

# **IAEM Disaster Zone Column**

## **June 2019**

### **Too Successful**

One of our greatest assets as emergency managers is our reputations. When people and other organizations have confidence in us and our professional capabilities it sets us up to be more successful. How then is it possible to be too successful, to the point that it detracts from the work of our emergency management program?

It is true that events that cause us to activate the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) are an excellent training ground for staff who respond to disasters in the future. These people, likely from a variety of agencies and organizations, learn all about the facility and the procedures used in an activated EOC. They become more comfortable with the rhythms of the EOC and shift work—where they learn to transition with someone picking up the pieces of where you left off and then visa versa when you return in 12 hours.

All the above is tremendously helpful to establishing operational readiness to respond to future disasters. There was a period in my emergency management career at the state and local level where nary a year went by when we did not have exercises and multiple no-notice events that caused us to activate the EOC. It is something we got pretty good at because of the frequency and repetition that it brought to the program. Without actual events you must depend on exercises to keep people trained.

Here is the rub. Others can observe that success and begin to think of you and your team and facility as the wunderkind of how to solve issues and respond to events. If there is a fair, parade, a festival of any sort, we need the EOC activated to help with coordination—because they do that so well.

Then there is that empty space for dedicated EOCs sitting there, idle and available for use “by others” who have a task force or perhaps special need for a limited time, like maybe four months! How do you refuse those types of “opportunities” to have people use your space, your copy machine, facilities, meeting rooms, etc. And, I’m specifically speaking about needs that have no direct or even tangential connection to emergency management. I think it is very hard to object to your space being used when it is empty and available.

Having people and activities in your building that have no nexus to emergency management can still cause a drain on your resources. One aspect is when you are called upon specifically to help them organize and coordinate their activities—because, you are good at these things. That can become a huge time suck from your normal non-disaster programmatic duties. And, even if these outside functions just occupy your space, it can be a distraction from your emergency management duties because they will need a certain level of care and feeding. Access to the building, use of the copier

and coffee pot, how to use the telephone system and other just plain administrative aspects of having an outside group being in your space and you being hospitable.

What are the solutions to the challenge of being “Too Successful?” I guess one would be to be “Less Successful” and have a terrible reputation for your organizational abilities and the quality of your work. I don’t necessarily recommend you pursue that as a goal.

In reality, I don’t have a great solution for you. “Shields-up,” we don’t permit those types of activities in our space and we don’t have time to help you with your problem are unlikely to win friends and more likely to tarnish your reputation for good work.

Perhaps your best option is to put some limitations on the use of your facility. No, the EOC is not available to be a homeless shelter at night. Yes, you can use our facility for a “limited time” while you deal with X. Yes, you can use our space, but our staff have other duties and grant deliverables that come with being an emergency management organization. Establishing boundaries on the use of your facility and staff allows you to be helpful, but not be completely deterred from what is supposed to be your primary pre-disaster functions of prevention, mitigation and preparedness.

As discussed above, being Too Successful might be a good problem to have. People and organizations know you exist, and you have something to contribute to solving problems.

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