

The Point-of-Failure That Continues to Stymie Emergency Management Efforts at the Federal Level: Addressing Rural Capacity and Capability

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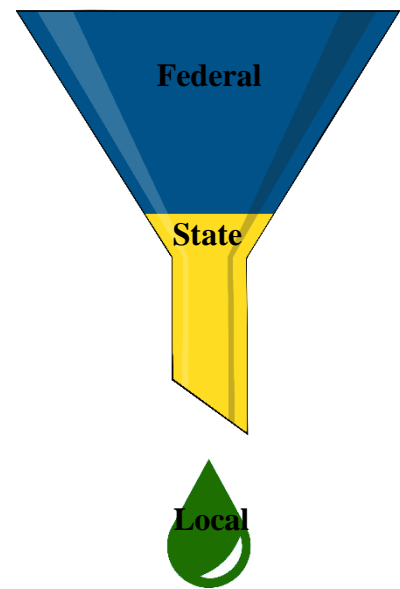
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Executive Summary

This white paper addresses capacity and capability particularly at the local level in rural areas. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has a long history of supporting the emergency management mission at the state, local, tribal, and territorial (SLTT) levels through capacity and capability development efforts. One of the most significant federal efforts to develop capacity at the SLTT level is the Emergency Management Performance Grant (EMPG). Yet, EMPG funding allocations at the local level can vary widely.

Rural areas struggle to develop the requisite capacity and capability required to meet the emergency management mission. In addition, the demographics and geographic realities of these areas create a different construct for rural emergency management practice. This puts the roughly 46 million people living in rural areas at greater risk in the event of a disaster.

The spectrum of practice highlights the disproportionate quantity of material, engagements, and expectations facing a one-person emergency management office. Without focused federal initiatives, efforts to create a secure and resilient nation will continue to be stymied at the local level and disaster costs will continue to rise. Specific recommendations focused on enhancing the capacity and capability of rural emergency management are offered.



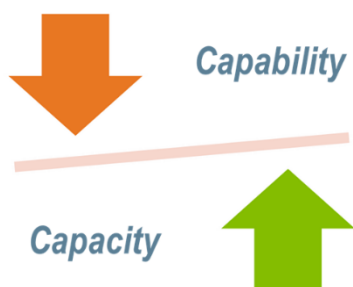
Federal Level Emergency Management Efforts

The federal government, most specifically the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), has maintained a decades-long focus on supporting the emergency management mission at the state, local, tribal, and territorial (SLTT) levels. This has been realized through structural, process-oriented, and funding efforts designed to enhance capacity and capability.

Capability, as it is used herein, addresses the knowledge and skill required to accomplish the necessary tasks within the breadth of the emergency management scope of responsibility. FEMA has played a significant role in creating emergency management frameworks, guidance, and training to develop capability and support improved outcomes at all levels of government, in the private sector, and among non-profit partners. From its premier training facilities, the Emergency

Management Institute (EMI) and the Center for Domestic Preparedness (CDP), to its efforts to professionalize the field of practice through the development of the FEMA Higher Education Program, the agency has a clear history of supporting the development of capability to ensure a safer and more resilient nation.

The recognition of the increasing frequency and severity of events in an ever-evolving volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) hazardscape, coupled with disaster expenditures that continue an untenable upward trajectory, has heightened the focus on a need for greater SLTT capability. Federal efforts that seek to bolster effective collaboration between SLTT emergency management entities and the distributed function networks they engage with to further emergency management’s mission to protect lives, livelihoods, and quality of life have ramped up dramatically over the past two decades. Enhanced efforts that focus on equitable vulnerability reduction and recovery; encouraging and incentivizing greater engagement at the SLTT level; risk reduction strategies such as building codes, statutes, zoning, and long-term development planning; and a shift in national narrative and policy focused on resilience has increased the onus on SLTT level government to change their mental model of the way hazard events are viewed and addressed. Collectively, these types of efforts are designed to help the nation more effectively prepare for and survive (physically, mentally, socially, and economically) disruptive hazard events, while also providing the promise of a reduction in escalating national disaster expenditures.



Actualizing the types of capabilities stated above requires capacity at the SLTT level. Capacity, as it is used herein, addresses the personnel, equipment, and resources needed to meet the level of capability required to accomplish the necessary tasks within the breadth of the emergency management scope of responsibility. The federal government has created several funding programs (competitive and non-competitive) designed to support specific types of capacity at the SLTT level. The broadest and most significant of the non-competitive capacity-focused funding programs is the Emergency Management Performance

Grant (EMPG). EMPG funding is designed to support SLTT governments in acquiring the capacity to “support the National Preparedness Goal’s associated mission areas and core capabilities to build a culture of preparedness” (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2023). Indeed, it has long been understood by state and national leaders and advocacy organizations that it is essential funding for local level emergency management practice (Gerber-Chavez, et al., 2023) and critical to developing the capacity which the national emergency management system relies upon (FEMA, 2023a; Jensen, 2011).

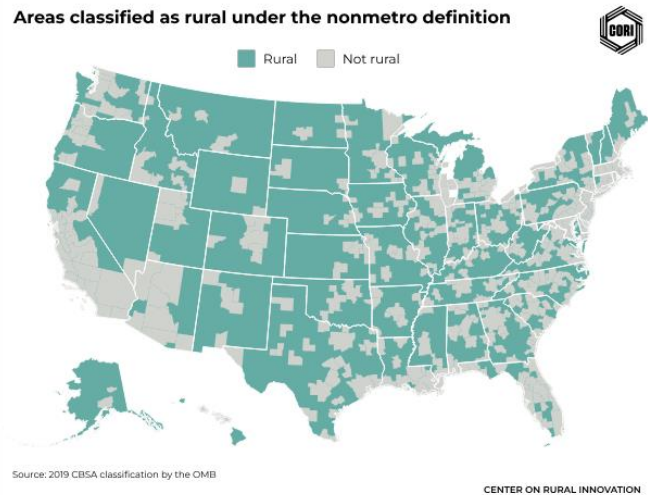
EMPG funding is distributed annually by the federal government at the state and territory level (FEMA, 2023a). The SLTT match must match the federal contribution (U.S. Code Title 6 762). States and territories decide the extent to which those funds are allocated to the local level and what requirements go with those distributions. An analysis of EMPG funding allocations found that funds distributed by state agencies were more likely to go to “high-risk, urban counties” than rural counties (Gerber-Chavez, et al., 2023). It is unclear the extent to which EMPG distributions

are helping to enhance local level emergency management capacity and meet the needs of the communities served as this topic is not well-researched or sufficiently measured (Jensen, 2011; Gerber-Chavez, et al., 2023).

Despite the increasing incidence of billion-dollar weather and climate disasters over the past decade (NOAA National Centers for Environmental Information, 2024) and the recognized need for enhanced capacity and capability locally, EMPG allocations have remained relatively static. EMPG allocations for the period of 2014-2023 - \$350 million from 2014-2016, \$355.1 million from 2017-2021 and 2023, and \$405.1 million in 2022 – have provided little opportunity to further enhance emergency management practice at the local level and have not kept up with inflation (Gerber-Chavez, et al., 2023; U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2023). The National Emergency Management Association (NEMA) and the U.S. Council of the International Association of Emergency Managers (IAEM) have called on Congress to fund EMPG at \$455 million in 2024 (2023).

Where Federal Level Efforts Meet Rural Practice

There are a number of federal definitions regarding what qualifies as a “rural” area. The two most utilized definitions are from the U.S. Census Bureau (uses population density) and the Office of Management and Budget (uses nonmetro areas and measures economic and social relationships that span cities and suburbs) (Center on Rural Innovation, 2022). These definitions matter as they affect the way “rural” is conceptualized. The nonmetro definition is used in this instance as it best aligns with emergency management practice. The nonmetro definition places the estimated rural population at approximately 46 million people, (Center on Rural Innovation, 2022) which is roughly 14% of our current U.S. population of 335 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023).



Rural areas can be found in almost all SLTT jurisdictions and represent a challenge in regard to emergency management capacity and capability. Rural areas can have economies that are less diversified and have less financial support than urban areas for essential emergency management efforts (Rural Health and Information Hub, 2022). As such, rural areas have fewer dedicated government positions, equipment, and resources to rely on for their whole of government effort. It is not uncommon to find emergency management positions in rural areas funded as a 10 or 20 hour a week position as a supplement to other assigned duties. Equipment limitations include a lack of interoperable communications, inadequate community warning systems, and limited items to support a basic Emergency Operations Center (EOC). Resources, such as a part-time staff member

to provide receptionist support, or a budget that could fund planning or grant writing assistance, are also often out of reach for those practicing emergency management in rural areas.

In addition, the nature of rural areas changes the nature of emergency management practice (Helpap, 2023; Kearley, Hill & Perkins, 2023). Rural areas typically have populations that are more distributed over larger geographic areas (Rural Health Information Hub, 2024a). This affects the time commitment and ability to conduct community-based engagement, planning efforts, training, and other efforts essential to effective preparedness efforts. It additionally affects the volunteer pool associated with firefighting and rural emergency medical services (Janssen, 2006). Geographic distribution that results in a series of remote locations also potentially impacts response time, trauma-level healthcare access, designation of easily accessible service sites in recovery, and broadband access (Legal Aid Disaster Resource Center, 2023; Valentín-Sívico, et al., 2023).

Rural areas are more likely to have lower income households (Davis, et al., 2023; U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2023), a higher percentage of elderly (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021; Mitchell, 2020) and disabled residents (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019; Rural Health Information Hub, 2024b), additional agricultural and livestock concerns (Haskins, Barney & Paudel, 2019), and declining populations (Davis, et al., 2023; Mitchell, 2020). The combination of demographics that are either specific to, or more prevalent in rural areas, coupled with the geographic realities, create a different construct for rural emergency management practice. The rural construct exacerbates the longstanding endemic issue of lack of capacity and capability.

Illustrating the Disconnect

There appears to be a lack of understanding at the federal level, and to a lesser extent at the state level, of the breadth of the responsibility at the local level. At the federal level, FEMA specifically, there is expansive depth - over 20,000 full-time employees (FEMA, 2023b). That number can expand upward to as many as 50,000 employees during major disasters (FEMA, 2023b). FEMA employees focus on mission areas, grant programs, capacity and capability development, continuous improvement, public outreach, and a dozen other broad areas that are then further segmented to serve a regional or national service area (FEMA, 2023b).

EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

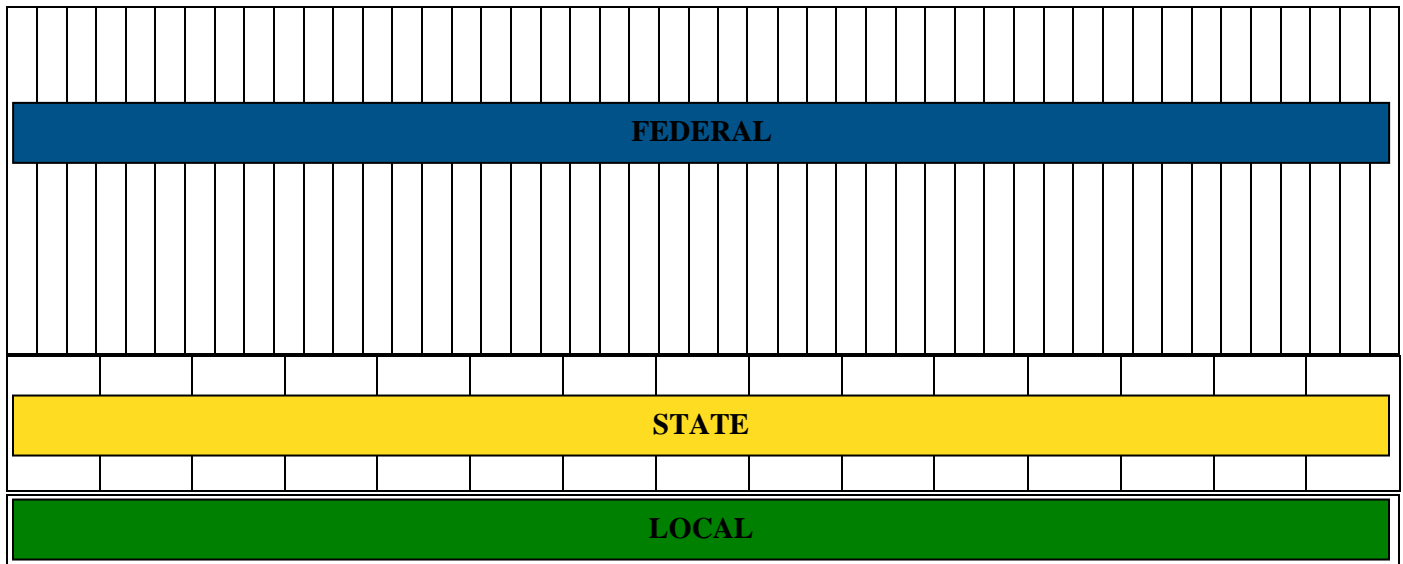
At each state level (and sometimes the tribal and territorial level), there are considerably fewer employees, and less expansive segmenting, but there are still upwards of 25 or more full-time employees at this level. The number of employees at the state, tribal, and territorial levels can also expand during and after major disasters. State employees have a responsibility to work with both the federal and local levels.

At the local level, the number of employees can vary quite dramatically. Large urban centers often have a number of specialists tasked with specific focus areas (e.g., preparedness, training, grant, mitigation, recovery, etc.) and a deputy emergency management director. In stark contrast, rural areas typically have one full-time emergency management practitioner and too often that office of one has other duties as assigned. The percentage of time assigned to the emergency management

function can be shockingly low (one emergency management practitioner in North Dakota has 1.5 hours a week – 15% of a 40-hour week – to devote to emergency management). The local level emergency management practitioner handles all the emergency management duties and responsibilities across the spectrum of practice and is expected to have both the capacity and necessary capabilities to perform these duties.

The spectrum of practice illustration below is designed to highlight the reality of practice at the various levels (with a recognition that tribal and territorial could be staffed in alignment with state, local, or some variation between the two). There are clear distinctions between the duties and responsibilities across the levels. While the federal and state levels have duties and responsibilities that are recognizably broader regarding the constituents they serve, the organizational structures at these levels can, and in many instances, have, expanded over time to meet the challenge. Sometimes those expansions at the state and federal level have been part of an effort to create new services or assistance to the other levels to ensure that key obligations are met. The local level areas of responsibility are listed below the spectrum of practice to further illustrate the capacity and capability challenges. This illustration, like the filling of the funnel image, shows the disproportionate quantity of material, engagements, and expectations delivered to a one-person emergency management office that lacks the capacity to develop further capabilities.

Spectrum of Practice



- | | | | |
|---------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| Preparedness | Response | Recovery | Mitigation |
|---------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-------------------|
- Establishing & Maintaining Partnerships – Plan Writing & Maintenance – Training – Exercise Development & Facilitation – Program Documentation & Reports – Response Operations – Recovery Efforts – Local Leadership Engagement – Grant Writing & Management – Stakeholder Collaboration – Public Outreach & Education – Policy Development & Compliance – Resource Management – Fiscal Reporting – Public Information – Continuity of Government & Operations – State Level Engagement – Federal Level Engagement – Continuing Education*

It is often said that all disasters are local, but that acknowledgement is not uniformly evident in existing rural area local level capacity or capability (An, et al., 2023; Jerolleman, 2020; Kapucu & Rivera, 2020; Manuele & Haggerty, 2022; Waugh, 2013). Most simply put, capacity development requires money, and capability development requires time. These commodities – money and time – are severely lacking in most rural area emergency management offices. Yet, our national emergency management system is reliant on the local level of emergency management practice to help create “a secure and resilient nation with the capabilities required across the whole community to prevent, protect against, mitigate, respond to, and recover from the threats and hazards that pose the greatest risk” (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2015). Without a dramatic shift in approach, rural area emergency management offices will not be able to meet the challenge set forth by our nation and millions of Americans will suffer losses because of these predictable failures.

Strategies for Building Capacity and Capability in Rural Areas

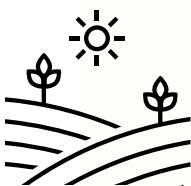
Focused strategies are needed to build the requisite local level emergency management capacity and capability needed to meet our national goals. This is particularly true in rural areas. These areas have some fundamentally different challenges than urban areas and require a focused national effort. Given the expansive distribution of rural areas across the country, it is paramount to FEMA’s overall mission effectiveness to explore strategies that can begin to develop the level of capacity needed to support capability development in these areas.

The recommendations that follow are premised on bolstering emergency management practice at the local level in rural areas, and on developing the knowledge, network, and partnerships that will create better disaster outcomes for those living in rural areas.

- Increase the funding to EMPG nationally to represent the overall need for enhanced capacity and capability at the local level of emergency management and adjust annually for inflation.
- Utilize the nonmetro rural definition to designate rural areas for the purposes of rural specific initiatives.
- Mandate 100% allocation of EMPG grant awards to areas designated as rural without any indirect deductions.
- Increase the EMPG funding equation to rural areas to a flat figure that equates with 75% of the national median wage estimate for emergency management directors (\$79,180 in 2022 per the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023).
- Add constraints and requirements designed to further capacity and capability development goals, to include:
 1. Rural areas must match the 75% EMPG funding with a 25% local match and must fill a full-time emergency management position to receive the rural EMPG funding.

2. Emergency management personnel who are funded by rural EMPG funding must meet current national EMPG training expectations, plus additional requirements that include:
 - a. The completion of the National Emergency Management Basic Academy offered by the Emergency Management Professional Program within 24 months of hiring; and,
 - b. Completion of four emergency management courses annually that advance and expand the individual's capability, with one necessarily being either regionally offered or offered at EMI or CDP and the remaining being a combination of FEMA independent study coursework or SLTT level offerings.
 3. Emergency management personnel who are funded by rural EMPG funding must attend quarterly virtual briefings designed for rural area practitioners and offered by their regional FEMA office.
- Develop a funding program designed to fund the hiring of a 36-month position at the state, tribal, or territory level to work exclusively with rural area emergency management practitioners in the jurisdiction. The position will focus on facilitating the development of community partnerships and resource networks; developing plans; conducting exercises; and other activities essential to a robust emergency management program. Best practices and success stories can be used to inform future training and guidance specific to rural areas.
 - Develop and host a national rural emergency management conference at EMI that includes reimbursed travel and campus housing accommodations for attendees. This conference will provide a forum for sharing ideas, best practices, and guidance about federal funding programs and initiatives of specific interest to rural areas.

The above strategies, similar to other federal strategies focused on building specific capacity and capability (i.e., Urban Area Security Initiative; State and Local Cybersecurity; Intercity Bus Security Grant Program; Emergency Operations Center Grant Program), are essential to addressing a critical point of failure that is stymying FEMA's overall mission to create a secure and resilient nation. The time for a national investment in rural emergency management is now. Until adequate capacity and capability is developed in these areas, millions of Americans remain in harm's way and disaster costs will continue to rise.



**Emergency management professionals
protect lives, livelihoods, and quality of life.**

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