

# Hurricane Sandy Lessons Observed



FEMA Region 10 Regional Advisory Council  
April 2, 2013

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**An interactive webinar on the major findings observed during Hurricane Sandy operations and how we might apply these observations to a joint, large-scale, disaster operation in the Pacific Northwest and Alaska**

# Hurricane Sandy Lessons Observed

## Meeting Webinar Themes

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Our discussions are separated into six major themes:

Theme 1: Command and Control

Theme 2: Situational Awareness

Theme 3: Logistics and Resources Ordering

Theme 4: Disaster Housing and Mass-Care

Theme 5: Individual Assistance and Disaster Recovery Centers

Theme 6: External Affairs and Community Relations

Theme 7: Implementing the NDRF

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## Background on the observations in this Webinar

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- FEMA Perspective: All observations are from FEMA's perspective (R10 staff); State and local officials on the ground may see things differently.
- Observations/Discussion items are based predominately upon:
  - the draft internal FEMA Hurricane Sandy AAR
  - the results of six Hurricane Sandy hotwashes conducted for returning Region 10 staff in late January 2013.
- All observations are non-tactical higher-order operational issues.
- Focus of discussion is on Sandy response operations – first 30 days or so.
- Focus is also on the challenges encountered...the things that did not go so well. But, it's important to keep in mind that many things did go right during Sandy!

**Disclaimer: The observations in this presentation are informal, internal, FEMA Region 10 observations only, and are not official AAR findings.**

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## Overall Macro-observations on Sandy

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- Sandy was *not* ‘catastrophic’ still it stretched FEMA /Federal interagency to full capacity.
- The lack of properly trained staff was (and remains) a significant limiting factor.
- Labor intensive: the number of staff – both civil servants and volunteers – required to perform operations at all levels was far greater than generally anticipated.
  - The Vertical Disaster – Disaster operations in high population density areas ‘eats staff’ and creates enormous complexity.
- The Troika of Doom: no electricity, no fuel, key transport routes closed (2 of these is a manageable problem; all 3 concurrently creates major challenges).
- The value of timely, accurate, coordinated, and consistent public messaging in all operations and in the delivery of assistance programs cannot be overstated.
- FEMA staff augmentation – ‘DHS Surge Capacity Force’ and FEMACorps utilized in large numbers; this is the future.

# Hurricane Sandy Lessons Observed

## Theme 1: Command and Control and Field Organizations

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- FEMA utilized a *Combined Organization* for operations in NY and NJ which included both Functional and Geographic organizations:
  - Functional organization – traditional RRCC/NRCC and large JFOs in each state organized around programs. JFO Unified Coordination Group (UCG)...no local representation.
  - Geographic organization – Each state was carved into geographic Branches and Divisions. Numerous challenges encountered within FEMA in executing Division/Branch concept.
- Area Coordination Group (over NY and NJ) was also established.

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## Theme 2: Situational Awareness

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- In-Briefings – Arriving FEMA/Federal responders provided with little info on the operational environment; i.e. lack of in-briefings on the impacts, area geography, demography, government structures, etc. Hindered ability to quickly identify and solve problems.
  - Future planning – limited ability to identify and communicate issues/trends and look ahead several days beyond the 24-hr op-period...especially in first weeks.
- Situational awareness and data collection tools and processes at all levels were often unsynchronized. Collection, analysis, and especially dissemination.
  - Program staff and managers across all levels and all programs were frequently overwhelmed with demands seeking information on: (1) impacts and situational awareness, and (2) status of solutions.

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## Theme 3: Logistics and Resources Ordering

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- Resource Request Process – some local governments seemed unfamiliar with how to make resource requests to their respective State EOC.
- The Mission Assignment (M.A.) Process – the key to tapping Federal resources (teams, equipment, commodities).
  - takes too long, lack of transparency, etc.
  - lack of knowledge of M.A. process...uncertainty on how to express operational needs.
- FEMA in your space – Large numbers of FEMA and Federal staff worked from the State EOCs and some local EOCs as well especially in the first weeks. The ability to accommodate (and the welcome) varied.

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## Theme 3: Logistics and Resources Ordering

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- Commodity Distribution – Federal Staging Areas (FSA); local Points of Distribution (PODs) – locations and operations called for in plans not uniformly carried-out.
- Fuel shortages – Lack of gasoline in initial weeks was a significant issue (less on response operations, but major economic impacts as well as impacts to social stability).
- Sustaining the Force – Lodging for FEMA/Federal responders, and sustaining the force in the field (facilities, IT, etc.) created challenges for FEMA.



# Hurricane Sandy Lessons Observed

## Theme 4: Mass-Care Services and Disaster Housing

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### Mass-Care Services

- Transitional Sheltering Assistance (TSA) Program – eligible survivors authorized to stay in participating hotels. Pros and cons.
- Warming Centers – these were critical; the lack of heat in multi-family residential buildings for an extended period of time was a significant mass-care issue affecting tens-of-thousands of survivors.
- Shelter operations – facilities, staffing, and transport challenges. Numerous unofficial ‘pop-up’ shelters – e.g., churches.
- Voluntary and faith-based agencies – role of the VOADs was *extremely* important in meeting mass-care needs – e.g. feeding, carrying survivors up-and-down stairs, providing blankets, shelter staff, etc.

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## Theme 4: Mass-Care Services and Disaster Housing

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### Disaster Housing – Innovative Housing Solutions:

- Sheltering and Temporary Essential Power (STEP) program – (Public Assistance pilot program to assist homeowners) – goal was to keep people in their homes by enabling them to shelter-in-place.
- Renovation and use of unoccupied housing units – e.g, Ft. Monmouth (NJ) and New York Technical Institute (NY).
- Temporary Housing Units (THUs) – option of last resort...private or commercial sites...a lack of space for both in many areas; some locations far away from impacted communities and school districts.

# Hurricane Sandy Lessons Observed

## Theme 5: Individual Assistance (IA) and Disaster Recovery Centers (DRCs)

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- Public messaging and education on IA disaster assistance programs was an enormous challenge and need:
  - IA Sequence of Delivery – huge demand by officials and public to understand Individual and Households Program (IHP), the types of disaster assistance available, and the steps in the process.
  - Need emerged to provide direct registration assistance, and not just rely on 1-800-621-FEMA. (see CR, roving NPSC teams, DRCs)
- Data management and sharing was problematic.
- Structure of county Social Service programs created unintended consequences for residents who were displaced from their “home” county.
- Delayed insurance settlements hindered and complicated housing solutions for survivors.

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## Theme 5: Individual Assistance (IA) and Disaster Recovery Centers (DRCs)

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Disaster Recovery Centers (DRCs) – intent is a joint disaster assistance resource center where survivors receive info on FEMA disaster assistance, other Federal assistance, local/state/tribal agencies, voluntary agency assistance, etc.:

- Mobile vs. Fixed DRCs
- Coordination with locals and states on sites was critical – very few pre-designated sites. Finding suitable sites was a challenge - e.g., located near shelters, PODs, churches, or major business districts
- Expectations Management – local officials want them, but many restraints in setting up DRCs including: staffing, IT, facilities
- Challenges in advertising locations...again public messaging critical.
- Logistical support challenges – IT/telecom, charging stations for survivor cell phones were extremely popular, etc.

# Hurricane Sandy Lessons Observed

## Theme 6: External Affairs: Joint Information System

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### **Overview**

- Coordinate all external event messaging from FEMA/DHS/White House

### **Challenges**

- Lack of detailed media market mapping and relationships
- Missing pre-approved linkages between State and FEMA on key deliverables, messages, and 'News Desk' coordination
- Out of region FEMA staff were unfamiliar with regional demographics, etc

### **Key Innovation**

- Strategic use of social media for first time during a major event

### **Future**

- Working with HQ and other Regional EA Counterparts to come up with a more deliberate strategy to provide EA coverage/assistance in a Level I/II event that takes into account our pre-existing State External Affairs partnerships

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## Theme 6: External Affairs: Intergovernmental Affairs (IGA)

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### Overview

- IGA identifies issues, responds to questions, clarifies or corrects policy and procedure concerns, and links impacted government officials with questions or problems to those who can assist them. The audience is primarily elected and appointed officials as well as associations.

### Challenges

- Mission creep: who owns the relationship ? (LNOs, Div Sups, HM, IGA)
- Lack of familiarity with the role and mission of IGA
- Elected officials had varying levels of understanding of the “disaster processes” which they inadvertently shared with survivors
- Policies changed frequently: whose responsibility is to keep electeds informed?
- Lack of established relationships between local elected and appointed officials and FEMA
- Lack of relationship between local chapters of national associations

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## Theme 6: External Affairs: Community Relations (CR)

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### Overview

- 1,600 FEMA, FEMA Corps, and DHS-surge staff served in CR mostly in NY and NJ. Missions:
  - Assess ongoing field situation (e.g. report observations back to Division and JFO leadership on mass-care needs, etc.)
  - Inform survivors, businesses, and others about registration process

### Challenges

- Deployment mechanisms and sustainment in the field
- Inconsistent management
- Inadequate training & equipment and unrealistic expectations

### Future

- CR is undergoing major overhaul and is moving to Recovery Division within FEMA. Being re-branded: 'Disaster Survivor Assistance Teams'.

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Other issues

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Any other issues?



Thank you for your participation!

Any follow-up questions or for more info:  
please send to Patrick Massey or one of the  
Discussion Leaders