

The Federal Response to Disaster

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Editor's Note: This Chapter is the continuation of an adaptation of a state plan for disaster preparation and response. In total, the original chapter comprises Chapters, 1, 14, 16-18.

The Federal Response

There are some disasters that are so large they warrant a massive rescue and recovery response, which under most circumstances would exceed any given community's or state's resources. Under those situations, the disaster response must be raised to a national level and the state may request assistance from the Federal government. This assistance and the process by which it is provided is described below.

The National Incident Management System (NIMS)

The National Incident Management System (NIMS)¹ provides a consistent nationwide template to enable federal, state, local, and tribal governments and private sector and nongovernmental organizations to work together effectively and efficiently to prepare for, prevent, respond to, and recover from domestic incidents, regardless of cause, size, or complexity, including acts of catastrophic terrorism.

The NIMS represents a core set of doctrine, concepts, principles, terminology, and organizational processes that enable effective and collaborative incident management at all levels. It is not an operational incident management or resource allocation plan. By September 30, 2006, federal, state, local, tribal, private sector and non-governmental first responders and disaster workers (including Emergency Medical Service personnel, firefighters, hospital staff, law enforcement personnel, public health personnel, public works/utility personnel, skilled support personnel, and other emergency management response, support, volunteer personnel) will be required to complete a series of courses offered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). These courses will describe in more detail the NIMS, the Incident Command System, and the National

Response Plan as they relate to disaster response.

The National Response Plan

The National Response Plan (NRP)² provides a framework for incident management at all jurisdictional levels. It establishes protocols and forms the basis for how the federal government coordinates with state, local, and tribal governments and the private sector during disasters.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)³, a federal agency since 1979, became part of the new Department of Homeland Security (DHS) on March 1, 2003. FEMA's mission within the DHS is to lead the effort to prepare the nation for all potential disasters and to manage the federal response and recovery efforts following any national incident — whether natural or human-caused.

The Robert T. Stafford Act

In 1974, the *Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act*⁴ was enacted to support state and local governments and their citizens when disasters overwhelm them. This law:

- Establishes a process for requesting and obtaining a Presidential Disaster Declaration.
- Defines the type and scope of assistance available from the federal government.
- Sets the conditions for obtaining that assistance.

FEMA is tasked with coordinating the national response to disaster under both the NIMS and the Stafford Act.

Presidential Declaration

In order for federal assets to be released to a disaster affected state, a Presidential Declaration must be requested and approved. The Robert T. Stafford Act establishes a process by which States can request federal assistance. The Stafford Act requires that all requests for a Presidential declaration be made by the governor of the affected state. Based on the Governor's request, and the supporting documentation regarding the extent of the damage, the President may declare that a major disaster or emergency exists, and activate an array of federal programs to assist in the response and recovery effort.

Federal Assistance

Not all federal programs are activated for every disaster. The determination of which programs are activated is based on the needs found during the Preliminary Damage Assessment and any subsequent information that may be discovered.

The federal assistance coordinated by FEMA, falls into three general categories.

- **Individual Assistance** provides aid to individuals, families, and business owners.
- **Public Assistance** provides aid to public (and certain private non-profit) entities for certain emergency services and the repair or replacement of disaster-damaged public facilities.
- **Hazard Mitigation Assistance** provides funding for measures designed to reduce future losses to public and private property.

Emergency Medical Services

The **National Disaster Medical System (NDMS)**⁵ is a section within the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency, Response Division, Operations Branch, and is responsible for supporting federal agencies in the management and coordination of the federal medical response to major emergencies and federally declared disasters.

There are three (3) primary components of the NDMS:

- Medical response to a disaster area in the form of teams, supplies, and equipment.
- Patient transport from a disaster site to unaffected areas of the nation.
- Definitive medical care at participating hospitals in unaffected areas.

In the event of a large scale disaster, teams of health care professionals may be deployed by the federal government to supplement the personnel of the local community and health care system. These teams, known as the **Disaster Medical Assistance Teams (DMAT)**⁶ also include mental health professionals trained to respond during large, catastrophic events.

The **Metropolitan Medical Response System (MMRS)**⁷ was established to develop or enhance existing locally based emergency preparedness systems. This system coordinates public health, medical and mental health, local law enforcement, emergency management and first-responder personnel to more effectively respond in the first 48-72 hours of a public health crisis and until federal assets arrive.

Mental Health Counseling Services

Under federally declared disasters, immediate and short-term mental health financial assistance to states may also be available from the federal government. Only the state (as a governmental unit) has the authority to apply for such federal assistance. This assistance is known as the Crisis Counseling Assistance and Training Program (CCP).

FEMA/Center for Mental Health Services Crisis Counseling Assistance and Training Program

The **Crisis Counseling Assistance and Training Program**⁸, authorized by the Stafford Act and administrated by FEMA and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) Center for Mental Health Services (CMHS), is designed to provide supplemental funding to states for short-term crisis counseling services to people affected in a Presidentially declared disaster.

Two separate portions of the CCP can be funded: Immediate Services and Regular Services. A state may request either or both types of funding.

- The **Immediate Services Program** is intended to enable the state or local agency to respond to the immediate mental health needs of disaster survivors with screening, diagnostic, and counseling techniques, as well as outreach services such as public information and community networking.
- The **Regular Services Program** is designed to provide up to nine months of crisis counseling, community outreach, and consultation and educational services to people affected by a *presidentially* declared disaster. Funding for this program is separate from the immediate services grant.

To be eligible for crisis counseling services funded by the CCP, the disaster survivor must be a resident of the designated area or must have been located in the area at the time the disaster occurred. The survivor also must be experiencing psychological distress that was caused or aggravated by the disaster or its aftermath.

During times of disaster, the process by which a Presidential Declaration is approved can take days, weeks, or even months. As you can see, a wide range of services that might be significantly helpful to individuals relies on a Presidential Declaration. The period between when a disaster declaration is requested and when it is approved can be an extremely stressful time for both disaster relief workers and disaster survivors. Further, rejection of a Presidential Declaration or limiting the services offered by the Presidential Declaration can pose significant challenges for mental health professionals who are caring for disaster survivors.

¹ For more information about NIMS, refer to the Web site www.fema.gov/nims/ and click on the Frequently Asked Questions link.

² For more information about the NRP, refer to the Web site www.dhs.gov/dhspublic/interapp/editorial/editorial_0566.xml.

³ For more information about FEMA, refer to the Web site www.fema.gov/.

⁴ For more information about the Stafford Act and disaster declaration, you may refer to the Web site www.fema.gov/library/stafact.shtm.

⁵ For more information about the National Disaster Medical System, refer to the Web site <http://www.oep-ndms.dhhs.gov/>.

⁶ For more information about the Disaster Medical Assistance Team, refer to the Web site www.oep-ndms.dhhs.gov/dmat.html.

⁷ For more information about the Metropolitan Medical Response System, refer to the Web site www.mmrs.fema.gov/default.aspx.

⁸ For more information about the Crisis Counseling Assistance and Training Program, refer to the Web site www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/cmhs/EmergencyServices/progguide.asp.