Mark Peterson - Host:

I'm Mark Peterson, and this is "Before, During, and After. A Podcast from FEMA." In late October, FEMA released the National Continuous Improvement Guidance. The guidance provides an approach to conducting consistent and rigorous continuous improvement activities before, during, and after real world incidences. Emergency managers and other whole community partners can use this document to effectively strengthen their continuous improvement capabilities, regardless of the organization's level of experience or resources. So, on today's episode, we're gonna walk through that guidance and also some technical assistance that FEMA is working to provide throughout the nation.

Alright. So, pretty much one commonality across all the emergency management professionals that I've met, so far, is that everybody wants to strengthen their organization and part of that is improving their continuous improvement processes. So, fortunately, FEMA has released a national continuous improvement guidance. So, here with me today to talk about this guidance is Lee Zelewicz, the Continuous Improvement Technical Assistance Program Lead.

Lee Zelewicz:

Yes. Thank you so much, Mark. It's a real pleasure to be here and really, really excited to be able to talk about this new guidance on the podcast with you today.

Mark Peterson - Host:

We also have Danel Trisi, National Integration Section Chief.

Danel Trisi:

Thank you so much for having us on. We're excited to share this guidance with everyone and yeah, excited for this to, kinda, be the start of a conversation. So, looking forward. Thank you so much.

Mark Peterson - Host:

So, Lee, you know, I know we talk about the idea of continuous improvement and it obviously maybe some sounds a little bit obvious to some people but, I think there's a bit of a discipline here. So, what is continuous improvement?

Lee Zelewicz:

Yeah. It really is, kind of, involving the establishment of an ongoing culture of learning. So, you know, a baseline is super important, especially in emergency management, for us to identify our strengths, potential best practices, and areas for improvement. And then to address those, build on them, to really be that regular assessment of an organization in terms of its capabilities, its processes and functions. And to do it in, you know, a rigid or replicable process that we do it over and over again, and that it's based, you know, on the idea that we can do little things to improve today, we can keep building on it and continue to improve over time - before, during, or after real world incidents.

Mark Peterson - Host:

I love that idea of a culture of learning and especially for any organization and, specifically ours, FEMA, but also the numerous partners that we have at the state and local level who, over the last couple years, I mean, through COVID, have maybe found themselves into different events or risks or disasters that they might not have found themselves in previously. And so, that idea of culture of learning really resonates with me, and I'm sure with others. And so, to kind of like, flesh that out a little bit, can you give me some examples that illustrate why continuous improvement matters in that ever-evolving emergency management communities?

Danel Trisi:

So, yeah. So, I think one of the things that is unfortunately happening is that disasters are happening more frequently and the severity of each of these incidents is often more common. And additionally, disasters are now happening in areas that maybe previously weren't as disaster prone, right? So, there's a lot of lessons learned that could be captured and that's why continuous improvement is super important for this world of emergency management. So, for example, right, so, if we could learn from the past experiences, from other cities, from other states and localities so that when that disaster impacts our area, we could leverage those lessons learned, right, and that's why continuous improvement provides a solid process to learn those lessons about what worked, what hasn't past, what hasn't worked, and to build that process for success, right? And yeah, it's about avoiding things that could have been avoided, right? There'll always be new challenges, but it's about learning from where we can, right? And in the emergency management world, unfortunately, we're called to respond time and time again. And so, that's a place where it's primer to capture those lessons learned and see about improving each time.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Lee, before we get into the guidance itself, what is the part of FEMA - because it's a big organization and not everybody is familiar with all the different areas of FEMA, what is the part of FEMA that really focuses on this continuous improvement effort?

Lee Zelewicz:

Yeah so, FEMA's continuous improvement program is part of resilience. And, baseline concept is the program itself focuses on building out preparedness, you know, and helping the agency learn from past disasters. But, even beyond that, you know, we have a part of that program that focuses on technical assistance and that's the continuous improvement technical assistance program. And, that's where we, again, are able to bring forward guidance tools, templates, advisory services - a lot of elements for our partners really to engage with continuous improvement, again, to look at the process and also to provide them with the tools to help engage in that in their own organizations.

Mark Peterson - Host:

So, when you talk about technical assistance, what types of technical assistance are we talking about that the program provides? And, is that different than the continuous improvement efforts that we do within the agency itself?

Lee Zelewicz:

Yeah. So, yeah, there's definitely, it's different than what we do internally, in terms of what we provide. Internally, the continuous improvement program really helps agency programs improve through, kind of, that consistent agency-wide assessments, through program consulting and support, and improvement tracking, which, you know, as you develop after action review products, you end up with observations and recommended actions or, basically, how you're gonna improve and, you wanna track that progress over time. So, that's what we do internally. But then, externally facing, under the Technical Assistance program, we really have three major areas that we focus on. The first is supporting a community of practice. And what that means is, we try to bring together emergency management professionals, stakeholders that are engaged in a continuous improvement so that they can share ideas together and engage with us with the continuous improvement technical assistance program team. And I might call it CITAP at some point but, that's the same thing, just the abbreviation.

So, that's kind of the first engagement, and we do that in different settings. So, for example, we hold, office hours once a month and that's, kind of, an open forum where we stakeholders come together, talk about current topics or addressing continuous improve it. Maybe they're developing a survey and they want some input from partners. Well guess what? The next county over might attend or across the nation have a great idea for how they can address that problem and we can talk about it and have a dialogue.

Additionally, the second piece is, we have a training suite. The training suite includes additional webinars where we focus on talking about some of the data collection methods or analysis methods that are used in continuous improvement. We have an independent study, so on the Emergency Management Institute's website, that's IS45, and it provides an overview of continuous improvement, really to get people off the ground. And then, we have over 30 templates and tools available on our preparedness toolkit website, as well.

And then, the last piece of that, the third piece, is our advisory services. And really, this is the opportunity for, you know, an organization to come forward with an issue they're working on, something they need some engagement on, and then we work through that in a customized way to figure out how to support them in that. Mostly, it's virtual at this point. It makes sense, you know, to get those engagements off the ground, virtually. There can be some in person and they can vary. Like it can be a consultation on a simple thing.

Maybe, again, to go back to the survey example they want some help to learn how to develop a survey that's gonna get them the results they want in terms of data. Maybe they want some help on learning how to develop interview questions in an interview questionnaire but, it can also be bigger. It can be something where they're trying to establish a continuous improvement program and maybe they need some assistance to think about what elements that need to have in place to make a program successful, and we can support that. And, that's obviously a much larger, longer term engagement that can be done with the program. So, those are, kind of, the three areas - the community of practice, the training suite, and the advisory services.

Mark Peterson - Host:

You know, Danel, FEMA has no shortage of opportunities to engage with state, state and local partners and even other organizations that support the emergency management, you know, efforts in communities across the nation. You know, do you have any examples of where you all have, sort of, led technical assistance deliveries and really helped those partners?

Danel Trisi:

Yeah, for sure. So, this is also a part of the program that we're actually currently expanding and growing. So, let me share some examples of what we've done in the past and where we hope to go from here as well. So, in the past, we've helped a large emergency management agency build out their continuous improvement program. So, they were well established organization and had already been doing some continuous improvement initiatives for some time but, they met with us. We went with their staff. We flew to them and met with them for two days and over and workshop some ideas their mission value statements for the continuous improvement program. We, kind of, helped them do a SWOT model, right? Which was strengths, weakness, and opportunities and threats - and also did a gap analysis with them as well.

And so, through this, they were able to identify like - how do they mature their program, where they're at, where do they wanna go? And so, they were able to get some direct, kind of, one-on-one support. And so, we're also gonna be doing that soon with another organization that's actually has a different challenge. They're looking at how do they track the corrective actions items - like poster abstraction reports, right? So, they do report other types of assessments and they have all these areas for improvement that they wanna track for long term to make sure they're being addressed. And so, how do we do it at FEMA and what tools could we give them, and suggestions for how to do it themselves at their state and local levels. And so, those are kind of some of the bigger engagements we've done.

There's also shorter consultations, right? We've had organizations approach us and be like, "I'm trying to do a survey, a short survey, to capture some lessons learned post an incident we had." So, we might review their survey, give them some resources for survey development and things like that. As Lee mentioned, we have these monthly webinars. So, these office hours. So, that's where a lot of folks can come with their questions and ideas and, you know, whatever their challenges and struggles are at with continuous improvement, we can hopefully help them and connect them to some resources on our website. The preparedness toolkit, we have a lot of resources and templates there that we we're always happy to link and connect individuals to, as well. And so, in the future, we definitely hope to be augmenting the amount of direct advisory services support we can provide to organizations. And, the idea here is, we wanna provide them to all levels, right? So, those that have established programs and those that are just trying to start one up, right? Even if you are the sole emergency manager and a local community, there's probably little things you could do in the continuous improvement ground to still help capture some of those lessons, learn and be a little more ready for the next incident.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Alright. So, given the, you know, the technical assistance that's available and then also the toolkit that's online, which, by the way, I spent a little bit of time on that website, you know, prior to talking to you. I mean, it's really robust. There are a lot of resources on that and a lot of good discussion points. So, tell me about the guidance, the national continuous improvement guidance, the release of it and what you're trying to achieve from it, Danel.

Danel Trisi:

So, with the national continuous improvement guidance, we've heard from the partners, right, from all the state and local and tribal and territorial partners, that there wasn't any kind of guidance. While there might have been some guidance in terms of the exercise realm of how to capture our lessons learned and evaluate exercise, there wasn't the equivalent of that in the real world incidents, right? So, post a real world incident, you know, you don't start with exercise objectives, for example, right? So, there's a lot of different things that could happen in an incident that you want to capture and track as lessons learned and to see how you could do better. And, if there's things that also worked out well, how could you implement those for later on? And so, this guidance, kind of, provides a lot of information about how to do that for real world incidents - how to really evaluate your response incidents and capture that.

But it also goes beyond that, right? So, we're also trying to help the emergency management community get beyond just doing the after-action reports. There's a lot of other works that continuous improvement can be a part of. And one of those, for example, is incident operations. You could actually embed incident operations, continuous improvement staff into incident operations to help kind of capture lessons learned in the moment, right? Like, what is working and what's not working to later on be able to follow up after the incident. There's also a whole range of process improvement work that continuous improvement also encompasses where, you know, there's a process that's not working that could be improved. There are different ways that those could be augmented or addressed in some ways, right? So, you could do some process mapping techniques as well, to help understand those processes.

And so, this guidance - we really wanted to be very robust and almost to be like a menu of options for you to, kind of, take and choose what you need, right? So, we wrote it pretty robustly. It's quite lengthy. We won't, we will admit but, the idea is that there's hopefully something there for everyone, right? Whether you're an established organization that's done continuous improvement efforts for quite some time or whether you're just like a tribal nation or a territorial partner that's just starting up in this realm. So, we wanna make sure there's, kinda, something in there for everyone, right? So, we encourage you to, kind of, dive through it as it's released on the website. There's gonna be information about different views to take the guidance and different aspects, depending on the type of role you have in the organization. There's also some guidance that goes along with that document to share for emergency management leaders, you know, key things for them to be aware of. So, as the guidance is released, we're gonna have a lot of tools and templates that could be continuously updated. And so, we also wanna hear from the community, right? What's needed, what's next with this guidance? Like, where do we need to go from here?

Mark Peterson - Host:

Yeah. And Lee, with the fact that this guidance is really intended to assist so many different types of emergency management organizations, what was the process for developing it?

Lee Zelewicz:

Yeah so, it really began with engaging our stakeholders. So, back at the start of 2022, we held listening sessions because we'd heard from stakeholders that this was needed. There was a need for this guidance and we wanted to know - what did they want this guidance to be? So, there was a series of listening sessions in January or February and we really heard about the topics that they felt were important to include in the guidance and what they needed guidance on. And, from that, that established the baseline of need and topics. Then, as we pivoted to look at continuous improvement best practices within FEMA, but even broader - best practices, in general, for continuous improvement, to address those needs and develop a preliminary draft of the guidance. It went through obviously many reviews internally and then we had the great pleasure of getting feedback from the public again on that draft during the public review and comment period that started in late June and ran through all of July this year.

And, during that period we had, not just the ability for stakeholders to download it and then submit feedback via email to us, which was a great opportunity for a large wide audience to engage with it. But, we also had more webinars so, we actually had four webinars where we provided an overview of the guidance and also time for question and answer to, kind of, come through the chat and the Q and A feature. And, we addressed those topics and gained additional feedback right there, live, during a presentation on the guidance. And then, we also just had the opportunity to present at the National Homeland Security Conference in July. It was in Cleveland. And, we did a workshop there, which was topic focused - spent two hours with a group that was just so great in giving us input on specific ideas and areas that we thought needed to be fleshed out in this new draft.

And then, did a presentation later in the week. And that presentation, of course, had a Q and A, where we got more feedback from stakeholders. So, when you, kind of, roll that all up together, we were able to look at all the feedback from those opportunities and then adjudicate it and address it in the guidance to come up with a draft, a final draft. But, importantly, even elements of feedback that didn't get directly incorporated has inspired additional work in terms of development of other tools and templates. We developed a companion guide specific for considerations for emergency management leaders, you know, focused on continuous improvement, and that's you know, a short document, accompanying this larger set of guidance. And then, additionally, like Danel said earlier, it also informed how we present the guidance. So, on the preparedness toolkit, there are four main views. And in those, they're kind of tailored so, some sections of the guidance are left out in a view - maybe focused on resource constrained organizations. We try to pull forward the points that would be good for them. Same with the new-to-continuous-improvement organization view. You know, there are elements there that they might want. Then, an established-program view and continuous - maybe some of the baseline content isn't necessary so, let's get right into the considerations for those stakeholders. And, the other view about, Beyond the AAR - Beyond the After Action report. I think that's also a good view that, kind of, came out from a lot of the feedback that we heard from our stakeholders. You know, a lot of people know the world of an after action report from an incident but they may not know all the other elements or have engaged fully in the range of before and during an incident. So again, how to do continuous improvement during incident operations, for example.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Danel, if it's okay, I'd like to go back to something that you mentioned earlier, which I, really was, you know, just thinking back through the last few years of COVID and this, kind of, evolving incidents - things that we may be, you know, were new to us as, you know, constantly evolving demands on the emergency management profession and so, this idea of embedding continuous improvement staff, or an individual, that can, you know, work with incident operations to adjust on the fly but that takes staff, right? And so, if you think about - I'm just thinking across the nation, so many emergency management organizations are just short-staffed, right? So, does this guide help these organizations with limited resources really tap into the power of continuous improvement, even with their own constraints?

Danel Trisi:

Yes, most certainly it does. And so, Lee was also just mentioned, right? So about the considerations for resource constrained organizations. So, we actually have an appendix in the guidance that is entirely dedicated to this, helping draw out the connections for organizations that yeah, may only have one staff member that is really the full-time emergency manager and everyone else is just deployed as needed during an incident, right? And also, throughout the guidance, we also have little call out boxes specific for organizations that are more resource constrained for ways how they can tailor the guidance or tailor or adapt things. And so, for example, right? So, one of the things that we definitely push for in the guidance, for smaller organizations, would be maybe just send out a survey, right? Maybe you don't have the luxury of doing a lot of interviews and all this data analysis during or after an incident but, maybe before people demobilize from an incident and go back to their steady state operations, you can click send on a short survey for them to complete and capture their lessons learned, right?

So even little tweaks like that, if organizations aren't doing things like that - those are some examples of the things mentioned in the guidance, right? And then, it's about just tracking it and doing it to whatever level they can at that organization, right? So, for one organization, it might be a long, you know, extensive report. For a small organization that has more limited resources, it might just be one meeting but, there's, like, key takeaways from that meeting that are gonna be shared and tracked for the next hurricane that comes, right? And so, whatever that is, we encourage folks to make those little adaptations. That's why, very much, it is a pick your own adventure type of guidance that is not a directive, by any means. It is, kind of, an option of, you know, compilation of various options and ideas for you to see what resonates and what works with the organization.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Lee, before we started talking, you were telling me a little bit about your background and having worked with a number of different emergency management organizations and, I just wonder if you could share, you know, thinking back, you know, what are some aspects of the guidance that really, kind of, resonate with those experiences and maybe emergency managers will find really helpful from the guidance?

Lee Zelewicz:

For sure. So, some of the aspects that, you know, in my own background - having, you know, been in a local emergency management agency and also a consultant that supported state and local partners around the United States, the aspects that jump out are, in some cases, those items about the resource constrained considerations. And also, the fact that we tried to drive the guidance to speaking to a broad range. Again, it's that scalability, flexibility, and instant operations being one that, you know, when I came to FEMA it wasn't an area that I was totally used to seeing always in those terms but, the guidance does a really good job of noting, again, you don't necessarily have to add a position to your EOC. Look at a couple of items you can add to existing positions in your emergency operations center, their checklists that then still, you know, yield large scale benefits over time because, even incremental positive change can, you know, build up over time.

So, it's really making sure that the guidance speaks to that wider audience. And also, again, you know, there are different topics that are gonna speak well to state organizations versus local. So, counties perhaps, you know, there might be some elements that speak very well to tribal and territorial organizations or those collaborative relationships. Another appendix that we developed focused, specifically, on considerations about doing continuous improvement work in other cultural settings, for example. So if, you know, via mutual aid, you end up working in a cultural setting that's not your own and you need to work with that community, and there are different expectations, you know, we wanted to call out that, that's really important to think about when you're talking about how do you do a survey? You know, do you engage with them using a digital medium? Do you have to engage translators? You know, it can be broad, it can be simple but, we try to provide some tools to help in these different, you know, settings in terms of state, local, tribal, territorial partners, even how non-governmental organizations and private sector engage with continuous improvement.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Alright, so Danel, where can individuals who are interested in it, where can they find the guidance?

Danel Trisi:

Sure. So, the guidance was released on October 25th and they can find it on the FEMA website. There's a link from there to the preparedness toolkit. So, that's preparednesstoolkit.fema.gov/web/cip-citap. And so, that's where you can find the guidance. From there, you'll also have links to all the resources that are a part of the guidance that can be downloaded as well. A lot of the resources are in Word and Excel formats so that they could be customized for each organization for the needs that they have.

Mark Peterson - Host:

So, you both mentioned throughout the podcast that the continuous improvement technical assistance program is certainly interested in hearing from individuals throughout the nation. So how can somebody provide you with feedback?

Lee Zelewicz:

Yeah, we could definitely love to hear feedback, you know, directly via email. Our email address is fema-citap@fema.dhs.gov. But, if you find your way to our website, even on the page where the National Continuous Improvement Guidance is, there's a submit feedback button, so you can get to the contact us page and right, there's the email address, so if I spoke too fast, you can grab it and we'd love to hear from you. And, we also, you know, encourage you to engage with us in other ways too. We have the webinars every month. On average, we have three webinars a month. A lot of those are opportunities to dialogue with us. So, really invite that engagement and to hear about your own continuous improvement initiatives, kind of, the issues that come up, and to have that open conversation about the path forward.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Thanks for listening to this episode of "Before, During, and After. A Podcast from FEMA." If you'd like to learn more about this episode or other topics, or have ideas for future episodes, visit us at fema.gov/podcast.