

Catastrophic Planning vs. Conventional Disaster Planning



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There has been a debate over the past 10 years about the need to improve catastrophic planning at all levels of government. State and local jurisdictions are obligated to plan for higher probability non-catastrophic incidents, whereas the federal government is often perceived by the public as being the resource of last resort for low probability catastrophic incidents. Therefore, there is good reason to perform some pre-incident catastrophic planning to ensure that all parties can quickly and effectively carry out response and recovery operations in any major incident that would occupy the national media stage. The public will not tolerate slow reaction perceived to be a result of ineffective intergovernmental coordination.

To make matters more challenging, even when a low probability event occurs, the ability to predict that it will directly affect a specific geographical point on the national map is not realistic. So if a state or local jurisdiction invests resources for a specific catastrophic incident, there is still a chance that that area will not be the target when such an incident actually occurs.

The Differences in Planning Strategies

Claire B. Rubin, a social scientist affiliated for over a decade with The George Washington University Institute for Crisis, Disaster, and Risk Management, and co-founder of the *Journal of Homeland Security and Emergency Management*, has been researching the field for 34 years. In her book, *Emergency Management: The American Experience 1900-2010*, she defined “focusing events” as those that are so traumatizing they cause significant changes in the nation’s approach to incident management. These focusing events include such calamitous incidents as the 1900 Galveston Hurricane, the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, the 1919 Spanish Flu Epidemic, the 9/11/01 terrorist attacks, and Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

Each time one of these events has occurred, the nation has attempted to improve its response capabilities. However, it could be argued that some of these events might be more easily described as not truly catastrophic – and, for that reason, the response system already in place would be capable of handling it.

The National Incident Management System (NIMS) and the Incident Command System (ICS) that evolved historically over the past 40 years – i.e., since development of FIREScope in Southern California in the early 1970s – are based on the assumptions that: (a) There is a continuum of incidents that can be managed through a scalable system of structure and resources; and (b) Among those resources will be a broad spectrum of mutual aid that is often supported by federal resources.

The role of the federal government changed dramatically with passage of the 1950 Disaster Relief Act, which gave the President permanent authority to order appropriate federal action in such times of crisis. This authority was modified and changed in 1966, 1970, and 1974. The 1988 Robert T. Stafford Act not only expanded the Presidential authority to declare disasters but also made it much easier for state governors to obtain such disaster declarations. It might reasonably be argued, therefore, that the Stafford Act was not only a major step in a long-term movement to nationalize emergency management but also gives the federal government a strong incentive to manage pre-incident plans and activities to reduce future risks.

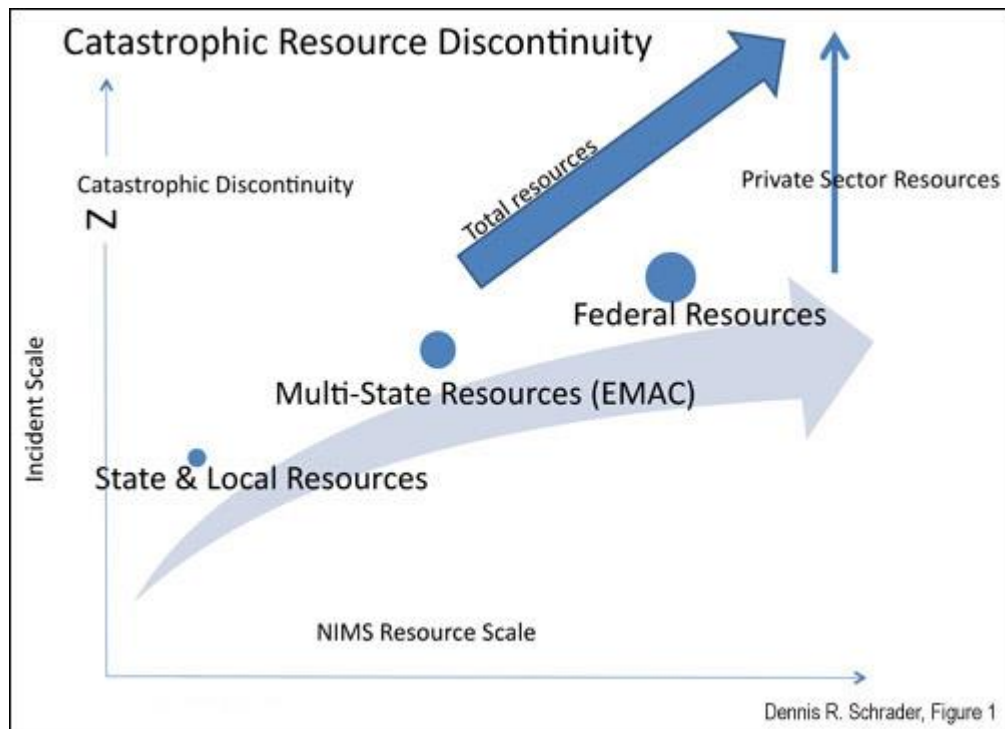
Incident Planning Efforts

Since the early 1990s, in fact, there have been several major efforts by the federal government to put more rigor into incident planning. The focus on catastrophic planning has gained greater momentum, of course, in the years that have passed since the 9/11 attacks and Hurricane Katrina. The 2006 Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act actually prescribed certain very specific planning requirements.

The Regional Catastrophic Preparedness Grant Program was established in 2008 to explore these issues in 12 major urban areas in different states and regions of the country. The results of that 5-year exploration are now being reviewed, and the concepts involved, as well as their probable results, will be examined very carefully going forward.

There still are several threshold questions that must be answered, though, including the following: (a) "Is catastrophic planning really necessary?" (b) "If so, how does it differ from conventional – i.e., previous – disaster planning?" (c) "Again, if so, how, and how much funding will be required to support and sustain the actions determined to be necessary?" The answers to those questions may well be included, or at least implied, in certain assumptions about the scalability of the NIMS and ICS concepts.

As shown in Figure 1, there appears to be at least a few discontinuities – in the resource requirements and logistics processes postulated in the NIMS and ICS framework – that require a different thought process to plan for the response and recovery operations likely to be needed. These same discontinuities might also affect the approach taken to catastrophic planning – a still relatively new specialty skill that many jurisdictions below the federal level cannot afford to maintain. Moreover, a truly catastrophic incident would obviously require a multi-jurisdiction, multi-state response effort. One viable approach that might be taken, therefore, would be to maintain a small nucleus of people, experts in this field, who could maintain continuity over a number of years and share their collective capabilities both regionally and nationally.



Guarding Lifeline Infrastructures

Another important point to remember is that the rapid recovery of private-sector lifeline infrastructures is a key to catastrophic recovery. In the National Capital Region's 2012 [Strategic Playbook](#), Philip J. Palin, a staff member of the Center for Homeland Defense and Security at the Naval Postgraduate School, examined the probable impact on supply chains caused by a catastrophic incident affecting infrastructures. Solving what might loosely be called "the infrastructure problem" would require, among other things, he said, full and effective cooperation between and among officials of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Federal Emergency Management Agency, the states and urban areas directly involved, and the private sector.

The most difficult challenge here, probably, might be that the federal government cannot and should not unilaterally direct the alignment of the many other political jurisdictions directly involved. There must be, though, both a horizontal network and a cooperative effort that makes state and local governments also responsible.

It may also be prudent to spend more time in the research and analysis phase of the planning process used to deal with many catastrophic events. For example, in the mid-Atlantic region, there is already a Fleet Movement Group sponsored by the All Hazards Consortium studying the effects of moving power-sector mobile assets such as trucks and crews through multiple jurisdictions to speed the recovery process for power and thereby facilitate the rapid recovery of lifeline sectors, such as food, water, and telecommunications. This type of analysis makes the planning process yield more effective and tangible results.

The correct approach to resolving this problem may lie in resourcing the planning effort through cooperative working relationships and intergovernmental personnel agreements between the different levels of government. These tools already exist and may hold the key to resolving the dilemma caused by the cost and personnel considerations involved in planning even some low probability events.

The preceding factors and a number of other issues should continue to be studied, obviously, especially in light of the results of the Regional Catastrophic Preparedness Grant Program that are starting to emerge from various jurisdictions around the nation. The notion of catastrophic discontinuity and the differences that it produces bear particularly close scrutiny in the long-running debate over catastrophic planning. Only after generally accepted answers and solutions are agreed upon, it seems, can the threshold questions mentioned above be answered.

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