience. And, our third goal is to promote and sustain a ready FEMA and prepared nation. And so, I really wanna drill down on our first goal, which is equity as a foundation of emergency management. And, this is really where I'm excited to say that, in concert with our strategic plan, just in August, just a few months ago, our administrator, Deanne Criswell also launched our comprehensive tribal strategy because understanding that our tribes have historically, and currently, face a disproportionate inequitable treatment, not only in the way that they're impacted by disasters, but in their inability to tap into the resources to help them combat the impacts of disasters.

And so, I am incredibly excited that, not only does she recognize that we need a robust strategy to combat that, but also that she recognizes that by engaging and learning from our tribal partners, we are going to be able to address other inequities in our program. So, I'm really, really excited that the grant programs directorate is, kind of, helping lead the way. So, we've already engaged in three formal consultations with our tribal partners to help learn more about what we can do to adjust our programs to better meet their needs. And I'm really, really excited to adjust our programs and see what we can do to help engage our partners and truly adjust and address their needs in a more meaningful way.

Mark Peterson - Host:

So, maybe this is a good opportunity to just, kind of, talk about some of the things that you are aware of, and maybe the agency is aware of, in terms of the hurdles that tribal nations, you know, face in their ability to apply for and then successfully obtain FEMA grant funding. So, maybe sort of, set the stage for what it is that we're trying to achieve.

Pam Williams:

So historically, particularly with FEMA's programs, tribes have had to apply for resources and assistance through the states in which their sovereign lands are located. And, we should first remind everyone that's listening that federally recognized tribes are sovereign nations. You know, we have over 570 federally recognized tribes throughout the country, but they are legally to be treated as sovereign nations. I mean, just as we would diplomatically engage with a foreign country. They have leaders and some of them are called presidents. They have different governing structures, and we are to legally recognize them as sovereign entities. And so, to force them to go through a state is inappropriate and truly not right. And so, as we are adjusting the way our legal framework works with them, we need to recognize their inherent sovereignty. And that's why we have implemented the consultation process.

And the consultation process is a very respectful, formalized process in which we provide them notice, provide them an opportunity to come to us with formalized comments, but also where we engage with them in a very open, honest, transparent process. And then, dialogue with them about our proposals, what we're thinking, and then solicit their input. And then, not only solicit their input but truly dialogue and engage with them. It is a trust building process. It is a collaborative process. It isn't only a solicitation for input, but we need to engage with them in a way where we truly understand what we are proposing and that impact on them. And through this process, we have, certainly, for me, it has been completely eye opening. One of the things that you have to understand about tribal nations is, culturally inherently, tribes are so intertwined with a respect and an understanding of climate change and an investment in how they impact the environment and the world around them. Tribes think about their impact in the world around them, not in terms of the next 10, 20 years. They truly think about things in terms of four to six generations ahead of them. Imagine thinking about what I do today and how that is going to impact things four generations down the line. Well, that is truly a climate impact type of thinking. And so, understanding that is a great way of thinking how they want to invest in things, how they're thinking about hazards and mitigation and how to draw down their risks.

And one of the things that we have greatly learned, is that they are restricted in the amount of resources that they have. Many tribes are completely strapped for resources, but don't have any more than one person that is even focused on disasters and emergency management and preparedness any more than full time so the resources that they have to even tap into grants is extremely limited. So we're learning things like - they shouldn't have to go through the state. They need increased flexibility on the use of grant funds. They need flexibility on any sort of cost share, again, because of limited resources. And so, as we are continuing to dialogue, we are certainly learning things that, as I mentioned, will certainly have applicability to other communities, particularly in rural and underserved communities across the country, but specifically streamlining our application process. Our application process can be burdensome and hard, and that is a tremendous burden on tribes and other communities. And so, helping us understand where those pressure points are, and if those were to be relieved, the impact that that would have on our tribal partners has been tremendously informative and what we can undertake to alleviate those pain points so that they can avail themselves to the resources that are available.

Mark Peterson - Host:

I mean, that's a tremendous effort and I really appreciate you, kind of, clearly helping us understand the sort of, term of art of, what a tribal consultation is. And, it sounds like it's just truly a mutually beneficial experience from what it sounds like. And Pam, how many consultations have you done already?

Pam Williams:

So, to date, we've done three consultations. So, during the summer, we did a specific consultation on the emergency preparedness performance grant or what we call EMPG, which specifically provides resources not only to tribes, but to our state and local partners to help them with personnel needs. But again, one of the things that we learned is that tribes having to go through states, or receiving not enough resources, it's just not augmenting them in the way that they are needing to be augmented. So, as we are taking a look at that, you know, how could we get them more resources, more dedicated resources, or more flexible resources, that was definitely themes that we heard in that consultation - that was the summer. And then, we had a consultation specifically on a new grant program that came out of the bipartisan infrastructure law, and that was in August - that was specifically related to cybersecurity. So, certainly our tribes are not immune to the cybersecurity threats that are facing us across the nation. And, the bipartisan infrastructure law actually carved out a dedicated pot, specifically for tribes. And so, we held a consultation related to this pot of money specifically to ask them how should we design this program? So, it was a tremendous opportunity because we were in a position of designing a brand new program - what does this need to look like? And, one of the things that we heard, they need guidance on what should their cybersecurity look like? So, there was a tremendous knowledge gap, what do they need to be doing? And so, we definitely saw this as an opportunity to build resources. So that's gonna definitely be one of the things that we are going to have to do with the cybersecurity grant program is what resources need to be pulled and given to tribes as part of this grant program.

But again, one of the things that we definitely heard was the amount of resources dedicated to this and the consistency of resources across tribal nations. And then, most recently, we looked to the tribes to give us some input on the Tribal Homeland Security Grant program. And, in engaging with tribes on this, we are actually looking to potentially influence a legislative change and going back to Congress to adjust the legal authorities and expand the legal authorities so that we can address the needs of our tribes because, currently, we do not have sufficient legal authorities to address those concerns and to expand the program to address, not only terrorism needs, but more all hazard needs of our tribal nations. And again, to just input additional flexibility into the program, reduce cost share and administrative burdens on the tribes so that they can exercise greater flexibility into the program and utilize the resources intended to them to strengthen their communities against inherent risks.

Mark Peterson - Host:

So, the tribal consultation process and the conversations that are had - are they always, sort of program specific or do you sort of engage in a consultation broadly about the way that FEMA engages or communicates with tribes? I guess what I'm wondering is, if they are meant to be programs specific to gain understanding with regard to one specific topic, what do you have in store for the future? What other topics are you looking to improve as it relates to grants and where do you see this going?

Pam Williams:

Yeah, so, I definitely see this as a meaningful ongoing continuous process. Because of our history with tribes, I think it is critical that we continue to build trust and engagement. And ,one of the things that has been very important for me is to make sure that tribes understand that with each engagement, even if we are engaging on a specific topic, that the floor is open for them to bring anything to the table. Because you're exactly right, while we may be engaging on a specific topic, we need to know those things that we need to sign post for additional engagement, those things that we may not be aware of because the tribes are experts for those issues that they are facing. We are not, that's why we do these engagements. So, one, we are making sure that they know that the floor is always open for them to bring issues to us so that we can prioritize them. And, that is certainly a key part of this tribal strategy that Administrator Criswell has prioritized for us, along with a strategic plan. But I think as we move forward, we do need to be sign posting not only those programs, but big issues on what is on the horizon for us. What are those programs that need to be at the forefront for us? And I do think, you know, on the disaster side, certainly our partners in our Office of Response and Recovery are also prioritizing what disaster response and recovery looks like for our tribal partners because it's inevitable and they are continuously burdened by the disaster cycles. And, mitigation is also looking at, how do we strengthen our tribal partners against some ongoing flooding and massive climate change and how do we look at it in a different way, given their unique relationship with sacred lands that are being impacted by massive climate change. So, I think that those are some big issues that we have on the horizon, particularly as we continue to prioritize equity. Because historically, these programs have not met their needs and they have not been able to truly, truly, reach in and take advantage of the resources that are available just because they haven't had access to these programs.

Mark Peterson - Host:

You mentioned this a little bit earlier, Pam, but you know, where do you see some of the conversations that we're having about improving delivery of services with our tribal organizations? How do you see them leading to improved efficiencies, improved processes with other applicant stakeholder groups like our rural emergency managers, maybe UASI applicants or faith-based organizations? You know, where are the, sort of, nexus that can improve those consistent efficiencies?

Pam Williams:

I definitely think we have a lot to learn in how we can simplify our application processes, right? I just think that, as bureaucratic organizations do, inherently some things have just become overly burdensome, overly administrative in process. And, I think we can definitely identify some ways to simplify that to truly find ways that we can eliminate certain processes, certainly eliminate some duplications and, I think that all of our applicants are gonna benefit from that. But one of the things that I've certainly learned from our tribal partners is that there are some partnerships that are amazing. There are some states and some regions and some communities that have truly developed amazing partnerships. And Administrator Criswell talks about this in an amazing way. When we're talking about resilience, the most important thing that you can do is invest in the system, right? It's not just a single investment in a single project. You've truly gotta invest in the system and tribes, while they're sovereign, they also need key partnerships. And those are partnerships in the communities around them, in the states, around them. And so, there are some amazing examples of great partnerships, and I know that we have some tremendous lessons learned. We also know there are some great lessons learned in that amazing relationship with the environment, with climate change, with creative solutions. I think we have a lot that we can learn from best practices from our tribes. And I think that that's not only going to help us in our administrative processes, but in our other grant applicants. And so, that's gonna help all of our grantees - large and small, find better solutions, find better opportunities for partnerships, and I think that that's only going to strengthen the country at large.

Mark Peterson - Host:

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