



Is Your base Ready for an Emergency?

By Craig Fugate

In September 2016, the most powerful storm to threaten the U.S. in almost a decade formed over the Atlantic. Within days, Hurricane Matthew—a storm that would eventually carry sustained winds over 160 mph—brushed along the Eastern Seaboard. By the time it dissipated more than a week later, Matthew had taken the lives of over 40 civilians, left thousands stranded from historic flooding, and threatened the mission readiness of some of the Army's most critical installations.

As Matthew demonstrated, disasters can imperil our forces at any time. It is vital that Army leadership recognize the importance of building an Army better prepared to respond to—and recover from—every type of emergency.

The urgency of prioritizing emergency management in the Army is about more than being physically stronger and safer at home. It is about meeting the Army's basic core warfighting mission. Installations are the foundation that allow our soldiers to provide prompt, sustained land dominance across the full range of military operations and spectrum of conflict in support of combatant commanders. Our bases do more than feed, house and train our soldiers. They serve as platforms that project our force worldwide and protect our nation's most critical assets.

Being prepared to respond to disasters demonstrates to adversaries that even when disaster strikes at home, we can respond to any crisis competently and shift quickly to deploy and support our warfighting requirements anywhere, anytime, across the globe. This is particularly important today, as we face active threats from adversaries around the world who are undoubtedly keeping tabs on our readiness posture at home.

We are fortunate to have an Army that recognizes the importance of being ready for the worse. At bases across the nation, the Army has hired highly trained civilian emergency managers who support installation commanders and local communities to execute standard emergency management plans and procedures when disasters strike.

Each September, the Army also participates in National Preparedness Month, an important education campaign coordinated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency. It provides research based tips and information to military families so they can be ready and recover more quickly from the worst.

Still, more can be done.

Installation commanders must work to prioritize the importance of emergency management on- and off-base and become personally familiar with contingency plans. Just as we do with active shooter drills, a wide array of other emergency scenarios should be exercised routinely, and in realistic ways that test the Army's ability to respond to what can actually happen during an emergency versus what the Army believes it is capable of handling.

Community Support

Increasingly, our installations have also become dependent on the communities they live in for vital services like water, sewer, power and other infrastructure. We must ask: During an emergency, are we prepared to take steps to make sure we are taking care of our civilians and soldiers who live off-base? Have we forged relationships with local authorities and private-sector leaders before disaster strikes that will be key to providing vital life-safety services to soldiers and their families? Army leadership must recognize that installation operations are inexorably linked with communities outside the wire, and they should be key resources for providing life safety and life-sustaining support when disaster strikes, not liabilities.

Without the institutional Army, the operational Army cannot function and without the operational Army, the institutional Army has no purpose. The Army must continue to value the importance of emergency management as part of its institutional force and build upon it.

As damaging as Matthew was, it could have proved worse. Had it tracked just 50 miles farther inland, it would have wrought catastrophic damage on Fort Stewart, Ga., and Military Ocean Terminal Sunny Point and Fort Bragg, both N.C., three of our nation's most vital installations. But with an Army that values a robust emergency management program, there's no question you'll be prepared to meet your core mission no matter what happens next.

Craig Fugate served as a Federal Emergency Management Agency administrator from May 2009 to January 2017. He served as then-Florida Gov. Jeb Bush's emergency management director from 2001 to 2009. He is a graduate of Florida State Fire College.