Elected Officials' Guide to Emergencies and Disasters

The Basics of Community Response

Introduction

The Virginia Department of Emergency Management, in partnership with the Virginia Municipal League and the Virginia Association of Counties, created this guide to inform elected officials about emergency management. VDEM is the lead agency at the state level that protects the lives and property of Virginia's citizens from emergencies and disasters by coordinating the state's emergency preparedness, mitigation, response and recovery efforts.

As an elected official, your response to a disaster will influence government, citizens, the private sector, voluntary organizations and the media.

This guide will introduce you to the local declaration process and the responsibilities of a local emergency manager, but the best way to learn about disaster response is to meet with your local emergency manager.

More detailed guidance about Virginia's emergency and disaster response procedures are available in the Local Emergency Coordinators' Handbook, available from your local emergency manager or at http://www.vaemergency.gov/em-community/em-resources/handbooks.

We would like to acknowledge the Prince William County Office of Emergency Management for inspiring this guide for elected officials. Ideas such as this help strengthen the Commonwealth's ability to respond to disasters.

The Elected Officials' Guide to Emergencies and Disasters is sponsored by

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10501 Trade Court
Richmond, VA 23236
(866) 782-3470 (toll free)
http://www.vaemergency.gov

Understanding the disaster process

All emergency and disaster response begins at the local level.

If local mutual aid agreements with neighboring localities and other local resources become overwhelmed, a locality can call the Virginia Emergency Operations Center for assistance at (804) 674-2400 or (800) 468-8892.

The VEOC will look first to state agencies and other local governments, and then to commercial contracts to fill requests. Federal resources are available only if the president declares a federal disaster, which may happen days after the emergency.

Wherever assistance comes from, it is important to remember that those resources may be limited.

Code of Virginia: Authority
(Title 44: Chapters 3.2 to 3.5)
Each political subdivision in the Commonwealth is within the jurisdiction of and served by the Virginia Department of Emergency Management. However, responsibility for local disaster mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery falls on the local government. Emergency management organizations in towns are usually integrated into county government, unless specified by charter. Towns shall appoint a coordinator of emergency management to ensure integration into their county's emergency management organization. Each political subdivision shall have a director of emergency management. Each political subdivision shall have an agency of emergency management, which has jurisdiction over the entire political subdivision.

The local director of emergency management or a designee may declare a local emergency with the consent of the governing body of the political subdivision.

If the governing body cannot convene, the director, or designee, or in the absence of both, any member of the governing body may declare a local emergency, subject to confirmation by the governing body at its next regularly scheduled meeting (or at a special meeting within 14 days of the declaration, whichever occurs first).

Emergency Management

Emergency management is a field that involves dealing with and avoiding risks through four steps: preparedness, response, recovery and mitigation.

As an elected official, you probably will receive calls from your constituents. Work with the public affairs officer designated in your Emergency Operations Plan to coordinate public information.

Response

During an emergency, your locality may declare a local emergency, which allows your emergency manager and first responders to respond more quickly to the event.

In addition, the governor may declare a state of emergency to speed state agency assistance. In some cases, the governor may make an emergency declaration before an emergency happens, such as an approaching hurricane. A governor's declaration of emergency is a required step toward receiving a federal disaster declaration.

Code of Virginia: Response
(Title 44: Chapters 3.2 to 3.5)

- Whenever a local emergency has been declared, the local director of emergency management may control, restrict, allocate or regulate the use, sale, production and distribution of food, fuel, clothing and other commodities, materials, goods, services and resource systems. The director may enter into contracts and incur obligations necessary to combat the threatened or actual disaster in order to protect the health and safety of persons and property and to provide emergency assistance to the victims of the disaster, as long as these actions do not affect systems in adjoining or other political subdivisions.

- The director may proceed in exercising the powers vested in this section, under the supervision and control of the governor, without regard to usual procedures and formalities prescribed by law (except mandatory constitutional requirements).

- A declaration of a local emergency activates that jurisdiction's Emergency Operations Plan and authorizes aid and assistance in accordance with the plan.

- No interjurisdictional agency or official thereof may declare a local emergency. However, an interjurisdictional agency of emergency management shall provide aid and services to the affected political subdivision because of a local or state declaration.

- When the local governing body decides that all emergency actions have been taken, it shall take appropriate action to end the declared emergency.

Recovery

Recovery involves all of the cleanup, repair and financial assistance needed to return an area back to pre-disaster conditions; it is one of the most challenging aspects of disasters and the most complex. It will take time and a community-wide effort to recover from a disaster.

Some residents may question the pace of the recovery effort or question why they are not seeing relief workers in their specific area. The priorities after a disaster are:

1. Life safety
2. Critical facilities (systems)
3. Private property damage

After initial response efforts, your community must determine the amount of damage. Your locality must submit an initial damage assessment to the Virginia Emergency Operations Center, usually within 72 hours. If the damage appears significant, then a team of state and federal personnel may visit the area to perform additional assessment.

As an elected official, you should get regular briefings on the extent of damage and status of the recovery process from your local emergency manager. These briefings will help you answer questions from your constituents and the media.

If the damages appear to meet the criteria, the governor may request a federal declaration. Not all disaster events result in a governor's request. Only the president of the United States has the authority to approve the request, and an approval is not automatic. Many disasters in Virginia have not received a federal declaration.

A federal declaration must include the locality's name for it to receive aid. There are two main types of federal disaster assistance: Individual Assistance and Public Assistance.

Individual Assistance for individual citizens and businesses

• By law, federal assistance cannot duplicate any coverage provided by private insurance.

• In order to receive IA, registrants must live in the localities named in the federal declaration.

• The majority of assistance to individuals comes through low interest loans from the Small Business Administration. All registrants will be asked to fill out an application for an SBA loan.

Other federal assistance comes through direct grant and reimbursement programs:
• Housing Assistance
• Other Needs Assistance
• Federal Disaster Assistance and Small Businesses
• Federal Disaster Assistance and Agriculture

If Individual Assistance is available, citizens should register by calling the special toll-free telephone number, 1-800-621-FEMA (TTY: 1-800-462-7585) or register online at http://www.fema.gov.

If the Commonwealth does not receive a federal disaster declaration, Virginia's Emergency Relief to Localities may be able to reimburse a locality for costs if threshold and program requirements are met.

Public Assistance for state and local governments and certain nonprofits

Public Assistance reimburses local and state governments and certain private nonprofits for the expenses involved in response and recovery efforts.

In Virginia, state and local governments will combine funds to match 25 percent of the federal reimbursement amount. How much the local government will contribute depends on its fiscal stress. Some localities might be required to provide 13 percent and the state 12 percent, while other localities might only need to provide 2 percent as the state provides the remaining 23 percent. Talk to your local emergency manager about your locality and matching funds.

To be eligible, the work must be the result of the disaster, be located within the designated disaster area and be the legal responsibility of the applicant. Projects that may be reimbursed include:

• Debris removal from public roads and rights-of-way and from private property when determined to be in the public interest. Encourage your locality to develop a debris removal plan in advance of an emergency. Take advantage of state debris removal contracts already in place.

Note: debris removal on private property is the property owner's responsibility, unless the debris poses a hazard to the community at large.

• Emergency protective measures, including search and rescue, warning of hazards, and unsafe structure demolition. Zoning and ordinance issues can play a major role with rebuilding. Get regular briefings about the status of these issues from the appropriate agencies.

• Public infrastructure repair, including roads, bridges, water control facilities and public utility distribution systems.

Mitigation

Mitigation is taking sustained actions to reduce the impact of natural hazards on people and property. Mitigation activities can save lives and money. For example, maintaining strong building codes and enforcing them can reduce property damage from storms, and storm water management can minimize flooding risks.

As an elected official, you should be aware of the mitigation issues in your community. Learn the high-risk areas, the existing or potential mitigation projects, and how they are funded.

Preparedness

As an elected official, there are several important steps you can take to prepare yourself and your community for emergencies and disasters.

- **Understand the National Incident Management System.** Localities are not eligible for federal preparedness funds if they do not meet annual NIMS requirements. The Department of Homeland Security created NIMS to provide a comprehensive and consistent approach to incident management.

  Make sure that all government departments and agencies in your community have adopted NIMS. Encourage NIMS adoption and use by associations, utilities, non-government organizations and the private sector.

As an elected official, you should take NIMS classroom training from VDEM, including G402: ICS Overview for Executive and Senior Officials.

NIMS should be adopted through executive order, proclamation, resolution, or legislation as the jurisdiction's official all-hazards, incident response system.

FEMA strongly recommends that elected officials complete "IS-700 NIMS: An Introduction" and "ICS-100: An Introduction to ICS" training courses. They are available online at http://training.fema.gov/emiweb/IS/crslist.asp.

- **Get involved with your local Emergency Operations Plan.** The Code of Virginia requires each jurisdiction to maintain and keep current an Emergency Operation Plan. Familiarize yourself with the plan before an emergency, and be involved with any updates. Your participation will send a strong message to the agencies and departments involved that this process is an important one.

- **Participate in training and exercises.** Statewide and regional exercises are conducted regularly, and local participation is an opportunity to practice your Emergency Operations Plan. FEMA's Emergency Management Institute offers online training at http://training.fema.gov, and VDEM offers classroom training at http://www.vaemergency.com/train/calendar.cfm.

- **Encourage community and business preparedness.** Emergency responders will respond quickly after a disaster, but they cannot reach everyone right away. Everyone should be prepared to be self-sufficient for at least the first 72 hours after a disaster. For more information about how to prepare, visit http://www.ReadyVirginia.gov.

Code of Virginia: Preparedness
(Title 44: Chapters 3.2 to 3.5)

• The director may develop mutual aid arrangements for reciprocal assistance in case of a disaster too great to be dealt with alone. Such arrangements should be consistent with state plans and programs, and it shall be the duty of each local organization for emergency management to render assistance in accordance with the provisions of such mutual aid arrangements.

• Each local and interjurisdictional agency shall prepare and keep current a local or interjurisdictional emergency operations plan for its area. The plan shall include, but not be limited to, responsibilities of all local agencies and shall establish a chain of command.

• Every four years, each local and interjurisdictional agency shall conduct a comprehensive review and revision of its emergency operations plan to ensure that the plan remains current, and the revised plan shall be formally adopted by the locality's governing body. In the case of an interjurisdictional agency, the plan shall be formally adopted by the governing body of each of the localities encompassed by the agency. Each political subdivision having a nuclear power station or other nuclear facility within 10 miles of its boundaries shall, if so directed by the Department of Emergency Management, prepare and keep current an appropriate emergency plan for its area for response to nuclear accidents at such station or facility. All political subdivisions shall provide on or before July 1 each year an updated emergency management assessment to the State Coordinator of Emergency Management.

• All localities with populations greater than 50,000 shall establish an alert and warning plan for the dissemination of adequate and timely warning to the public in the event of an emergency or threatened disaster. The local governing body shall amend its local emergency operations plan to include rules for the operation of its alert and warning system, to include sirens, Emergency Alert System, NOAA Weather Radios, other personal notification systems, amateur radio operators, or any combination thereof. EOPs should be updated to reflect the addition of new information as it becomes available, or, at a minimum, annually.

Media Guide

For many disaster survivors, information is their first need, and it is vital that information be consistent.

It is important to understand that government assistance can help disaster survivors, but it is not designed to replace all that was lost. Make sure your community has a strong public information team that can coordinate and distribute information to the public.

One of your main jobs as an elected official is to help **manage public expectations about what government can or cannot provide during or after a disaster**. Reassure citizens that responders are doing all they can, but do not raise unrealistic expectations. Knowing your locality's emergency operation plan will help you more confidently and accurately answer questions.

What you say to the media can have a great impact on the public's perception of response and recovery efforts.

You can support response agencies and reassure the public by talking about:

1) Only what you know
2) What emergency responders and community leaders are doing
3) What the public can and should do
4) Positive things. Avoid focusing on problems -- it can have a negative effect on recovery efforts.

VDEM State Coordinator
(804) 897-9711

Virginia Emergency Operations Center
(804) 647-2400 or (800) 468-8892

VDEM Director of Public Affairs
(804) 897-6510

Virginia Department of Health
(866) 531-3068

VDOT road conditions
511

Local Electric Company

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Local Telephone Company

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Other important numbers:

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Virginia State Police
Administrative Headquarters, Richmond
24-hour response: (804) 674-2000

Division 1
Central Virginia
(804) 553-3444 or (800) 552-9965

Division 2
Culpeper
(540) 829-7401 or (800) 572-2260

Division 3
Appomattox
(434) 352-7128 or (800) 552-0962

Division 4
Wytheville
(276) 228-3131 or (800) 542-8716

Division 5
Hampton Roads
(757) 424-6820 or (800) 582-8350

Division 6
Salem-Roanoke
(540) 375-9500 or (800) 542-5959

Division 7
Northern Virginia
(703) 323-4500 or (800) 572-4510

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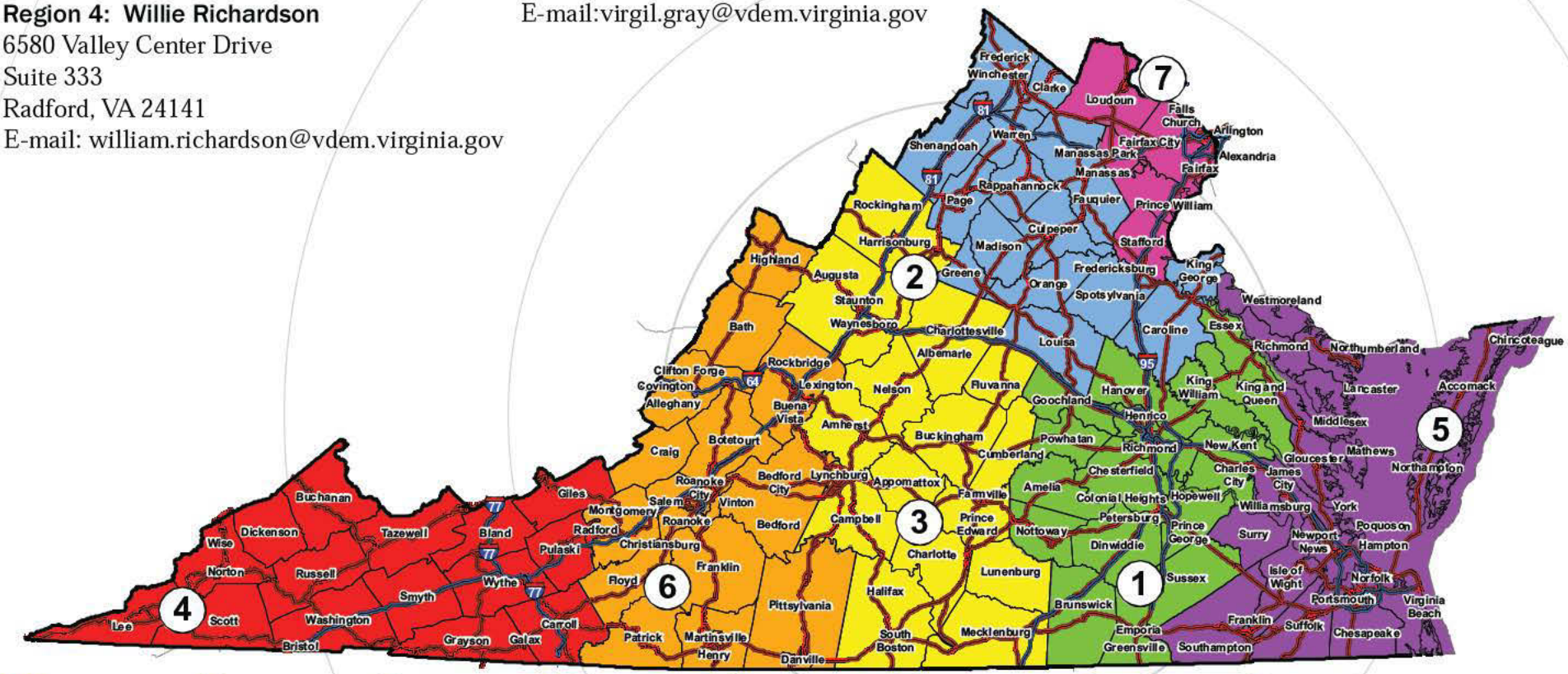

VDEM Regions