Issue Brief

A Proactive Approach to Emergency Preparedness

With an automated staffing and workforce management solution, city leaders will be ready to respond to a crisis and prepared to handle the aftermath.

The Rising and Costs of Natural Disasters

From coast to coast, not a single U.S. state is safe from natural disasters. As of May 2018, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) had already declared nine major disasters and emergencies, due to severe storms, flooding and mudslides. In all of 2017, FEMA declared 74 disasters and emergencies.[1] That year, Hurricane Harvey flooded parts of Texas with unprecedented amounts of rain, while Hurricane Irma wreaked havoc on Florida and Puerto Rico. California experienced devastating wildfires, while the Midwest saw tornadoes and other violent storms. The aftermath of these disasters is devastating: homes are destroyed and people are displaced; land is ruined and crops are lost; businesses are closed and jobs are eliminated. The victims rely on their governments for a wide range of emergency services.

In addition, the astronomical costs of natural disasters can weaken local economies. In 2017, weather and climate disasters in the United States caused 362 deaths and more than $307 billion in total estimated costs.[2] State and local governments are struggling to keep up with the rising costs of natural disasters. An emergency situation is made worse for the many municipalities that rely on outdated processes for deploying first responders, tracking resources and then applying for federal aid and funding.

To solve these challenges, government organizations are turning to automated staffing and workforce management solutions that help them be better prepared before, during and after a natural disaster or emergency situation. The right automated staffing and workforce management solution helps put first responders on site as fast as possible, tracks all jobs related to recovery clean-up efforts, and aids in effective labor reporting for reimbursement from FEMA and other funding sources.

Prepared for Any Disaster

Before disaster strikes, agency leaders must know how to manage their personnel and effectively deploy them as an emergency unfolds. Traditionally, that has been one of the most time-consuming and administrative-heavy tasks. The right solution can automate this process, eliminating the three main pain points:

1. Deploy the right first responders at the right time. An automated solution tracks employees' certifications, ensuring only the appropriately qualified people are sent to the scene. It also communicates emergency deployment assignments to first responders through texts, emails or phone calls.

"We can get more personnel on the street faster, so we see a quicker presence during an emergency than ever before," says Lt. James Casteel of Nassau County Fire Rescue and Emergency Management in Florida, which has been using an advanced scheduling automation tool since 2007.[3]

2. Eliminate administrative work so responders can focus on protecting the public. An automated solution takes over the

Natural Disasters by the Numbers

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administrative tasks that sidetrack public safety officials. Instead of worrying about managing schedules and logging accurate information, the people in charge can focus on providing aid to their communities.

During wildfires in Southern California, Monterey Park's fire department uses an automated staffing solution to reassign personnel to strike team status and make automatic phone calls to backfill employees on the fireline. According to former Fire Chief Jim Birrell, the system saved him countless hours.[4]

3. Track all labor to recovery efforts. An automated staffing and workforce management solution makes it easy to prepare labor and management reports, which can be used to more efficiently identify all costs related to an emergency — both reimbursable and non-reimbursable. The total economic costs in the aftermath of a disaster can be alarming. The direct and indirect costs can seem daunting to an accounting department. Compiling labor data with manual processes such as paper and spreadsheets is no longer sustainable when employees have the extra workload of reconciling job assignments to recovery efforts — and clean up and rebuilding can last for years depending on the devastation level. "You can't imagine how much staff you will need to deal with an emergency," says one county ravaged by floods several years ago.

When facing a crippling disaster, the first reaction is to evaluate the situation, ensure the safety of the community and communicate with citizens. Unfortunately, one of the most critical considerations — how to pay for it all — is often an afterthought. That's why it's so important to have a plan prior to an event. Emergency preparedness means not only providing guidance to leaders and first responders during a crisis, but also supporting administrative personnel in tracking all labor associated with recovery efforts. Accurately tracking reimbursable costs is imperative to getting the most funding available from outside sources such as FEMA.

Dealing with the Aftermath: FEMA Reimbursement

The initial response to a disaster is the responsibility of local emergency services and state agencies, but a catastrophe often warrants a federal response. According to FEMA, when the financial strain of recovering from a disaster threatens to overwhelm local governments, the federal government may provide additional funding and support.[5]

Consider Hurricane Harvey, the second-costliest hurricane in U.S. history (after Hurricane Katrina). In addition to taking more than 100 lives, driving thousands of people into shelters and ruining homes and businesses due to flooding, Hurricane Harvey caused billions of dollars in damage to schools, wastewater systems, roads and more.[6] As of early 2018, FEMA had provided $625 million in public assistance to state, local and tribal governments affected by Hurricane Harvey.[7]

Even when municipalities are entitled to FEMA reimbursements, they are too often unprepared to handle the resource tracking and paperwork involved in applying for federal funds. But a robust automated staffing and workforce management solution can lighten this load. During an emergency, administrators can assign a job code to the resource responding to the FEMA-declared disaster and track costs associated with responding to and recovering from that incident, including labor hours, within the automated solution. By making sure municipal personnel hours are accurately recorded, agencies can both maximize the amount of public assistance funds the government is entitled to and properly compensate employees.[8] After the emergency, administrators can generate reports specific to the job code and more easily complete the paperwork to apply for federal reimbursements.

Conclusion

For local governments, the costs associated with a single emergency can be overwhelming, if not financially calamitous. FEMA reimbursements after a disaster are often critical to the recovery efforts.

A robust automated staffing and workforce management solution can help mitigate some of those costs by potentially expediting reimbursements from the federal government in the case of a FEMA-declared disaster. It can also mean the difference between being prepared for an emergency and scrambling to meet the needs of citizens. First responders can be called to the scene faster and more efficiently, other critical personnel can begin the clean-up process, and civic leaders can focus on what's most important to their communities — open communications and rebuilding efforts.

Endnotes

1. https://www.fema.gov/disasters
2. https://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/billions/events.pdf
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5. https://www.fema.gov/disaster-process-disaster-aid-programs
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