

Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct for Emergency Management Professionals

FEMA SIG Working Group on Ethics

This is a draft document under review by the emergency management community through 12/31/21.

Introduction

Emergency management is a managerial function charged with creating the framework within which communities reduce vulnerability to hazards and cope with disasters. Emergency management professionals seek to promote safer, less vulnerable communities with the capacity to cope with hazards and disasters. Communities in this context are broadly defined to include humans, organizations, the environment, and government.

Emergency management professionals work with a diverse group of stakeholders in a wide variety of businesses and industry sectors, in non-profit organizations, and in all levels of government. Emergency management professionals are relied upon for their subject matter expertise and support in managing a diverse, complex risk portfolio for the communities they serve. Emergency management professionals recognize the value of, and are committed to, developing and promoting in themselves and their organizations the following competencies: disaster risk management; community engagement; governance and civics; leadership; scientific, geographic, sociocultural, technological, and systems literacy; operations consistent with the emergency management framework, principles, and body of knowledge; critical thinking; continual learning; and, compliance with professional ethics.

Inherent in the practice of emergency management is a series of duties and responsibilities to affected populations, partners, stakeholders, the public, the environment, colleagues, employers, the profession, and self. These duties and responsibilities were examined in concert with established competency behavioral anchors related to professional ethics (see Appendix B) and foundational ethical tenets to develop expected professional conduct standards. In its totality, the *Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct for Emergency Management Professionals* delineates an ethical framework to guide practice in both known and uncertain environments.

Code of Ethics

The Code of Ethics provides emergency management professionals with a set of foundational tenets that guide ethical practice and decision-making. These tenets emphasize the need to think and act ethically. Emergency management professionals have a duty of care that requires a careful, critical decision-making process grounded in ethical deliberation.

This Code of Ethics is intended to help frame ethical thinking about behaviors and decisions in conjunction with the Code of Professional Conduct. Emergency management professionals can utilize this Code of Ethics to ensure a more careful and critical process regarding behaviors or decisions that are morally or ethically challenging. The foundational tenets, both aspirational and prescriptive, capture the essence of effective and just emergency management practice.

Foundational Tenets

Think ethically, act morally.

Sometimes it is clear what the right thing to do is, but often it can be difficult to sort out, especially if there are conflicting ethical arguments (see Appendix C). It is not enough to be able to ethically analyze situations or to know what the right thing to do is; emergency management professionals must act morally. To act morally, emergency management professionals' actions should evidence moral courage, integrity, honesty, respect, kindness, professionalism, competence, impartiality, and objectivity. These actions delineate the requisite moral character for professional emergency management practice. Ethical decision-making is strongest when the knowledge and skills to analyze the ethics of complicated situations and the moral character to act in the best way possible are both present.

Obey the law.

A social contract exists between citizens and their governments, with duties and obligations on both sides. As citizens and as emergency management professionals, there is an obligation to obey the law, except in very rare cases where a law is immoral. But there is an important distinction between what is legal and what is moral. The law is prescriptive, not aspirational, and represents minimal standards of morality. There are times when it is sufficient to simply obey the law, and there are other times when obeying the law is not enough to satisfy moral imperatives. For example, the law does not require emergency management professionals to treat victims with kindness, but it is moral to do so.

Maximize the good done for people and society, taking into consideration the needs of the most vulnerable.

A basic principle of ethics is to do the greatest good for the greatest number, as long as the most vulnerable are not disadvantaged. This principle is important and must be tempered in two ways. First, what is good and how is it measured must be debated and agreed upon (e.g., political parties often disagree on what is good, as do environmentalists compared to real estate developers). It is not solely up to emergency management professionals to decide what is good – these decisions are best made by engaging stakeholders to derive public values. Second, people and institutions have rights that should not be needlessly or thoughtlessly trampled over in the pursuit of a greater good.

Respect the rights of people and organizations; fulfill duties and obligations to those served.

One of the problems with maximizing good is that it can be used to justify bad actions if the needs of many are served. As a society, we agree that some actions that serve the greater good are immoral (e.g., we do not harvest organs from people without their consent, even if doing so would save several lives). We need to be aware of, and respect, the rights of others whether they are constitutionally based, defined by laws, or accepted as cultural norms. There are also times when the perceived rights of some conflict with the common good, or the rights of others (e.g., choosing not to wear a face mask during a pandemic may conflict with the rights of others not to get infected, or the health of the public at large).

Emergency management professionals have duties and obligations to employers, clients, and stakeholders, which must be fulfilled. While many of these duties and obligations are defined by job descriptions, some are a result of societal expectations (which though unwritten, are important and can be powerful). Emergency management professionals must act ethically and professionally in the execution of their duties and obligations.

Build trusting relationships.

Trust is an asymmetrical relationship, which means that it is hard to gain and easy to lose. Trusting relationships are essential to effective emergency management practice. Trust is gained by having a virtuous character (particularly fidelity), being competent, following the law, and avoiding conflicts of interest.

A conflict of interest is a situation in which an emergency management professional has a private or personal interest sufficient to influence (or even have the appearance to influence) the objective exercise of his or her official duties. Emergency management professionals must avoid their judgment being influenced by any conflict of interest and shall inform their employer, or client, of any conflict between their own personal interest and service to the relevant party.

When faced with an ethical dilemma, use an ethical decision-making process.

Ethical dilemmas (having to choose between two rights or two wrongs) present difficult choices between competing ethical principles. Ethical dilemmas occur either because different ethical perspectives (such as the greater good versus individual rights) lead to different decisions, or because of varying underlying values (such as defining good as economic development versus environmental protection). Ethical dilemmas can be extremely difficult and contentious to manage. When faced with an ethical dilemma there is generally no one correct answer. In addressing these dilemmas, a transparent, inclusive and effective decision-making process should be used to arrive at an equitable outcome based on ethical reasoning (see Appendix C).

Code of Professional Conduct

These standards present ethical expectations for all emergency management professionals and extend across all areas of practice as well as individuals' representation of the profession of emergency management. These standards focus heavily on the duty of care inherent in the practice of emergency management and seek to clearly delineate expected professional behaviors. These standards may reach beyond organizational or jurisdictional policies, requirements, or laws; conversely, organizational or jurisdictional policies, requirements, or laws may issue more stringent standards. These standards should be viewed as universal baseline expectations for all emergency management professionals.

Responsibility to Affected Populations

STANDARD 1: Emergency management professionals recognize that diversity in needs, resources, abilities, cultures, beliefs, and societal equity exist within affected populations and treat all affected populations' interests and needs in a fair, equitable, compassionate, and sustainable manner.

STANDARD 2: Emergency management professionals work to provide services equitably without discrimination or preference based on age, ethnicity, culture, race, ability, gender, language preference, religion, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, nationality, or other historically oppressed groups.

STANDARD 3: Emergency management professionals understand that those they serve rely on their expertise and guidance to communicate clearly, effectively, and appropriately regarding risks in an effort to engage citizens (before, during, and after an event).

STANDARD 4: Emergency management professionals collaborate with stakeholders to understand vulnerabilities, exposures, threats, and the unique characteristics of communities in determining appropriate risk reduction.

STANDARD 5: Emergency management professionals advance the development and implementation of programs, plans, strategies, and initiatives to ensure life safety, reduce or eliminate damage to property and the environment, and ensure quality of life.

STANDARD 6: Emergency management professionals create and maintain robust, effective relationships with a wide variety of partners to build and safeguard capability and capacity.

Responsibility to the Partners, Stakeholders, and Public

STANDARD 7: Emergency management professionals create and maintain robust, effective relationships with a wide variety of partners.

STANDARD 8: Emergency management professionals are aware of, and operate within, applicable laws and regulations (except in very rare cases where the application of a law or regulation is immoral).

STANDARD 9: Emergency management professionals advocate for change in programs, policies, regulations, and laws that conflict with the ethical and effective practice of emergency management.

STANDARD 10: Emergency management professionals accurately represent their qualifications.

STANDARD 11: Emergency management professionals support and guide evidence-based choices by clearly communicating science and complex issues.

STANDARD 12: Emergency management professionals stay informed about emerging and evolving threats, new research and practice standards, and relevant tools and technologies.

STANDARD 13: Emergency management professionals remain current on social, environmental, technological, and political issues that may affect public risk.

STANDARD 14: Emergency management professionals remain cognizant of power and status differentials and ensure that they maintain ethical and professional relationships.

STANDARD 15: Emergency management professionals make sound fiscal decisions that support effective practice and the stewardship of resources.

Responsibility to the Environment

STANDARD 16: Emergency management professionals understand the interconnectedness, interdependence, and sensitivities between the human, built, and natural environments.

STANDARD 17: Emergency management professionals recognize the important role the natural environment plays in mitigating risks associated with natural hazards and seek to protect the natural environment from harm and, where possible, nurture its recovery.

Responsibility to Colleagues

STANDARD 18: Emergency management professionals support and assist other emergency management professionals in meeting and elevating practice standards to include coordination and collaboration to share personnel, materials, and resources with colleagues.

STANDARD 19: Emergency management professionals refrain from publicly disparaging other emergency management professionals.

STANDARD 20: Emergency management professionals respond appropriately to unethical and problematic behavior of emergency management colleagues; this may involve talking directly with the colleague or may require further action (such as reporting the colleague's behavior to an appropriate party or organization).

Responsibility to Employers

STANDARD 21: Emergency management professionals take direction from employers without deviating from ethical standards.

STANDARD 22: Emergency management professionals have a duty to provide employers with all available relevant facts, data, and resources so that they are able make informed decisions.

STANDARD 23: Emergency management professionals, whether in formal or informal leadership roles, have an obligation to model and support ethical decision-making and to help create an organizational culture that promotes and encourages moral behavior.

Responsibility to the Profession

STANDARD 24: Emergency management professionals have a duty to further the standing of the profession through their words, behaviors, and actions.

STANDARD 25: Emergency management professionals have an obligation to advocate for access and inclusion to secure a more representative and diverse professional community.

STANDARD 26: Emergency management professionals promote the continuing development and improvement of their profession by encouraging membership in professional associations, supporting research endeavors, fostering educational advancement, providing mentorship, advocating for appropriate legislative actions, and engaging in other related professional activities.

STANDARD 27: Emergency management professionals support and assist emergency management students in their learning and career development, including opportunities to engage in relevant internships and practicums, participate in training and practice activities, and contribute to meaningful work projects and initiatives.

Responsibility to Self

STANDARD 28: Emergency management professionals have a commitment to lifelong learning and to continually advance their knowledge and skills to serve their community and the profession.

STANDARD 29: Emergency management professionals recognize how their cultural and social backgrounds, beliefs, values, and biases can affect competent and just service.

STANDARD 30: Emergency management professionals are mindful of the ways in which stress can affect their physical and mental health and take appropriate self-care measures.

STANDARD 31: Emergency management professionals will practice continual self-reflection focused on growth and development.

Appendices

Appendix A: Definitional Framing

Appendix B: Behavioral Anchors

Appendix C: Ethical Decision-making Process

Appendix D: Examples and Case Studies

Appendix A: Definitional Framing

(To be completed after the comment period)

Appendix B: Behavioral Anchors

Excerpted from: *The Next Generation Core Competencies for Emergency Management Professionals: Handbook of Behavioral Anchors and Key Actions for Measurement*, August 2017

Behavioral Anchor 1

Respect: Actualizes honoring of individuals and groups of people by promoting dignity, diversity, and the rights of others; recognizes and respects the weight of their own actions as they work in communities.

Behavioral Anchor 2

Veracity: Demonstrates truthfulness and accuracy of facts, and abstains from misrepresentation in all situations.

Behavioral Anchor 3

Justice: Embodies a sense of obligation to the common good and treats others equitably and fairly; honors the rights of all species (present and future) when making decisions regarding the distribution of resources.

Behavioral Anchor 4

Integrity: Displays consistency between belief and action in all arenas of life.

Behavioral Anchor 5

Service: Acts to help others; is altruistically motivated. Puts others first, operating beyond the ego.

Behavioral Anchor 6

Duty to protect: Considers the moral obligation to avert harm (both present and future) and works toward a common good; facilitates community building, cognizant that all actions have consequences affecting people and performance.

Behavioral Anchor 7

Integrates ethical principles within stakeholder discourse: Guides ethical decision making across multiple stakeholders, who have varying interests, to derive public value.

Appendix C: Ethical Decision-Making Process

When faced with an ethical dilemma there is generally no one correct answer. In addressing these dilemmas, a transparent, inclusive, and effective decision-making process should be used to arrive at an equitable outcome based on ethical reasoning.

Decision-making Process for Ethical Dilemmas	
Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Know the facts of the case and antecedents. • Know the expectations of those involved. • Be aware of social and political pressures on decision-makers and stakeholders.
Nature of the decision-maker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the biases and values of the decision-maker? • What knowledge do they have of ethics and relevant codes? • What relevant experience do they have? • What is their character like?
Recognition of the problem as ethical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent does the situation evoke ethical concerns? • To what extent does the situation evoke personal and cultural values? • Apply the following three intuitive tests: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ The pillow test - would your decision allow you to sleep at night? ➤ The child test - what would you tell your child to do? ➤ The media test – would you want your decision to be in the public view?
Problem clarification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify relevant rights, duties, responsibilities, and cultural norms/values. • Identify pressures on decision-makers and stakeholders. • Identify other relevant information needed to clarify the situation and possible actions.
Action identification and evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generate action possibilities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Determine the consequences of the various actions. ➤ Examine the rights, duties, norms, and values associated with the various actions. ➤ Develop an initial justification for each possibility. • Assess the justifications <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Is the approach being used in a comprehensive and logical way? ➤ Is the argument consistent? ➤ Are all ethical concerns identified? ➤ Is there moral self-awareness?
Choice of actions and implantation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider which action choice or combination of choices is best defended by ethical arguments. • Identify factors that might impede a chosen ethical action. • Consider how those impediments might be overcome. • Eliminate impediments where possible and implement ethical actions.

Appendix D: Examples and Case Studies

(To be completed after the comment period)