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Research Note

A Glimpse Into the Federal Emergency Management Agency

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Abstract: From ad hoc responses in the 1800s, to the sweeping legislative overhauls of the 20th century, to the Homeland Security concerns of the present day, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has become the major government agency responsible for responding to disaster. With regional offices spread strategically across the country, FEMA continues their efforts of helping local governments, businesses and citizens to effectively prepare and recover. Businesses should be aware of the ways in which FEMA can assist them in the recovery process.

Introduction

The last half-century has been witness to natural and man-inflicted disasters which have left potentially crippling effects in their wake. With the primary aim of helping people prepare for and recover from disaster, the United States Federal Government created the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). By reviewing a brief history of major legislation and gaining understanding of how FEMA can help companies and individuals today, organizations can better prepare themselves to manage the unexpected.

Brief History

The earliest piece of federal legislation aimed at disaster recovery assistance can be traced all the way back to the Congressional Act of 1803. (1) Following a series of devastating fires in New Hampshire, this act brought relief to local merchants by waiving duties and tariffs on imported goods. (2) Over the next several decades, “ad hoc legislation was passed more than 100 times in response to hurricanes, earthquakes, and other disasters.” (1) But by the 1930s, “when the federal approach to problems” (1) was gaining traction, new, more comprehensive legislation was beginning to take shape.

Throughout 1960s-1970s, the United States was hit with a series of major hurricanes and earthquakes. Helping assist in recovery from these natural disasters, over “100 different federal agencies were collectively involved in the relief efforts.”(3) This

Overview by Decade 1930-1950

1930s

- Congress establishes the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, which had authority to grant loans to states in response to emergency
- Bureau of Public Roads given authority to provide financial relief to rebuild highways and bridges damaged by natural disasters
- National Flood Program created; establishing federal responsibility to assist flood mitigation programs along major rivers

1940s

- Civil defense programs established to protect civilians

1950s

- Disaster Relief Act of 1950 gives presidential authority to declare disaster areas which authorizes federal agencies to provide direct support to state and local governments
- Federal Civil Defense Act of 1950 created a nationwide system of civil defense agencies

(1)

involvement of so many government organizations often resulted with internal

bickering about authority, and led people to “complain about the lack of coordination and poor results.” (3) The Disaster Relief Act of 1974 attempted to address some of these concerns, but following continued pressure by state governors, President Jimmy Carter created the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in April of 1979. (3)

For many years FEMA operated as an independent government agency, largely able to respond effectively to natural disasters and weather the differences brought about by changing administrations. In 1988, the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (Stafford Act) amended the Disaster Relief Act of 1974 in an effort to further streamline and clarify federal assistance in natural disaster responses.

Following the terrorist attacks of 2001, Congress passed the Homeland Security Act of 2002, which resulted in the creation of the Department of Homeland Security in 2003. At this time FEMA was “downgraded from an independent agency to a sub-department of Homeland Security,” (3) where it remains today.

How FEMA Works

FEMA’s mission is to “support our citizens and first responders to ensure that as a nation we work together to build, sustain, and improve our capability to prepare for, protect against, respond to, recover from, and mitigate hazards.” (4) The Stafford Act of 1988 helped shape the response framework used by FEMA today. Awareness of how FEMA works and an understanding of the types of available assistance, can help individuals and companies be prepared to respond to the unpredictable.

Following the occurrence of a disaster, and a State declaration of emergency, “the State will evaluate the recovery capabilities of the State and

local governments. If it is determined that the damage is beyond their recovery capability, the governor will normally send a request letter to the President... The president then makes the decision whether or not to declare a major disaster an emergency.”⁽⁵⁾ An emergency declared by the President, “triggers financial and physical assistance through the FEMA.” ⁽⁵⁾

The Stafford Act also laid the ground work for the Public Assistance Grant Program. This program reimburses eligible entities for approved “expenses they incurred in protecting lives and property ahead of storms, and in cleaning up and rebuilding afterward.” ⁽⁶⁾ The grant program also helps by rebuilding “infrastructure that is better able to withstand future storms.” ⁽⁶⁾

Assistance to Governments

There are four major entity types that are eligible for public grant funds:

1) State government agencies, such as:

- Departments of transportation
- Environmental resources agencies
- State parks agencies
- Water quality commissions

2) Local governments, including:

- Towns, cities, parishes
- Municipalities, townships
- Local public authorities

3) Private nonprofit organizations or institutions that are open to the public and that provide certain services otherwise performed by a government agency. Eligible facilities are limited to:

- Educational
- Emergency
- Medical
- Utilities
- Custodial care
- Irrigation organizations
- Other essential government services

4) Federally recognized Indian tribes or authorized organizations and Native village organizations (7)

Assistance to Individuals

In addition to providing assistance to governments, FEMA provides a number of services geared towards individuals. They include:

Disaster Assistance: Provides money or direct assistance to individuals, families and businesses in an area whose property has been damaged or destroyed and whose losses are not covered by insurance

Crisis Counseling: Provides supplemental funding to States for short-term crisis counseling services to people affected in Presidentially declared disasters

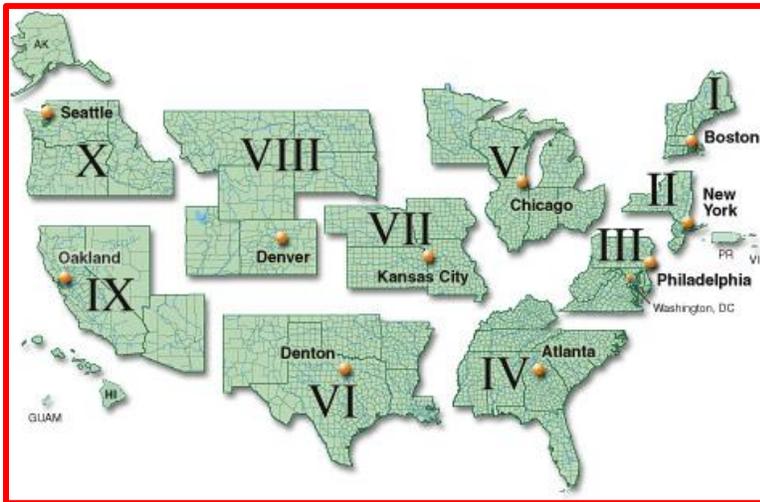
Disaster Legal Services: Provides free legal assistance to disaster victims

Disaster Unemployment Assistance Program: Provides unemployment benefits and re-employment services to individuals who have become unemployed because of major disasters

National Flood Insurance Program: Enables property owners in participating communities to purchase insurance as a protection against flood losses in exchange for State and community floodplain management regulations that reduce future flood damages (8)

Current Organization

FEMA is organized into ten regional offices, with headquarters in Washington, D.C. As of September 10, 2011, FEMA has 7,559 employees located across the country. (4) Because FEMA is a federally funded agency, it is paid for by taxpayer money and “spends an average of \$35 million a day.” (9)



Regional Map (10)

Conclusion

From simple, sporadic legislative beginnings, FEMA has progressively attempted to streamline their efforts to better prepare and more comprehensively serve American citizens. Because it is a publically funded organization, FEMA will always be subject to the objectives of changing administrations; but the primary goals of FEMA will likely remain consistent. Businesses and individuals should be aware of the ways FEMA can assist them in order to expedite recovery efforts and return to normal operation.



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