

WHEN THERE IS NO CAVALRY

BY DR. DOUGLAS HIMBERGER, DAVID SULEK, AND STEPHEN J. KRILL, JR.

When Hurricane Andrew slammed into the Florida coast in August 1992, it quickly overwhelmed local efforts and prompted pleas for federal assistance. But there were limits to what the federal authorities could do. After three days, Dade County Emergency Management Director Kate Hale lashed out on national television. “Where in the hell is the cavalry on this one?” she demanded. “They keep saying we’re going to get supplies. For God’s sake, where are they?”

If there was a cavalry to call, then it either never arrived or arrived too late to do much good. Andrew destroyed 126,000 homes, left 250,000 people homeless, and caused at least 40 deaths. Damaged was estimated at \$26 billion, including \$16 billion in insured losses, which bankrupted 11 insurance companies.

“Florida learned a hard lesson about response and recovery after Andrew,”



said Jeb Bush, who was the state’s governor from 1999 to 2007, in testimony before the U.S. House Committee on Homeland Security on October 19, 2005. “That catastrophic storm was a wake-up call for all Floridians.”

Following Andrew, Florida’s leaders acknowledged no single agency could manage this type of a catastrophe alone. The government and the private sector only had part of the resources or knowl-

edge needed to address a wide-scale disaster — one that affected transportation, utilities, food supplies, law enforcement, medical services, communications, and other critical services. So Florida moved toward a new approach, deliberately involving a variety of organizations — public sector, corporations, nongovernmental, and faith-based — in its emergency preparedness and response activities.

This meant changing both the planning process and the relationships among these various groups. For example, State officials took a hard look at construction practices and regulations, enforcing current codes and drafting new regulations to ensure that buildings could withstand hurricane winds. It also sponsored the Volunteer Florida Foundation, a community-based program that serves as a focal point for private, charitable, and individual donations and volunteer activities related to disaster recovery.

The success of this approach soon became obvious. During the 2004 and 2005 hurricane seasons, several powerful hurricanes struck Florida. The state's government, business, and civil organizations quickly mobilized, working together – as they had planned and trained to do – to provide response and recovery. Although Florida still requested assistance, the federal government was just one of many members of an integrated “megacommunity.” Consequently, when hurricanes or other disasters threaten Florida today, the State no longer expects the “cavalry” to gallop in and save the day.

Florida's experience offers important lessons for anyone responsible for emergency management. The need for multisector involvement is especially great today, because many potential disasters — such as pandemic influenza, large-scale earthquake, or terrorist attack — can produce such complex and far-reaching impacts that no single organization or even nation can adequately address them. The most effective way to manage these impacts is to create partnerships across organizations, and in a megacommunity public, private, and civil organizations work together to address a compelling issue of mutual importance. Although organizations within a particular megacommunity may compete in other spheres, they act together in a sustained partnership to address a complex problem that none can solve on its own.

The megacommunity is a relatively recent phenomenon – made possible by the increasing complexity, interdependence, and technological sophistication of modern society. It takes advantage of

1992 HURRICANE ANDREW STATISTICS

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technologies that enable communications across national and organizational boundaries, sharing information and collaborating in ways not possible just 10 or 15 years ago.

But putting that megacommunity approach into practice is still difficult. After 9/11, the U.S. government invested in interoperability, information sharing, and cross-agency collaboration, and billions of dollars went into planning activities, training, exercises, and communications systems. But four years later, the Nation was still not prepared for the scale and complexity of Hurricane Katrina. In the aftermath, various agencies were blamed for their lack of preparation and dismal response, with FEMA singled out by some critics as the primary culprit. But FEMA did not fail, nor did individual state or local agencies. It was the megacommunity that failed, or — more accurately — failed to exist.

An effective megacommunity achieves its goals through collaboration and embraces and empowers all actors as full partners with unique strengths to offer. It capitalizes on the very best ideas, ingenuity, and innovation from across the public, private, and civil sectors — to meet the urgent needs of a global citizenry that arguably faces more frequent and complex disasters than ever before, with less of a clear sense of which cavalry to call.

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