

**GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA**  
**Homeland Security and Emergency Management Agency**

Muriel Bowser  
Mayor



Dr. Christopher Rodriguez  
Director

**HOMELAND SECURITY COMMISSION**

**Thursday, August 20, 2020**

**4:30 – 5:30 p.m.**

**Virtual WebEx Meeting**

**Commission Member Attendees:** Brad Belzak (Chair), Ed Pearson, Phil McNamara

**HSEMA Attendee(s):** Jason Rubinstein (HSEMA)

**Invited Attendees:** John Scott, President of the Florida Emergency Preparedness Association and Director of Brevard County Homeland Security Emergency Management Agency

Brad: (Opens the meeting, addresses the Homeland Security Commission, and thanks the invited guests for joining and participating).

*Note, no members of the public are present.*

Phil: (Thanks John for meeting and asks initial question on the strengths and challenges facing Brevard County emergency management).

John: We have run into leadership challenges that require participation and money to get projects completed. When hurricane Mathew struck, it reminded the county of the importance of owning the leadership support responsibility. We built an entire program on a staffing list, disaster role, personnel, availability, exemption processes, etc.

Phil: To clarify, these are the staff that work for you and the agency in Brevard County?

John: We pulled staff from Parks and Rec, Housing Services, Human Resources, Public Works, etc. There was a seismic shift in our program. We began producing shelter kits. We got a warehouse and engaged in cost-benefit analysis. Having the Mass Care Working Group helped us tackle different pieces of our state and local program and collaborate. We uncovered issues such as the American Red Cross' (ARC) potential unavailability and applied policies and practices that permitted our ongoing operations. What we sold our leadership on was the notion that providing safe sheltering was a statutory requirement. We needed to own this and find a way to fulfill our responsibilities.

Phil: How many counties are engaging in response efforts without the usual ARC assistance?

John: Around 60, maybe. We have all repositioned ARC in some shape or form. Everyone has pivoted them in some direction.

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Many ARC staff are just-in-time volunteers. I would love to see ARC spend more time and energy on volunteer recruitment. I think you can see the importance of investing in the volunteers.

Circling back, the ESF #6 is led by Brevard County EM. We put a lot of energy and resources behind the program. We are constantly working to improve. It took us 6 months to build and implement the new program. We didn't start rostering and training people until June, this year. We administered around 25 sheltering trainings since then. We are still bare bones, but we do a good job with what we have. An activation would present challenges. Hurricane Irma came before we were ready, however, I was proud of our efforts. Shelter and notification processes were not perfect, but overall, we did a good job.

Brad: What changes did you make to the program?

John: We ensured there was a surplus of staff. Sheltering is never a problem until it is. The breakdown never arises at a convenient time. A big point of emphasis was to have more staff on site than we needed. The second priority was to instill values in the training that drives the heart of the mission by connecting the worker to the mission and the mission to the resident. We preach the staff being there as advocates and we try to compensate them well for their efforts. We want the staff to know they are there to assist residents who are having a bad day and emphasize the importance of their empathy and kindness.

Brad: That was helpful, thank you. Are you using any technology? Any applications?

John: I am old school. I don't always like technology in these kinds of situations. When tech breaks down, people shut down. We still do paper registration on index cards and we just capture core information. We have the client tell us medical information, allergy information, etc.

When it comes to client interaction, Covid makes it challenging. We have an application but I'm not a huge fan of it. The group that needs relocation during hurricanes is not usually the savviest with technology nor do they always have access to the application. I believe people talking to people is the better approach in many circumstances.

Brad: Can you talk about training and exercising?

John: We haven't done any exercises for the actual program, but we do it live, in practice. In terms of who is involved, we try to keep political folks separate from the operators. From an exercise standpoint, we understand both sides of the issue. Operationally, here is how we open shelters, and politically, here is why. It's about knowing the community and the demographic, locations of populations, pockets of poverty, underserved populations, etc.

Brad: Do you engage in data analytics and do you think you could be more efficient if you focused on demographics?

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John: One thing I think would be critical to consider is behavioral analysis. We saw a theme in Hurricane Mathew and Irma. If the storm is here in 5 days, our phone goes crazy on day 5. You would think we never even heard of opening a shelter, based on the calls. There is a large artificial demand. But when we open the shelter, people don't go. We will get maybe 1200 calls to register and then when we would call to provide pick up, the person would decline, last minute. We had one person crying to get into a special needs shelter. Then, right before we came to get her, she declined. So many people just want to make sure they are on the list. I would love to see more data on this trend.

Brad: That is very interesting. Would you say that the biggest issue is false calls?

John: Yes, for me.

Phil: I want to take advantage of your expertise from your FEPA role. If you were to channel some of the top challenges that other FEPA members would face, what do you think the top one or two challenges would be?

John: Everyone would say staffing is the number one issue. Second is access to resources. Some of the resource issue would be driven by geographic limitations, size of the program, etc. For example, some of our best shelters don't have a generator. Each generator costs half a million dollars.

Phil: How do you balance the interest of people's comfort? Doesn't loss of power contribute to that?

John: Yes. We try our best to be clear about expectations. Our experience is 'alive in and alive out' and 'same condition in and same condition out'. We tell people they are not guaranteed power. It's very hard to get FEMA money approved for power generators. There is no money for enhancing a person's experience. The disparity is that the underserved areas tend to be where shelters are unavailable. *(John also provides issue of people not wanting to leave pets behind).* Pets are evacuation decision makers.

Phil: *(Emphasizes this line).*

John: Having pet friendly shelters are crucial. Down the line we would like them to all be made pet friendly.

John: I looked over your questions and would like to offer some general responses. We are doing congregate sheltering. Non-congregate is obviously preferred right now, but it does limit our ability to be creative. Using local dollars now to do things virtually on a more permanent basis may become the norm. In terms of disaster housing, it is the single biggest barrier to recovery.

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There is no good program solution for that. From a policy standpoint, disaster housing is discussed, but never serviced. We are trying to use Covid as a chance to reinvest our program, strategically. I think we should set up recovery strategies. Establishing building codes and finding ways to take bad housing practices and replacing them with a better structure would be preferred. We shouldn't have to evacuate as many people, because they should be housed in a location where they are secure.

Brad: Thank you very much.

***Meeting adjourned. Note, no members of the public are present.***