



# FEDERAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY

Managing Public Organizations

Laurent Cortes

## Overview

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is a well-known federal agency due to the number of national emergencies that have put the name of the agency to the forefront. FEMA was created in 1979 through an executive order by President Jimmy Carter<sup>1</sup>. FEMA has a mission and set of strategic goals aimed at enhancing national preparedness and emergency management. The core mission of the organization is to help people before, during, and after disasters. Among its other goals FEMA has set what it calls its national preparedness goal. In this goal FEMA has set an overarching goal to 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 risks. To meet these mission goals, the organization has focused on five mission areas that are Prevention, Protection, Mitigation, Response, and Recovery.<sup>2</sup> The national preparedness goal establishes 32 core capabilities that are spread and overlap throughout the 5 mission areas. The following core capabilities fall under the prevention mission area: Planning, Public Information, Operation Coordination, Forensics and attribution, Intelligence and Information Sharing, Interdiction and Disruption, Screening, Search and Detection. For the protection mission area, the following core capabilities are covered: Planning, Public

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<sup>1</sup> "About Us", FEMA, Federal Emergency Management Agency, July 7, 2023

06/28/2024, <https://www.fema.gov/about>

<sup>2</sup> "Mission areas and Core Capabilities", FEMA, Federal Emergency Management Agency, July 20, 2020.06/28/2024, <https://www.fema.gov/emergency-managers/national-preparedness/mission-core-capabilities>

Information and Warning, Operation Coordination, Intelligence and Information Sharing, Interdiction and Disruption, Screening, Search and Detection, Access Control and Identity Verification, Physical Protective Measures, Cybersecurity, Supply Chain Integrity and Security, Risk Management for Protection Programs and Activities. The mitigation mission area covers Risk and Disaster Resilience Assessment, Community Resilience, Long-term Vulnerability Reduction, Threats and Hazards Identification. The response mission area covers the following: Environmental Response/Health and Safety, Critical Transportation, Situational Assessment Fatality Management Services, Fatality Management Services, Fire Management and Suppression, Infrastructure Systems, Logistics and Supply Chain Management, Mass Care Services, Mass Search and Rescue Operations, On-scene Security, Protection and Law Enforcement, Operational Communications, Public Health, Healthcare and Emergency Medical Services. The final mission area recovery covers: Infrastructure Systems, Health and Social Services, Economic Recovery, Natural and Cultural Resources, and Housing. Additionally, FEMA has laid out its current strategic plan that spans from 2022 to 2026.<sup>3</sup> In this strategic plan FEMA has outlined three main goals which are to instill equity as a foundation of emergency management, lead whole of community in climate resilience, and promote and sustain a ready FEMA and prepared nation. This strategic plan is a new addition and departure from the core mission of disaster readiness and response but shows the evolution and complexity of issues FEMA is prepared to tackle. FEMA as an

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<sup>3</sup> "2022-2026 FEMA Strategic Plan – Building the FEMA our Nation Needs and Deserves" FEMA, Federal Emergency Management Agency, February 6, 2024, 06/28/2024,  
[https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema\\_2022-2026-strategic-plan.pdf](https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema_2022-2026-strategic-plan.pdf)

organization is broad and encompasses a large group of stakeholders because it must be prepared for a large and diverse set of emergencies. Because the broad nature of FEMA, the number of stakeholders they have is a wide ranging. Among the main stakeholders they have is federal, state, local, tribal and territorial governments. Additional important stakeholders include nonprofit organizations, religious institutions, private sector partners, first responders, emergency managers, individuals and communities affected by disasters. Throughout their disaster management initiatives, they deal with a diverse range of additional stakeholders that include universities, media, media outlets, and media organizations. FEMA must always engage with these stakeholders throughout the lifespan of all their disaster management initiatives because FEMA heavily relies on assistance from outside their organization to better respond to emergencies. The operational environment for FEMA falls under the category of incredibly complex and dynamic. FEMA must always be adapting to meet ever evolving emergencies and challenges. Among the challenges FEMA faces is the increasing frequency and severity of natural disaster in the United States. With climate change being blamed for the frequency and severity we can expect both to continue to grow in the years to come. In addition to natural disasters FEMA operates in an environment of threats such as terrorism and cyberattacks that continue to evolve as technology continues to grow. Rapidly changing technology and communication become another factor in the operating environment of FEMA. FEMA operates in a multitude of diverse communities and each community has various needs and even its own vulnerabilities. To add to the complexity of the operating environment FEMA must work across multiple government agencies and jurisdictions. This leads to FEMA

having to continuously adapt its plans and strategies to meet all the emerging challenges found in emergency management.

Following the creation of FEMA in 1979, FEMA became part of the Department of Homeland Security in 2003 following the tragic events and terror attacks on 09/11/2001. FEMA's organizational structure is just as complex as the diverse responsibilities they oversee. The organization itself is headquartered in Washington, DC where it houses the office of the Administrator and various other program offices. The organization includes 10 regional offices that work directly with multiple states, territories, and tribes. FEMA also relies on field offices that manage disaster response and recovery in specific locations along with warehouses and staging areas throughout the country.

### Organizational Structure

FEMA has clear lines of authority which are necessary in an organization that is complex and diverse. FEMA is led by an administrator who reports directly to the Secretary of Homeland Security. During disaster response periods the administrator has a direct line of access to the U.S. President. The current FEMA administrator is Deanne Criswell who was confirmed by the Senate on April 22, 2021, and is the first woman to lead FEMA in its history.<sup>4</sup> The administrator supported by deputy administrator and chief of staff oversees the entire agency which is currently Erik Hooks as deputy administrator and David Bibo as chief of staff. Following behind the administrator is associate administrators who lead major directorates along with

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<sup>4</sup> "Offices & Leadership", FEMA, Federal Emergency Management Agency, July 3, 2024.

06/28/2024, <https://www.fema.gov/about/organization/offices-leadership>

assistant administrators who head specific program areas. Below the assistant administrators are division directors. Finally regional administrators report to the administrator but coordinate with program offices. This hierarchical leadership model is what keeps the lines of authority clear. Because of this the decision-making process is designed to be responsive to emergencies while maintaining a clear line of authority. FEMA leadership relies on different divisions to assist in the process of decision-making. The Office of Policy and Program Analysis (OPPA) assists by providing strategic coherence and driving linkages between budget, strategy, performance integration, and execution.<sup>5</sup> In layman's terms OPPA promotes effectiveness and efficiency by providing leadership with a multitude of information needed to make decisions. The Enterprise Resource Planning Division provides leadership with achievable packages of capabilities which are then built into fiscal years. The Strategy Division advances the agency's strategic goals by providing strategic planning, performance management, foresight, and innovation. The Enterprise Analytics Division provides evidence-based decision making, implementing enterprise data strategy and advancing evidence act processes. Regional administrators have authority within their jurisdictions which allow for rapid response to local emergencies. Much like all things in FEMA the decision process is complex and versatile in nature. FEMA uses a mixture of centralized strategic planning with decentralized operational decision making giving the organization the ability to act quickly in emergencies. Overall, their emphasis on data

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<sup>5</sup> "Office of Policy & Program", FEMA, Federal Emergency Management Agency, January 25, 2024. 06/28/2024, <https://www.fema.gov/about/offices/policy-program>

driven decision making and strategic alignment helps ensure that FEMA's goals of enhancing national preparedness and effective emergency management.

### Culture and Value

The culture of FEMA is constantly in the process evolving to meet the needs of both its employees and the population it serves. Currently FEMA is in the process of shifting from a traditional command and control structure to a more mission driven culture. The goal of this change is to empower its employees to make independent decisions within the bounds of leadership's intent. It does this by focusing on key aspects of mission driven cultures such as service for the common good, high trust states, pursuit of truth, form and function defined by state, individual initiative, and continuous improvement. FEMA has made it a mission to improve the culture within the organization. It states that they will continue to work toward delivery of a workplace where each employee feels valued and can meet the mission to their ability without fear and in an environment free of harassment and misconduct. FEMA does this by implementing and establishing the office of professional responsibility, providing mandatory training sessions, and offering counseling services. Though FEMA has established these training sessions and services they have faced challenges in implementing these changes to the culture. In 2019 Rand Corporation was hired by FEMA to conduct an employee survey regarding workplace harassment and discrimination.<sup>6</sup> The results of the survey found that employees had issues with trust in senior leadership, barriers to reporting civil

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<sup>6</sup> "Culture Improvement Action Plan", FEMA, Federal Emergency Management Agency, May 1, 2024. 06/28/2024. <https://www.fema.gov/about/action/we-are-fema/culture-improvement>

rights violations, and perceptions of retaliation for reporting misconduct. In a follow up survey Rand Corporation found that there was a 28% decrease in the prevalence of staff reporting gender based, sexual, or race/ethnicity-based harassment compared to the previous year. To address these issues FEMA implemented initiatives such as establishing an office of professional responsibility to investigate misconduct as well as providing mandatory training sessions on anti-harassment and civil treatment. It has also developed a culture improvement action plan to address systemic issues and empowering employee resources groups to advocate for core value and antiharassment. These results provided encouraging information, but also found that there are still changes that need to be made for further improvement. FEMA spends resources in doing research on its own employees because at the end of the day happy employees are more productive. Cultivating a positive culture is a necessity when running an organization as complex as FEMA. A positive work culture plays the important role of not only maintaining key employees, but also attracting exceptional talent. This improvement of work culture plays a fundamental role in what FEMA has established as part of their core values. Core values listed as compassion, fairness, integrity and respect. Their goal of compassion is to support fellow employees, partner organizations, individuals, and communities. The goal of fairness is to treat everyone impartially, offering unbiased and consistent assistance, and ensuring equal access to resources and tools. The goal for integrity is to ensure responsibility as stewards of Federal resources, services, programs, and conduct as trusted professionals. The goal for respect is the practice of acknowledging the value of the people they work with and serve. These core value goals have the added value of providing positive impact such

as emphasis on individual initiative and decision making can lead to more responsive and adaptive performance during emergency situations. It also allows for focus on continuous improvement and encourages learning and development and ultimately it provides a framework for ethical behavior and decision making. FEMA continues in its ongoing efforts to improve transparency, accountability and trust with its employees. Improving these will be important in aligning employee behavior and organizational performance with FEMA's values and cultural goals.

#### Leadership, Communication Strategies, Teamwork and Conflict Resolution

As previously mentioned, FEMA is in the process of shifting its leadership model from traditional command and control structure to a mission driven culture that empowers employees. This new leadership approach includes 4 key aspects. Those aspects include emphasis on service for the common good, promoting high trust within the organization, encouraging individual initiative, and focus on continuous improvement. The new leadership model seems to have had its share of challenges in being fully implemented. As a result of an employee survey by Rand Corporation issues were brought about regarding issues with trust in senior leadership within FEMA. Additionally, employees reported concerns of barriers to report misconduct and fear of retaliation. The survey made it clear that while changes were being made there were still lingering mistrust between employees and leadership at FEMA. Going forward teamwork and conflict resolution will play an important role in gaining that trust. This goes back to some of the organizational culture and leadership goals FEMA has. FEMA must empower individual initiative to create a culture that members are encouraged to contribute ideas and take ownership of their work. A team

where individuals are encouraged to take initiative builds a stronger unit. An emphasis on collaboration also plays an important role in effective teamwork. Because FEMA works closely with multiple agencies and jurisdictions, collaboration plays a critical role in its success. Another important aspect of FEMA's organizational culture and leadership goals is having respect as a core value. Respect plays a major role in organizational culture. Having respect as a core value shows that FEMA prioritizes respectful dialogue and consideration of diverse perspectives. Using respect as core value sets up the organization for positive work environment base. Another important organizational culture and leadership goal emphasized by FEMA is the pursuit of truth and continuous improvement. This shows that FEMA values learning from its shortfalls and seeks to improve on a continual basis. The pursuit of truth also emphasizes fact-based problem solving and learning from disagreements. Communication plays an important role in any organization both internally and externally. While FEMA focuses on improving culture and communication within it must also focus on communication strategies in the field. During emergencies it is critical for effective communication between all parties involved and FEMA makes clear that communication must be the most important aspect of answering to emergencies.<sup>7</sup> Communication strategies for FEMA include emphasis on clear, timely and accurate information dissemination. FEMA also focuses on use of multiple communication channels that include traditional media, social media and in person events. FEMA must also keep in mind that they cater to

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<sup>7</sup> "Lesson 3. Communicating in an Emergency", FEMA, Federal Emergency Management Agency. February 2014

06/28/2024. [https://training.fema.gov/emiweb/is/is242b/student%20manual/sm\\_03.pdf](https://training.fema.gov/emiweb/is/is242b/student%20manual/sm_03.pdf)

diverse audiences within communities and must focus on tailoring messages for each. The goal of FEMA is to be prepared for any unexpected event and the same goes for their messaging. FEMA develops pre prepared message templates for common emergencies to save time in emergencies where every second counts. In times of emergency communication must be delivered accurately and in a timely manner, but issues in the field do arrive. FEMA must deal and prepare for potential issues with overcoming communication barriers during emergencies. They often encounter issues in communication regarding language barriers, but also physical and technological barriers during emergencies. Communication during emergencies plays a critical role and FEMA ensure they can communicate with the intended audience in a timely manner to avoid the spread of misinformation and panic. They must also be vigilant in the way they craft their messages. They must consider factors that influence message reception and response, but also craft messages that elicit specific responses from their target audience.

### Key Challenges

As an organization FEMA faces many challenges when it comes the organizations management practices. While FEMA has begun to address it issues with its organizational culture, it remains among its major problems. As previously discussed, Rand Corporation was tasked with conducting surveys to employees FEMA. What it found was that there was a distrust in upper management, barriers in reporting civil rights violations, and perceived retaliation for reporting misconduct. What the survey ultimately found was that one of the key challenges FEMA was facing was having organizational culture issues. FEMA has already begun its process of addressing the

issue organizational culture. FEMA has developed and updated a culture improvement action plan that helps to outline specific steps to enhance workplace culture and climate. In the last few years another key issue FEMA has been facing is staffing shortages. During seasons of bad weather and disaster FEMA's workforce has been in high demand, but FEMA has had trouble facing shortages of staff. A report by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that on average FEMA was operating with shortages in over half of operational groups.<sup>8</sup> Most of those operational groups were operating with only 25% or less staff available for deployment. Not only was FEMA operating with shortages, but close to half of the staff declined deployments citing difficult field conditions and burnout. Another key challenge is the qualifications and training of FEMA workforce. FEMA is having trouble attracting and keeping staff with designated qualifications in FEMA's systems. Additionally, they are facing gaps in qualification and their actual skills in field. They are also facing challenges in providing adequate training and development opportunities to both their staff and reservist staff. Among the major key challenges FEMA faces is the increase of workload and mission scope. The past few years have brought about an increase in frequency and severity of disasters. Many see global warming as one of the issues that have brought about more natural disasters, but also emergencies such as Covid-19 have placed a huge burden on FEMA and stretched their workforce to the brink. FEMA has been dealing with emergencies such as the Maui Fires and the Covid-19 outbreak. Not only has FEMA

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<sup>8</sup> "FEMA: Opportunities Exist to Address Mission Challenges and Increased Workload", U.S Government Accountability Office, March 12, 2024.

been dealing with these unprecedented emergencies but the mission scope has also increased. FEMA was charged with also dealing with non-conventional emergencies but have been tasked with duties such as distribution of covid vaccines, sheltering migrant children at the southern border and even helping settle Afghans who were transferred to the United States following the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. The growing scope of duties is another issue that FEMA will continue to deal with along with the funding issue that will eventually catch up. While FEMA has begun addressing some of these issues but some of the newer issues will remain ongoing areas of improvement in FEMA's organizational management practices.

### Recommendations

FEMA is facing many challenges and changing environments and will need to adapt to be able to meet its mission and strategic goals. Some recommendations that can enhance effectiveness include an increase in stakeholder engagement when it comes to strategic planning. FEMA has already begun doing this gathering input from internal and external stakeholders in its 2022-2026 Strategic Plan. An increase and continuation of this collaboration between stakeholders can help FEMA to be aligned with the needs of partnering stakeholders. By its nature FEMA relies heavily on collaboration of both public and private industry and further collaboration will lead to increased effectiveness as an organization and for its employees. Another recommendation would be to invest in building and training a new workforce. FEMA is facing a shortage of workforce, and they can address this issue by developing programs to strictly deal with shortage. They can better train their staff by providing improved training programs and qualifications. Once they train a resilient workforce they can

continue to work on and improve their organizational culture. They are currently in the process of addressing this issue through their culture improvement action plan. FEMA can also empower its employees to drive innovation. While improving the organizational culture they can encourage their employees to promote innovation and submit ideas for improvement. They can also encourage their leadership to engage with employees and create opportunities for further collaboration. Promoting a learning organization culture can also be an important aspect to introduce. Fostering a work environment that encourages its employees to learn, adapt and improve at all levels of the organization can be beneficial to growth both for employee and organization. Change can be beneficial to any organization, but for FEMA another important recommendation would also be the integration of modern technology. Government organizations in general tend to fall behind when it comes to technology and FEMA is no different. FEMA can focus and develop innovative systems and technologies that can assist in reaching its mission goals. They can invest in new technologies and systems to improve the ability for FEMA to effectively meet its mission and goals. Along with the new technologies FEMA can also enhance the use of data analytics and evidence-based approaches to inform policy and operational decisions. In using these recommendations FEMA can enhance its effectiveness and adaptability in the face of its ever-evolving challenges.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, FEMA plays an increasingly vital role in preparing for, responding to, and recovering from emergencies across the United States. Through its dedicated leadership, evolving strategies, and commitment to serving communities, FEMA will

continue to adapt to the complex and changing landscapes of emergency management. With the frequency and growing intensity of natural disasters due to climate change, FEMA will continue to play a critical role in the United States. Going forward FEMA will not only rely on its internal capabilities but also the ability to engage with stakeholders outside of the organization. The ongoing efforts to improve programs, enhance accessibility, and strengthen its workforce will be important in ensuring that FEMA will effectively fulfill its mission of helping people before, during, and after disasters. Ultimately, these efforts will lead to a safer and more prepared United States.

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