



# Preparedness Grant Effectiveness Case Study: Chicago

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FEMA



## Preparedness Grant Effectiveness Case Study

### I. Overview

In August 2020, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) conducted a preparedness grant effectiveness case study with the City of Chicago Urban Areas Security Initiative (UASI). The Illinois Emergency Management Agency (IEMA) is the State Administrative Agency (SAA) with the legal authority to administer the grants, according to FEMA grant requirements. IEMA, as the award recipient, has sub-recipient award agreements with the Chicago Office of Emergency Management and Communications (OEMC) for these grant programs. The purpose of the study was to understand the impact of FEMA preparedness grants on the city's coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic response. City representatives from the Chicago OEMC, as well as the departments of police and fire, participated in the case study and discussed how federal funding affected the pandemic response. FEMA also drew from information provided through the Biannual Strategic Implementation Report (BSIR) and Threat and Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment (THIRA)/Stakeholder Preparedness Review (SPR).

This case study found that Homeland Security Grant Program (HSGP)-funded and Emergency Management Performance Grant (EMPG)-funded investments supported a collaborative preparation for and response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Officials from Chicago cited trainings, planning, a whole-community response, and cross-department exercises as key contributors to the city's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and concurrent civil unrest. This whole-of-city response was made possible through administrative and legal collaboration across departments that allowed the government to operate continuously as it transitioned from steady-state to a long-term, often remote, emergency posture.

### II. COVID-19 in Chicago

On March 18, 2020, a public health shelter-in-place order was announced for the City of Chicago in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, followed shortly by a stay-at-home executive order made by the Illinois governor on March 26, 2020. As of August 4, 2020, the City of Chicago has reported 62,122 cases of COVID-19 and 2,792 related deaths.<sup>1</sup> Chicago has not reported a pandemic scenario in their THIRA/SPR since 2014 and indicated during the case study session that the city intends to create one in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic scenario will mimic much of the impact of the spread of the virus and the response of the city during the actual COVID-19 pandemic.

### III. Investments and Capability Impacts

#### Workforce Protection and Training [UASI]

Ensuring the health and safety of the first responder community has been a key success factor in Chicago's ability to maintain a robust response over multiple months and for multiple incidents. In the first months of the city's COVID-19 response, the Chicago Fire Department (CFD) developed an internal testing, tracking, and tracing program to identify infections and outbreaks. The CFD then adapted existing protocols from a UASI-funded Decontamination Unit to create a Mobile Disinfectant Task Force, Mobile Safety Task Force, and Mobile Integrated Health Task Force (MIH) to address any hot spots.

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<sup>1</sup> COVID-19 confirmed cases and fatalities are counted through August 4, 2020, when the case study was conducted.



Starting with FY 2014 UASI funds, Chicago has annually sustained a mobile simulation (SIM) lab that the CFD uses as a training platform. During the COVID-19 response, the SIM lab was sent to all firehouses to conduct pandemic-related training on safety protocols, disinfecting, and the use of personal protective equipment (PPE). These trainings are believed to have helped reduce the spread of COVID-19 within the CFD and allowed the Department to maintain its ability to serve the public. Officials also credit previous training experience, including the active shooter and complex coordinated terrorist attack (CCTA) trainings described later in this report, with helping first responders absorb and implement the large amount of safety-related information being provided over a relatively short period.

### **Multi-Incident Response Capability [UASI]**

Chicago officials emphasized their ability to operate in a multiple-incident, multiple-agency environment through experience with UASI-funded active shooter and CCTA trainings, as well as through frequent exercises involving police, fire, and OEMC. These trainings, initially funded with FY 2014 UASI outlays and then continued annually with additional UASI funds, enabled Chicago to transition smoothly into a multi-incident response within hours of civil unrest occurring during the pandemic response. This capability was adapted to the COVID-19 pandemic response and was seen as a major contributor to the successful coordination among city departments.



Supply Distribution in Chicago

Training and planning projects with the OEMC, and specifically their 9-1-1 operations, were adapted for use in the COVID-19 pandemic response. Through this partnership, the city modified dispatching protocols to identify potential COVID-19 or respiratory-related calls, including creating a COVID-19-specific ambulance response. This prevented ambulance vehicles from being removed from service because of potential COVID-19 contamination and thus remain able to respond to other incidents. Officials credit the past investments in active shooter and terrorist attack trainings with allowing these new dispatching protocols to be smoothly adopted by first responders.

Officials also report that when civil unrest and large-scale protests began over the Memorial Day weekend (May 23 to 25, 2020) the active shooter and CCTA trainings proved effective in blending police safety teams with fire crews sent out to extinguish fires set during the unrest. The CFD created a separate dispatching protocol for these types of fires, and the dispatching of these combined crews was performed from an alternate emergency operations center (EOC). These steps allowed both the COVID-19 and civil unrest responses to operate concurrently, and enabled a successful multi-agency, multi-incident response.

### **Operational Structure [UASI]**

Case study participants indicated that the organizational structure within and across individual departments facilitated a robust, multi-incident, long-term response. For example, Chicago had an existing city-wide incident coordination structure based on National Incident Management System (NIMS) guidelines that has been a critical element of the response. The City of Chicago's emergency operations plan (EOP), which has a Public Health Annex, follows the NIMS framework to ensure coordination. This structure allowed for daily incident action plans, which had two impacts. First, there was a broader consistent situational awareness across the city, which became more important as the city transitioned into a long-term, multiple-incident response. Second, the plans had clearly defined objectives that departments could work toward meeting each day. In another example, the CFD stood up an incident management team that helped mitigate the spread of COVID-19 within the Department, as well as supported basic CFD functions. NIMS training took place before the pandemic and was supported by UASI funds.

## **Information Technology and Cyber Security [UASI]**

Information technology (IT) increased the resilience of Chicago's response to COVID-19 by allowing more remote work but also presented potential vulnerabilities by exposing more systems to viruses, phishing attempts, and other cybersecurity threats. Significant resources were put into allowing remote work to continue while also mitigating vulnerabilities. An example of this comes from Chicago's fusion center, the Crime Prevention and Information Center (CPIC). The counter-terrorism section of the Chicago Police Department based in the fusion center replicated some desktop functions and accessed them remotely through department laptops and software licenses purchased with UASI funding. During the COVID-19 pandemic response, this system was tested and proven to be effective, which allowed for uninterrupted remote functioning for parts of the fusion center with no significant security impacts. Access to UASI-funded laptops allowed the CPIC to operate remotely, which was a critical test to ensure continuity of operations planning in any major incident or disaster.

City representatives also indicated that an important driver of Chicago's government IT security is the constant cyber and data security education provided to employees and users, which has been funded with UASI grant investments since 2013. COVID-19-related phishing schemes quickly rose in frequency following the onset of the pandemic and were countered by updating the standard education on password security and email use. This education was even more important in a predominantly remote environment, given that IT-driven solutions have been replacing some work that normally would be performed face to face.

Chicago also implemented a robust geographic information system (GIS) during the COVID-19 response. The GIS used COVID-19 tracking data provided by the Chicago Department of Public Health, as well as data from 9-1-1 and 3-1-1 calls related to COVID-19, to provide a daily snapshot of COVID-19 cases in the city. When civil unrest events took place during the summer of 2020, Chicago also developed a GIS data hub specific to the events. The City used the data provided by GIS software to analyze and understand how these events changed over time in terms of incident reports and routing calls. Chicago had previously used UASI funds to send staff to annual GIS conferences, and those staff were able to tailor the GIS tools described above for COVID-19.

## **Continuity of Operations (COOP) [UASI/EMPG]**

Chicago's COOP planning was traditionally a department-specific effort that focused on the integrity of and damage to physical infrastructure. However, the COVID-19 pandemic did not impact infrastructure and instead involved personnel reduction due to illness. Continuity for COVID-19, therefore, tended to require the reallocation of personnel across departments. The city initially used its continuity programs to identify mission-essential functions related to the COVID-19 pandemic. This process included identifying divisions in departments that would fulfill specific roles within the COVID-19 pandemic response. In instances where departments did not have immediately identified roles, the city assessed for capabilities that could be shared among other departments and allocated personnel accordingly. COOP planning has been supported with UASI funds since 2011, including a program manager's salary. EMPG-funded positions also supported the COOP updating project.

Outside of the COOP, Chicago fosters whole-community relationships that have aided the COVID-19 response. The City of Chicago hosts an annual whole-community conference that serves as a continuation of community partners coming together under the original Regional Catastrophic Preparedness Grant Program (RCPGP) and features discussions on pressing community issues. Case study participants



Supplies ready for distribution in  
Chicago

indicated that this conference has strengthened and sustained relationships across agencies and has aided a robust, whole-community response during COVID-19. The conference is covered each year by UASI funding.

### **Equipment Upgrade and Stockpiling [UASI]**

In Chicago, investing UASI funds into first responder PPE procurement and vendor agreement development since at least 2007 helped the city avoid critical shortages during the pandemic. The vendor agreement proved particularly important during the pandemic, as it obligated delivery of PPE to designated locations in the city within a specific time window. OEMC also facilitated the stockpiling and procurement of PPE on behalf of first responder personnel in Chicago. Having this stockpile readily available was essential, as other PPE supplies were prioritized for public health officials and responders. Fire and police departments being able to access these stockpiles ensured that those departments could continue to function in a COVID-19 environment and, as described earlier, workforce protection has been a significant enabler of a successful, long-term response. Chicago also made use of FEMA-led technical assistance on supply chain resiliency and built a robust contact network with private sector providers, such as pharmacies and grocery stores. During the COVID-19 response, this network allowed the OEMC to maintain accurate insight into the availability of critical supplies, such as PPE and disinfectants. Having this information allowed the city to adjust the prioritization of PPE contracts and reallocate resources as needed.



Supply storage in Chicago arena

Chicago also invested in respirators for law enforcement and the CFD, and those were initially purchased with UASI funds with a terrorist incident in mind. City police and fire departments had previously trained to conduct fit testing for respirators and were able to use this skill to speed up the process of fitting over 10,000 first responders. Apart from PPE, Chicago had a supply of body bags previously purchased with Metropolitan Medical Response System (MMRS) grant funding. Cook County organized fatality management for the COVID-19 response and the Chicago UASI shared the supply of body bags with the county.

### **Mass Care Exercise [UASI]**

In March 2020, Chicago invested FY 2017 UASI funds to conduct a mass care exercise to test plans and standard operating procedures. The city had taken in a large number of evacuees from Hurricane Maria in 2017 and, based on that experience, knew that sheltering would be a challenge in COVID-19. The 2020 exercise tested the housing and PPE elements of the mass care plan and was a critical element in Chicago designating the pandemic as a mass care incident. This allowed for the reallocation of resources toward feeding, housing, and PPE distribution. Chicago officials looked at homeless shelters through the lens of congregate disaster shelters and serving that population more effectively through hiring required specialized staff. Additionally, the City had a respite housing mission for first responders and other essential workers, which enabled a greater degree of resilience in the workforce.



Socially Distant Sheltering in  
Chicago



## **IV. Recommendations and Conclusion**

Chicago recommends FEMA maintain less prescriptive guidance on how localities can invest funds to allow more flexibility for meeting each jurisdiction's unique needs. If FEMA has specific areas of investment that need emphasis, Chicago recommends additional, targeted grant programs to meet those needs. One example mentioned was FEMA's previous EOC support grant, which allowed for EOC improvements and did not take away from jurisdictions' ability to structure other preparedness investments according to local context and needs.

The projects described during the case study and detailed in this report illustrate the interrelationships involved in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the resilience of Chicago's holistic response. FEMA grants enabled a multi-agency, multi-incident response as well as collaborative engagement with non-government community partners. Investments made with preparedness grant funds have addressed equipment, planning, staffing, training, and exercise needs across the city of Chicago during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, HSGP funds have supported training efforts and planning for mass casualty events, as well as the procurement of PPE for use in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Chicago's response illustrates how project funding can be effectively implemented to respond to an unprecedented incident.