Mark Peterson - Host:

I'm Mark Peterson, and this is "Before, During, and After: A Podcast from FEMA."

To accomplish FEMA's mission, we work with governments at all levels to ensure the agency is helping people before, during, and after disasters. One special relationship that federal agencies, such as FEMA, have is the relationship with tribal nations, since the federal government has a treaty and trust relationships with tribes. In that same vein, tribal emergency management is very different compared to emergency management at the local or state level. In this episode, Troy Christensen, from the FEMA podcast team, speaks with two tribal emergency managers about what makes their job unique. Also, stick around for a bonus segment after the episode. You won't wanna miss it, as we explore one tribal elected official's take on why investments in emergency management is a top priority.

Troy Christensen:

I'm here with Tim Zientek, emergency manager from the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. Tim, welcome to the podcast.

Tim Zientek:

Thank you. Thanks for inviting me, Troy.

Troy Christensen:

And also, Paul Downing, the emergency manager for the Seminole Tribe of Florida.

Paul Downing:

Thank you. And thank you for having me.

Troy Christensen:

Paul, we'll start with you. Tell us a little bit about your background and your journey into the position you are now, as an emergency manager.

Paul Downing:

Hmm. So, I retired from the Army and I was looking for something to occupy my time. The tribe had a need for an emergency manager. I really didn't know what it was. Once I started to get into what emergency management was all about, it was not far removed from what I did in the military. So, some reason, I just like a fish to water. It seems like all this stuff comes very easily to me. And so, I started working with my tribe, the Passamaquoddy Tribe of Indian Township. Spent a few years there and then the pandemic kicked off and I went to the Passamaquoddy Tribe of Pleasant Point and worked for them for almost two years. And, the Seminole Tribe of Florida Public Safety Director met me in Washington, DC when I was there for USET and started trying to recruit me. So, after a year and a half, I finally gave in and I'm there as the Director of Emergency Management in Seminole Tribe of Florida.

Troy Christensen:

Great. And Tim, what about you? Tell us about your background.

Tim Zientek:

So, I started my career in 1980. I actually worked in the automotive industry and for, probably, 20 something years in automotive industry. During that time, I only worked at like four different locations, for four different companies. And, during that time I was the safety manager for every place I worked. After 20 years of working in the auto industry, I found a job working for my tribe, the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. They asked me to come and be their safety director and director of housekeeping. So, that started in the year 2000 and three months later, we were hit with an ice storm and that's where I started working with FEMA. And then a month after that, we had another ice storm so, I got pretty acquainted with FEMA and working with FEMA. At that time, we were going under the state as subrecipients.

We did have some questionable, I guess, relations with the state and once they seen the emergency - or the safety part of my position and understood the importance of having emergency management, we kind of created emergency management program and, I started the program on my own without the blessing from the leadership. But then, later on, they realized that that was a good thing - that I did that. And then, I was like, let's see, I believe we were like number six in the nation. The Citizen Potawatomi Nation was number six in the nation to actually have an approved mitigation plan, back in 2005. I'm in the middle of our, what, third update, I think. So, through that I also had worked with the Emergency Management Institute on several of the focus groups to build what now is the tribal curriculum and have been a part of all of the updates and focus groups on each of those.

See, I am the longest tenured adjunct instructor for Emergency Management Institute and have taught over half of the 574 federally recognized tribes in class. I currently sit, I think I'm in my 11th year, as a member of the Regional Advisory Council for Region six. I was a founding member of the Inner Tribal Emergency Management Coalition of Oklahoma. That, I'm told, is one of the longest running coalitions of emergency management in the country. Several other states and regions have requested that we help them develop a similar program. In fact, the tribes or pueblos in the state of New Mexico has taken our bylaws and have built their own item C. In fact, they just put "Southwest Item C" in front of it and they are in the process of building that. So, I think, Northwestern United States, Washington, I think has one now - seven tribes in it. So, it's been a while, an interesting ride. We've applied for several mitigation grants and received some grants, built some safe rooms. And actually, today, what they told me last week was that we have built the largest safe room in the history of FEMA. So, it's, we're pretty proud of it. It's a 25,000 square foot safe room, and it's two story.

Troy Christensen:

And Tim, you mentioned, you know, you're from the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. Tell me a little bit about the risks and hazards you face for people who may not be familiar with your nation.

Tim Zientek:

So, Citizen Potawatomi Nation is located about 30 miles east of Oklahoma City, in Oklahoma. We have virtually all of the hazards that FEMA wants to consider when you're writing your mitigation plan. We've had floods. We've had tornadoes, earthquakes, winter storms, snowstorms - haven't had an avalanche yet but I'm waiting. But, we sit between two waterways. And so, we, when we first wrote our mitigation plan, the team thought, you know, we're gonna have tornadoes. It's gonna be our number one threat. Well, as we got into the risk assessment, we figured out that the most often threat that we had and the most damaging threat we had was flooding. And so, because of the risk assessment, we changed our way of thinking. Tornado is number two, but flooding was number one. And we, we've done quite a bit of mitigation with our flooding efforts.

We have the one, it's called Squirrel Creek, that runs within a hundred feet of our administration building, that was notorious for flooding. Every time we get, you know, two to three inches of rain, it would flood. Well, one of the mitigation projects we do, that's ongoing, is that we go down that channel and clear out all the debris. That might be falling trees, or it might be someone has thrown - we've pulled car doors out of the creek but, anything that slows the flow down, we remove it and dispose of it. So, virtually, that has decreased our chances for flood immensely. And, we did a flood study in 2004 and found that, we found a way that we could even decrease the risk for flooding even more and that project is still ongoing. It's not quite complete yet but we have made remarkable difference. We dug - it's actually, we called it an agricultural drainage ditch that actually will move the water from Squirrel Creek into the North Canadian that borders on the other side of the complex, before it gets to the complex, which will take several hundred acres out of the floodway once we get done with our flood study that we're doing now.

Troy Christensen:

That's fantastic. And Paul, I'm guessing you don't have to worry about avalanches as well, just like Tim, but, you know, tell us a little bit about some of the threats for your, from your perspective and, I'm sure I can guess a few, being down in Florida, but take it away.

Paul Downing:

Well, the primary threat in our area is flooding and hurricanes. Florida as a state is a very low state, sea level wise. So, if you have storm surge coming from the east coast or the west coast, we tend to get inundated a lot further inland. This last hurricane that we just had, Hurricane Ian, we had tribal members that lived in the Naples community but by and large, the reservations, the track of the storm kind of almost went in between them all the way up. So, we had a lot of the peripheral damage - wind, rain, etc. but we didn't get the eye of the storm through it. And of course, severe weather, extended power outages, all of those things. Much like any other jurisdiction. And it's just, I have seven communities that we have to tend to - seven separate reservations, and they go from Tampa all the way as far south as Miami and as far north as Fort Pierce. So, it's a pretty good geographic footprint that we tend to.

Troy Christensen:

You know, we've got a lot of listeners that are emergency managers at all levels of government from local to state and tribal. I guess my first question is, what aspects of tribal emergency management make it distinctly different from other jurisdictions, in your opinion?

Tim Zientek:

There are 574 federally recognized tribes and each one of them have a unique form of government. Some of them have elections every four years. Some of them have elections every one year. Some of the tribes are, you know, the Cherokees, the Navajos have, what are they now 375,000 members. There are some tribes that only have a few hundred. So, there is a very broad difference between all of them. Emergency management part of it is the same. Some of the larger tribes that have more funding have very robust emergency management programs. And there are some tribes that don't have any emergency management program whatsoever, but it's simply because they just can't afford it. As far as the differences in government, we had recently changed our form of government from a business committee aspect to a legislature where we have 16 members that are - half of them live within the state of Oklahoma, the other half live in different districts throughout the United States.

And they come together, via virtual or in person, every quarter and discuss the tribe's business. We split our government up that way and move them out into the regions where they can better serve the people that are citizens. Citizen Potawatomi Nation can go to their representatives in their region and discuss any issues that they may have or some changes that they may want to see or have input to the government. And, it's been remarkable. It works very well and we've had a lot of input from around the rest of the country because now, they have a chance to.

Paul Downing:

So, I think one of the primary differences that I would say between working with the tribal government emergency management program and many of the jurisdictions is we are the federal, we are the state, we are the county, we are the local emergency management in one office - very often in just one person. So that person, and as I sit here and listen to discussions that we're having in our meeting here, we don't have the luxury of having a hazard mitigation officer or a planner or a preparedness, you know what I mean? So, we have to have all of those skillsets under one person, very often. Listening to the conversations of public assistance complexities and dealing with the PA portal that FEMA has now, we have to become subject matter experts on every level. So, it's just a little bit different. But I think, because we're more versatile, we tend to get a lot of skillsets that other jurisdictions may not have because they operate within their silo of recovery. They operate in their silo of mitigation. Tribes don't have that luxury. So, we have to be more flexible, a little bit more versatile. We may not have the depth of expertise that somebody that is working in that silo has, but we have just enough to get us by. And then we, very often, have a wide network. Tim is part of my network. When I don't know, I can reach out and say, "Hey, have you ever had this?" So, we do a lot of inter-communications between emergency management offices. Tribal.

Troy Christensen:

That's great. I mean, I think both of you have overlapping jurisdictions, right? So you have, you know, you're working with emergency managers maybe, at a town or county level as well. For emergency managers who may not have that experience in working with tribal nations, is there anything that you would recommend or suggest for them? Especially for new emergency managers out there?

Tim Zientek:

Yeah. Get up - boots on the ground. Go introduce yourself to the surrounding communities. Take the time to get to know the people before there's an incident and don't give up. Don't ever give up. Always go and don't go and ask for things. Go in to share and get to know the people from the surrounding jurisdictions that's within our community and our jurisdiction. 'Cause we go from, we're in four counties and several communities that we work alongside with county emergency management, city emergency management, supply resources that they may not have or vice versa. But we, to us at CPN, our community is our entire jurisdiction and everybody that lives in it. And we want to be a part of bringing them through recovery and response so, my advice to them is to don't give up. Go to the fire chief's meeting, go to the emergency management meetings and conferences and get to know not just the local and state assets, but also get to know FEMA and get to know the people that you're going to be working with. Because it's not a matter of if you're gonna be hit, it's when.

Troy Christensen:

That's a fantastic point, Paul.

Paul Downing:

I think, I'll absolutely agree with everything Tim just said. It's that integration interaction with local jurisdictions. And the other part is education of one's self, education of your partners that are surrounding your jurisdiction on what your tribe has for assets, what they have for capacity and capabilities sometimes and Tim actually has a very well written - and I won't call it a story, but an example of it. Very often tribes are the only source of emergency management or resources for jurisdictions because if they're more rural, sometimes their states don't really supply or support them. Their tax bases are too slow, et cetera. So we offer those colorless threads of assistance and say, "Yes, you're within close proximity to our jurisdiction, we're gonna help you." And I use the story of Tim's distribution of the COVID vaccines. They were the first in the nation to enter in that. And I'll not steal your thunder, I'll let you share that portion of it.

Tim Zientek:

So, when the vaccines come out, actually prior to that, before the vaccines were actually rolled out to the public, we had a forethought, I guess, that we knew that the vaccine would have to be stored at an ultra-cold storage. Well, that's 72 degrees below zero and, we didn't have any place to store vaccines. And we found out later that there was nowhere else in the state that did either. So our leadership opted to go ahead and buy enough capacity to store at minus 72 degrees Fahrenheit - 438,000 doses of the vaccine. And we partnered with the state, we partnered with the county, and we partnered with the local tribes and the Indian Health Service to be a hub for them to bring their, to ship, the vaccines to us. We put it in ultra-cold storage, and then they would come and pick it up, package it, and deliver it to wherever they needed it to go. And it worked out very well. In fact, we still do that today. So, it's been a partnership built that has gone far and beyond.

Troy Christensen:

That's great. So, you know, thinking ahead to the future, what are some of the biggest challenges that you encounter in tribal emergency management within your programs?

Tim Zientek:

So for emergency management in general, one of the biggest hurdles that I see, and especially for the smaller tribes that don't have an emergency management program or may have one guy like myself, I have six departments that I run. And funding is always the issue since the conception of FEMA. FEMA has had a program where they were funding the states to build capacity and capability, but not the tribes. And we still don't have that. And without that funding, it's difficult for a tribe to make a determination to pay for an emergency manager when they could be buying medicine for some tribal member that's ill or paying medical expenses. So it's not a good situation and, to make it even worse is that, like the state, the size of the state collects state taxes on every dollar that's spent.

The tribes don't have that. It's in a much smaller capacity. We're limited on where we can charge taxes or collect taxes. So we don't have the revenue flow that the state does, but the state gets the money and then some of it is supposed to be passed down to the tribes. And usually that's a very, very small amount. Or it may go to one tribe and leave the other 38 tribes in the state without. So, to me, the funding is probably one of the biggest challenges for emergency management in the tribal world.

Troy Christensen:

And Paul, tell me about, you know, some of your view of the biggest challenges within your emergency management program.

Paul Downing:

So it's twofold in my opinion. One is the funding mechanism. Because there is no consistent funding, some tribes will get a little bit to start a program and then they run out of money. Then there are others that have never received any level of funding to develop capacity and capability. So there's that portion. Then you have the, I just call it inequities, that tribal leadership, by and large, even tribal citizens don't really understand the mechanism of what emergency management is. All they see is FEMA. So, FEMA is not emergency management as two completely separate thought process, et cetera. And so it's an educational thing. We're trying to combat that. We started the effort - FEMA, the tribal curriculum. So, both of us are instructors for the FEMA tribal curriculum and then we took it a step further, now we're doing a "Train the Trainer" program for emergency managers from the tribal perspective.

So, it's tribal members teaching tribal members what emergency management is. And then you compound that with many tribes of the US have been taught, and this is just my opinion, taught the superstition of if you prepare for disaster, you invite disaster. I think that was created in order to create that dependency. Oh, you can't plan, you can't plan or prepare, we'll do it for you. So by creating that stigma of not preparing for disaster, you create dependency on somebody outside of the tribe. So, we're changing the dynamic of the language to create resiliency. We're gonna build resiliency, which is what we've always been, time and memorial. If we weren't resilient, we never would've persevered to this state, today.

Tim Zientek:

So, another aspect and issue, I guess you could say, with working with tribal governments is the land. You don't drive a 30,000 pound water truck out there on some of the properties that the tribe owned from the cultural aspect. And those are private places that may be ceremonial lands that you just don't, you don't go. And it's trying to get an outside, non-native, to understand what that means to the culture of the native tribe is difficult. It's very difficult for them to comprehend that that's our culture and we rely on these lands for medicines. And then a lot of times it's food or whatever. And it may be ceremonial grounds, but for those places, there's not supposed to be anybody there. And I've known tribes that have had some very horrific things that have happened to their ceremonial lands and their gardens they call them, that have been destroyed by natural disasters. But how do you put a price tag on that?

Paul Downing:

Exactly. So I used the analogy, when people were telling me, "Oh, well, it's just, you know, burial grounds, it's nothing like, you know, come on there's skeletons, there's dust, et cetera." So, I always used the story of, "Well, did you hear of the oil discovery under Arlington National?" And they kind of look at me like, "What?" And I was like, "Oh, this is a huge, huge oil reserve under Arlington National so the federal governments gonna tap it. They're gonna remove all the headstones and they're gonna transplant all of those soldiers. And everybody that died there, we're gonna move them off." I said, "It's no big deal. It's gonna be, you know, 20, 30 miles away and we're gonna tap all the oil. So instead of Arlington National, there'll be just a couple oil wells there, but just imagine the production that they'll get and are you okay with that?" And they're like, shock and "No, you can do that." Well, you want to do it to our culture, but you don't wanna have it in your culture. So it's that whole not in my backyard mentality.

Troy Christensen:

That's a great perspective. That's a great analogy. I love that. You know, so looking ahead to the future, I'll start with you Paul. Where do you see tribal emergency management evolving in the future? If you had a crystal ball?

Paul Downing:

If I had a crystal ball, I think the pandemic is, is always gonna be looked upon as a good and a bad thing. So, it opened up the eyes to a lot of tribal governments of what emergency management really is. It's not just the FEMA disaster, it's not just the catastrophic event. It's all of the things that you do to prepare for that catastrophic event so when it occurs, it is a lower impact, developing that resiliency. So, I think that's the message that I'm gonna try to push out and things that I'm gonna do, efforts that I'm working on, both with Congress and the Senate - letter writing campaigns, and we've been doing it for more than a couple years but, it does take time. And I've always said, you can't move a mountain, but you can chip away one rock at a time and eventually, you're gonna move that mountain.

So, that's us from the tribal perspective. We're not looking to move the mountain because it's not gonna move, but we're gonna chip away at it and move it bit by bit until we have that level playing field. Because honestly, if you have a level playing field, look at what we're in right here. Go to Tim's reservation, go to mine, and you look at the tribes that are funded that create their own funding mechanism, or they've taken advantage and received grants to create that emergency management footprint, and you maturing. And as you build, you look at these resilient locations and realize that could be every jurisdiction in America. So futuristic, my crystal ball, we're gonna create that, what success looks like, and we're gonna be that platform and model not only for Indian country, but for all jurisdictions by and large. That's my prediction.

Tim Zientek:

I absolutely agree with Paul. You can't move a mountain, but you can move it a little at a time. And it's been a number of years that we have been working on this together. But my crystal ball says that eventually, there will be the creation of an emergency management program in every federally recognized tribe. It'll start small and slowly build capacity and resiliency and preparedness and every time that there's a disaster, it'll be a little bit less and then it'll be a little bit less. And then eventually, what I see - there's my vision down the road, and it's just my vision, is that the tribal nations and pueblos and native Alaskans are all going to be okay. They're gonna be resilient, they have for thousands of years, but it's gonna make it easier for them.

Mark Peterson - Host:

Tribal emergency managers can't protect their communities alone. That requires the support of their elected leadership and collaboration with other tribal staff. We caught up with one tribal leader to discuss why investing in tribal emergency management is such a priority for him and his pueblo.

Troy Christensen:

I'm here with Governor Chavarria from the Santa Clara Pueblo. Governor, thank you so much for being on the podcast.

Governor J. Michael Chavarria:

Thank you.

Troy Christensen:

Governor, I really want to know from a tribal leader's perspective why emergency management is so important. So, I guess my first question for you is, tell me about your path becoming a tribal leader and your emergency management experience along the way.

Governor J. Michael Chavarria:

Okay, well, I've served 12 one-year terms as governor for Santa Clara Pueblo in New Mexico. I first served in 2006, seven, and eight. I worked as a wildland firefighter. I worked as a conservation officer. I worked as a water quality coordinator, forestry director. And so, since 2014 to present, I've been elected as governor for Santa Clara. So; however, in 2011 I was the forestry director and at that time we had the Las Conchas fire, which was the largest fire in New Mexico history. And so my passion is hunting, fishing, you know, living off the land, utilizing the resources, and then when fire has a devastating impact on our ways of life. Then in New Mexico, you get the monsoon seasons - July, August, September you get the rains. So, we were devastated by those wildfires and floods.

And so, at that time we didn't have a emergency management department. Because I was a forestry director, I assumed that responsibility. So I had to learn because it was our land, it was our traditional cultural properties. It was a secret landscape. It was the infrastructure. Now if we don't do it for ourselves as tribal people, who else is gonna do it for us? It's better for us to tell our own story because we live there day in and day out. And so all that is very critical. Having a good foundation. And then, now having to create an emergency management department is very important, but you have to understand the incident command system, you have to understand the, the qualifications, the criteria, which is very important, but also understanding FEMA and all the other federal agencies or policies and procedures so that they can utilize their existing authorities to help tribal nations when they're in dire need, especially as it deals with the natural disasters.

Troy Christensen:

Did you find that it was difficult to start up your emergency management program right after that fire? Or was it something that, you know, that took all time? It was a process.

Governor J. Michael Chavarria:

I think what was very fortunate is that we had our past tribal sheriff, Regis Chavarria, that was his background. And so. he helped the pueblo to create policies, procedures, and create that department. But it was challenging because there's not no money out there. And so, the pueblo had to put its own financial resources to hire, to create policies and procedures, understanding all the authorities that this department would have. But again, he had to be, so we hired an ex-police officer because you had to understand emergency management - the structure, the system, and it's not just fire and floods, it's also car accidents. It's also hazardous spills. There's all these things that are very important and in order to find a good individual that has awareness is very critical, but also takes into account the cultural sensitivity of us as Santa Clara people, because that's who we are. It's that cultural sensitivity that we have to the land, to the landscape. And we can't go away from that. But that has to be protected. But how do you do that in today's time when you deal with these unfortunate disasters that we all face in Indian country?

Troy Christensen:

Absolutely. And we're recording this at the National Advisory Council meeting in Oklahoma. And you know, a lot of what some of the emergency managers here are thinking about is the future of emergency management from a tribal leader's perspective. What do you think the future looks like for your emergency management program and really across the entire emergency management landscape for tribal governments?

Governor J. Michael Chavarria:

You know, all the tribes are different. We're all unique. Some are large tribes, some are small tribes, and then you don't have that financial resource. How do you hire individuals? And so, that's what's very important. So maybe a smaller tribe, you to come together as a consortium, meaning maybe 3, 4, 5, 10 tribes come together, pool your resources. But then again, it's the geographic location, the miles that you're gonna have to cover, you come to that type of scenario. But, you know, emergency management is priority. We don't ask for any disasters. You know, I think some of us face hurricanes, some of us face tornadoes. Like for us in New Mexico, we get the fires and the floods, maybe earthquakes. But then we also have the Las Alamos National Laboratory, which is only eight air miles to the south of Santa Clara. And so, they transport the hazardous materials, the hazardous waste, and they utilize the state route 30 as a corridor. So whenever an accident happens, you gotta be prepared. If you're not prepared and qualified, then how do you deal with that type of disaster? How do you deal with that type of incident? So it's very important that we build up our internal capacities and capabilities again, to do it for ourselves and not having to rely on someone else. Again, that goes back to telling our story because we know how we utilize the resources, but we know our community better.

Troy Christensen:

That's a great point. And I guess my only other question would be, you know, if other tribal leaders are thinking about putting together an emergency management program or starting an emergency management program, do you have any advice that you would give them or any first steps that might help them along the way?

Governor J. Michael Chavarria:

I think it's reaching out to your other pueblos, tribes, and nations that already have an established system and asking them. We have to share our knowledge, share our resources. We're a technical assistance to provide that information so that they don't have to start from scratch. You know, sharing our policy, sharing our procedures, but understanding that this is the criteria that that director needs. It's not just anybody off the street. You gotta make sure they have training and understand that system. And so, for certain federal agencies, like for FEMA, you have to have a hazard mitigation plan. You have to have all these systems in place. And so when a disaster occurs, you have all those structures already identified, the documents ready to go. But again, we say we don't want to wish anything bad on anyone. But again, if something were to happen, if you're not prepared, then that makes it more difficult. So, it's very important for those tribal leaders, their tribal council, their administration to reach out to other tribes, pueblos, and nations that already have established structures in place and then utilizing that and sharing our expertise and sharing our knowledge is very critical.

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.