

Preparing Local Elected Officials in Northwest Colorado for their role before and after a Disaster

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Organization for which project is being Performed (Client)

This project is being performed at the blessing of the members of the Northwest All Hazards Emergency Management Region (NWAHEMR) who are the Emergency Managers across 10 rural, Northwest Colorado counties, but the “client” is the local elected officials and jurisdictions across that region. Northwest Colorado Council of Governments(NWCCOG) is the fiscal agent and employs the NWAHEMR coordinator. That entity exists to coordinate preparedness and disperse grant dollars for preparedness across the region. The mission of NWCCOG is to provide information and support for our member jurisdictions which are counties and municipalities. The author of the project is the executive director of NWCCOG. The project is a capstone for the Certified Public Manager program at University of Colorado Denver.

Problem Statement

In disaster preparedness, a clear disconnect exists between the expectations of state and federal agencies regarding local preparedness efforts in contrast to the what many local elected leaders across rural Northwest Colorado perceive about the need for their own involvement in preparedness. The author knows this from some experience, having been elected 5 times in Eagle where he served for 10 years on a town board of trustees, including 4 years as mayor, and five years as a county commissioner after which he worked for 3 years as a town manager. Many residents and leaders in Western Colorado pride themselves for living in communities where one quality of life measures is a low level of perceived threat—from the ills of society, and a high degree of pride in self-sufficiency. This hardly inoculates the region from actual threat. Most elected officials simply don’t know what they don’t know when it comes to disaster preparedness. This extends to management leadership across much of Western Colorado as well.

This project consists of three parts, first a survey of elected officials to better understand the problem, and second a review of the publicly posted materials on local jurisdiction websites including an analysis of both, and then finally and the project proposes a number steps towards addressing the problem, including completion of the first proposed step.

Executive Summary

Today, preparation is expected of local jurisdictions (counties and municipalities) by state and federal agencies when it comes to disaster planning for communities to be able to scale up a response and access state and federal resources in a disaster situation. While a framework exists, and instructions for scaffolding that framework from a local level upward also exist, there is not a clear, digestible standardized template that exist. This in spite of the fact that each jurisdiction, no matter how small or limited in it's own capacity, is expected to develop a plan that is organic to its own capacity and identified hazards. Local officials have a key role in Colorado in helping drive the agenda for what work needs to be done in their communities. Many local officials do not understand that state and federal agencies expect this "bottom up" framework construction through development of a number of different emergency planning documents, or that this is to be accomplished ahead of any incident which may exceed local capabilities. Many local elected officials and managers do not understand the limitations of local capability. The statutory preference for local control in Colorado fragments governance and expertise. Culturally it also means "top down" approaches from state or federal agencies are viewed with skepticism or disdain.

The disconnect regarding what needs to be done for preparedness compounds the risks that jurisdictions confront in responding to hazards. The process of developing local plans for adoption is in itself a training exercise. The preparedness gap exists because of a variety of structural obstacles, including a lack of previous experience with disaster, a lack of training or education which leads to

misperceptions about roles, the very nature of small organizations in rural areas, as well as high turnover, each of which can be mitigated. It also exists because the expectations are not very well packaged by the agencies. Compounding the risk to most Colorado communities are a few key structural factors, including the rapid turnover of elected officials and upper management, the very size and focus of these small local public organizations, the perception that local police, sheriff, and other emergency responders have the capacity to scale up, and that State and Federal agencies when summoned, will simply descend *en-masse*, and take over incidents that exceed local resources and capacity. While this may have been somewhat the case twenty or more years ago, it is no longer true.

It is possible to close this disconnection “awareness gap” by raising awareness of local elected officials about the importance of their responsibility to take an active role in emergency preparedness, and urge local staff to prioritize their need to be better educated regarding their role in all-hazards preparation. FEMA calls this “pre-disaster mitigation.” Closing the elected official preparedness gap is important not only to the safety and security of local communities, but also to a community’s ability to rebound with resilience from both man-made and natural hazards. The term, “All Hazards,” is the official state and federal term for the content area of this project. In this project, “All Hazards” is used interchangeably with the terms “disaster,” and “emergency.” The latter of which are the more common terms for either natural or man-made incidents which exceed local interagency response capability, beyond even local mutual aid agreements. Many local emergency management offices format available information towards “emergencies” exclusively for public consumption and include incidents which fall within their capabilities. The focus of this project is preparation for those events which exceed local capabilities.

To assess the preparedness of local elected officials, the project involved a survey conducted in consultation with Emergency Managers of the 10 County Northwest All-Hazards Emergency Management Region (NWAHEMR).

Stakeholders

Ultimately the stakeholders to this project are the general public across Northwest Colorado to whom the various agencies, jurisdictions, employees and elected officials are responsible. Other stakeholders include the members of NWCCOG which are 23 towns and 5 counties that comprise the NWCCOG region and the elected officials and management leadership of those towns who are the membership. Because of the vast and remote nature of Northwest Colorado, communities rely heavily on resources from across the region and state. For instance, the only bomb squad on the Western Slope of Colorado is in Grand Junction. The NWAHEMR region for that reason is twice the size of the NWCCOG region. The primary data this paper is collected from a 10-County regional survey conducted in April of 2017 specifically for this project. NWAHEMR is overseen by a committee comprised of County Emergency Managers in those 10 counties. It exists to distribute grant funds from State and Federal sources to promote All-Hazard preparedness. NWCCOG is the fiscal agent for NWAHEMR.

The Standard of Expectations

In a nutshell, jurisdictions must comply with the Disaster Mitigation Act of 2000, or Stafford Act. In order to achieve eligibility for the Federal Emergency Management Agency, local jurisdictions must identify risks, assess vulnerabilities, prioritize hazards and create goals & objectives towards reducing them. This is done through development of an All-Hazards pre-disaster mitigation plan, and Emergency Operations Plan and a Continuity of Operations Plan. They must act on those, and document the process by which they acted. They must also show the process engaged the public through adopting an All Hazards mitigation plan. They must also have an Emergency Operations Plan, which needs to be activated to operate under an established set of rules during a disaster. They must also have current mutual aid agreements and current procurement and other policies aligned with federal standards. All of these documents should be adopted by the board of local elected officials, which should as the policy

body for the jurisdiction, be actively involved in the process of creating those documents. Because most Counties house an Emergency Manager, who by their presence creates a department, these documents tend to be more accessible via county websites, and counties feel the pressure of compliance from the state more directly because of this conduit of authority to a department director. Even at counties, though, it is sometimes common for these preparedness documents to be buried on a website, often beneath a number of layers of resources directed primarily towards preparing citizens, and not any of the county websites surveyed had all of the expected documents comprehensively posted.

In the January 2017 CPM course “Leading in Times of Emergencies, Crisis and Disaster,” taught by James D. Krugman, Wildland Operations Coordinator for Denver Fire Department and Patricia G. Williams, Executive Director of Colorado Emergency Preparedness Partnership, one of the first points made in the two-day class was that “every community has dramatic limitations on capability, yet this is not widely communicated.” Planning templates for comprehensive emergency management, known as CPG 101 were created after Hurricane Katrina, and the *Colorado Office of Emergency Management, Department of Public Safety, Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management* (all one title) does have a “Colorado Emergency Management Program Guide” issued May of 2016, yet many local communities don’t have a point person or even that they should have focus on preparedness who know they should be doing so. A culture of emergency planning and preparedness should be built into multiple layers of any public organization, from elected officials to department directors and to public. Having a Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP) is mandated at a federal level, communities must have and follow an adopted Emergency Operations Plan or they are liable. These EOPs dictate a continuous cycle of improvement, and they cannot be boilerplate. To access FEMA dollars following an incident, communities must have a pre-disaster mitigation plan and other agreements in place to access federal dollars. The efforts on these plans must be local, and must meet a “standard of care.” As was stated in

the class by Timothy R Gablehouse, President of Colorado Emergency Preparedness Partnership Inc, “THERE IS A CIVIL RIGHT IN THIS COUNTRY TO PROPER EMERGENCY PLANNING and the elected leaders in each jurisdictions are LEGALLY RESPONSIBLE for ensuring that... actions are taken to protect people and property (my emphasis).” He went on to state, “Across the United States, there are federal judges supervising this planning because civil actions have occurred.” This sense of urgency is not felt at the local level where disasters have not yet occurred. This disconnect or “gap” exists for many reasons and amplifies the risks the region faces in responding to future hazards

Alignment with state and federal disaster preparedness guidelines does require a certain fortitude, and can be daunting for smaller jurisdictions because instructions are buried in mountains of bureaucratic material not easily digestible for non-experts in the field. Hand a public works director CPG-101 when he/she doesn’t even believe emergency management is in his job description. In rural regions like Northwest Colorado, most local elected officials *and public employees* don’t have the capacity to become experts, nor do they even understand that they should become educated amateurs in the field. State resources do not currently “lean-into” this challenge to meet these non-experts halfway.

This project created a baseline survey that was distributed to 170 Elected Officials, municipal board members and county commissioners in the late spring of 2017, through Northwest Colorado Council of Government’s Survey Monkey account. The survey focused on a local elected officials’ awareness of the existence of key documents & processes related to all-hazard (disaster) preparedness. It also focused on that officials’ gut sense of whether their community is prepared, and whether they themselves feel prepared. One keystone result of the survey is learning that whatever their knowledge of this content area is that:

Question 11: Would you like to know more about your roles and responsibilities as an elected official with regard to natural hazard and disaster preparedness?

The response was 84% positive. This is extremely encouraging that this will-to-learn about this important subject exists. The challenge will be finding right strategy to deliver preparedness messaging to an ever-changing group of leaders (elected officials and staff), so that those officials who are responsible for the oversight of policy in their jurisdiction insure that key documents and processes are in place and that they themselves possess the crucial knowledge they need to be prepared. Completing this circle will increase the odds that a community may recover as best as possible when that community is having “its worst day” as emergency management professionals like to say. In researching this project, it appears that while there are “resources” there is currently no training standard, checklist or executive summary for elected officials to understand their role in all-hazard preparedness as it is expected by the state and federal agencies.

Challenges: Local Control in Colorado

Northwest Colorado’s counties and municipalities representing local communities are governed by an intentionally non-professional group of elected officials. These officials are elected within their communities and are charged with hiring upper management for the organizations. Those managers in turn oversee the key processes and services delivered within that public realm. For many smaller communities in the region, these services are sharply defined as public works (streets, water, wastewater, facilities), law enforcement, land use, and record keeping/tax collection. One of the most rewarding aspects of management of a small town or county is the breadth of knowledge required across a small group of employees. Neither the managers they hire or the citizen, elected officials themselves are required to have any specific formal training or education, other than knowing their community well enough to get elected in the first place. In communities which have not recently confronted a natural disaster, that local knowledge may not include any awareness of emergency management. In many municipalities, the only other positions hired by the elected officials are the

attorney and town clerk, each of whom is required to get varying degrees of formal training within their profession. Town and County managers have no such bright-line requirements. The benefit of this is that communities develop rather organic approaches to “local control” within the statutory framework allowed by the state of Colorado as interpreted by the attorneys and department level professionals hired by those managers within those organizations. This latitude allows a great deal of local flavor when it comes to land use, management of public works, facilities and parks and even to some degree in approaches to law enforcement and to budgeting. It also brings governance closer to the citizens than a state-level governance structure might.

Interestingly, the federal disaster response frameworks which began as top-down efforts following WWII and the end of the Cold War in the 1980s have been learning-by-doing and has turned a top down, federal approach on it’s head through federal legislation that responded to mistakes during a series of disasters. Direction now comes from local authority and scaffolds up. The expectations for preparedness evolved through the Disaster Mitigation act of 2000, also known as the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act, or “Stafford Act” has been distilled by the Colorado Division of Emergency Management into a document known as the Comprehensive Preparedness Guide CPG 1010. That document outlines what should be written into a local “All Hazards” mitigation plan. The expectation is that local communities are continually performing a cycle of assessment, analysis and mitigation with key elements creating a local scaffolding for preparedness to which state and federal agency resources can attach when incidents occur. The framework for such plans and processes are identified nationally, but the work is to be done locally. This concept is not incompatible with local control or the high turnover of elected officials were disaster preparedness to be built into orientation (on-boarding) of elected officials. It is not. Nor does any standard for on-boarding of elected officials for this topic or any other for that matter exist either.

The 10 County survey for this project was performed in April 2017 after gaining permission from the NWAHEMR committee for this project to survey their local elected officials with the specific questions proposed at the March meeting. The survey was sent out to 170 elected officials, specifically 3 county commissioners from each of the ten counties, and each member of the 5 or 7-member municipal boards or councils from each incorporated town in the region. There were 58 responses after four promptings. Seventy six percent of the respondents represented municipalities while 24% represented counties.

Question 2 asked: How long have you served in elected office, including previous positions?

0 -2 years	35%
2 – 5 years	26%
5 – 10 years	17%
More than 10 years	22%

That more than one third of respondents is new to the position underscores the turnover of elected officials and the challenge of re-educating elected officials on this and other topics. The learning curve for elected officials is steep in their role. Fully a third of elected are just getting oriented, while over 60% have been in office 5 years or less—likely one term. Since the Local Pre-Disaster Mitigation Plan is supposed to be renewed every five years, but more commonly is only renewed in rural areas every 10 years for adoption due to the cost and staff time involved, this means that it is likely that close to half of officials have not participated in a plan, and possible that close to 80% may not have participated in the adoption of a local plan.

There is a great deal of experience and knowledge across the NWAHEMR region, but like the population of the region, it is sprinkled across many jurisdictions and agencies. The popularity of term limits insures a rotating series of elected officials who must to be brought up to speed in the realm of disaster preparedness along with the many other areas of focus they have as local elected officials. Meaning

that the cycle of education must occur on a nearly annual basis. From the perspective of a new local elected official, many of these other areas of focus have vocal citizens, and active stakeholders creating urgency. Those other priority areas include budgeting, land use, economic development and other town services such as water, wastewater, streets, police, parks & recreation, not to mention evolving policy areas such as recreational marijuana. It is a lot to ask of elected officials one third of whom are new every two years.

Challenges: Translating Complexity to Citizen-Amateurs

One of the challenges in this content area is that of translating a very complex set of expectations from a federal agency and the state agencies which administer federal programs to the local jurisdictions “lay” management staff and to local elected officials who are volunteers and with all due respect, amateurs in their service to the communities. To simply direct the staff of a rural jurisdiction or their elected officials to the federal Stafford Acts, or agency produced documents is to send them on treasure hunt for which the treasures are unclear. Many are not clear about what they might have done with regard to disaster preparedness, although roughly half of elected officials have participated, or believe they have participated in some element in the process.

Question 4: Have you participated in any of the following Pre-Disaster Hazard Mitigation Plan process elements (check all that apply)?

Officially adopted a local pre-disaster mitigation plan in the past 5 years	34%
Participated in the process of creating or updating the plan	47%
Budgeted to achieve strategies to reduce loss due to hazard (equipment, projects...)	34%
Assessed Risks and vulnerabilities to natural hazards	50%
Participated in training on all-hazards or disaster preparedness	50%
Participated in emergency exercises	45%
Participated in Public Outreach with regard to hazard planning	24%

Taken an On-Line FEMA training course

26%

This was one of the most encouraging results with nearly half of those responding having participated in the process of updating or creating a plan. Even if it represents a perception rather than an actuality, the responses for how many officials have participated in the process of updating, assessed risks or participated in trainings all being close to 50% is tremendous. The fact that nearly that number had participated in an exercise, which can often take a day or more of precious time is also encouraging. That a quarter of elected have taken an on-line FEMA training course means that they likely have a higher level of interest and knowledge of how the process works. The introductory course likely taken is that which would teach elected officials about the emergency response scaffolding.

Challenge: Complexity and Compartmentalization

Like many trained professionals, it is the tendency of professionals in the field of Emergency Management to “bury the headline” in piles of materials, acronyms and nomenclature – the very field which they spend years to become adept in navigating themselves. This may be impressive, and oddly it may build confidence in those within the Emergency Management field, but the inaccessibility of that complexity is not ultimately productive to outcomes which are expected to be achieved by local jurisdictions. This complexity is part of what builds the gap, and leads elected officials to perceive that emergency management is perhaps a field better left to professionals. After all, isn’t “emergency preparedness” precisely what local fire department, police and sheriff or other first responders which may be a department within an elected officials’ jurisdiction, or may be a separate entity altogether are trained to address? This question may arise from the variety of sources for emergency preparedness information coming at the local elected official. One question in the survey was designed to find out who the point person for this scope of work was from an elected officials’ perspective. There is not a right answer to the question.

Question 3: If your council or board receives periodic updates about Emergency Management planning, who provides these updates? Answers:

County or Municipal Manager	31%
Sheriff or Police Chief	29%
Fire Department	10%
City or County Emergency Manager	35%
I don't recall being updated	22%

It was important through the survey to know where officials get their information because this indicates where they are most likely to seek more information in the future. It also has implications about the actual contents delivered to elected officials.

A few notes on organizational how organizational siloes and layers of management could separate local elected officials from the preparedness process are in order. Some county organizations with a full-time emergency manager likely have that person directly provide information to commissioners. Having been a commissioner, I know that the dynamic as an “employee” is not one in which the emergency manager always feels free to tell elected officials what they need to do to be prepared or to suggest that they are in any way “unprepared.” Often a town or county manager filters such information from the Emergency Manager who is far down the food chain. The positive side of the contact person being the county manager is that *if delivered comprehensively rather than perfunctorily*, it is delivered by someone further up the ladder who has the ear of the elected officials, that is, if that person does not over filter the information or deliver it in a “we got this” type of message. One challenge observed which led to this project in the first place, is knowing how many different “voices” are coming at elected vying for priority and attention. If it is a small town where the local disaster planning is managed by the county, it is possible that a person coming in from outside the municipal organization to brief leaders is not highly prioritized since they have no standing within that organization. In Northwest Colorado, most fire

districts are distinct entities from the municipalities they may cover within their service area. This is just as true if the county emergency manager must coordinate with director-level staffers in municipal organizations. The emergency manager may be screened by only meeting with staff, or may not even be provided in-person agenda time by municipal management if there are deemed to be other pressing matters. There are always pressing matters. Management with control of agenda, in such cases can have a tendency to communicate to elected officials that they have emergency planning under control. It is not in their interest to alarm newly local elected officials who are unaccustomed to the volume and sometimes heated tone of input they receive from the public and who frankly, have a tendency to overreact to the noisiest or most alarmist input they receive. Though a fire chief or police chief or sheriff may be the perceived trusted keeper of disaster planning, listing these as the source is questionable since what is likely the focus of briefings by these sources are events and challenges which do not rise beyond local capacity to address. Fire Chiefs don't like to let it be known that their capacity has limits. It was beyond the scope of this project to confirm who, if anyone, was actually supposed to be the point of contact for these elected officials in disaster planning.

Since the very purpose of pre-disaster preparations is to do important work prior to the urgency of an event, it becomes easy for elected officials consciously or unconsciously, to delegate that complexity right out of their own awareness...until it gains urgency during an event. One of the challenges is translating complex professional language and structures—and embedded expectations—to the elected officials who are in their roles precisely to be servant-citizens, not professionals. Elected officials together as a board within a jurisdiction, make policy and legislative level decisions on the threshold between various government roles – land use planning, public health, law enforcement, water or wastewater management – on behalf of the citizens who elected them. The board led public process is intended to be transparent, and the process slow. Boards are not hierarchical or naturally designed with any one person assigned to make snap decisions in a crisis. A board is not expected to act rapidly or

decisively, but openly at a public meeting that has met posting requirements. Their decisions are often not binding for 30 days. This structure is intended for the sake of transparency and due process of citizenry. Statute intends policy making to be slow enough for proper notice to occur, for public hearings to occur, for wait periods to occur, and for the entire process to be deliberate and transparent. During a disaster, legal structures need to be put in place to allow some of those structures to become more efficient. This is what an Emergency Operations Plan outlines. Part of the education of elected officials gap training is to coach them in what their job is NOT in the midst of an all-hazards event and to let them know how communication and response structures will be scaffolded up. Elected officials have important decisions to make in order to insure that such scaffolding is on solid footing with the proper documents in place and internal and external preparations in place so their poise and understanding of the process can be an asset during a disaster and afterwards. They also get to make some of the decisions during an incident about allocation of resources which Pitkin County Manager, Jon Peacock notes, “there are no right answers.”

With all that is expected that elected officials learn quickly, most of which is urgent, it is easy to push aside a topic like disaster preparedness, which may feel remote if a community or that official has not experienced such an incident. In talking about preparedness, there is a tendency to assure elected officials that certain content areas are “under control.” There is a mutual motivation for believing with emergency management that somebody else “has got this under control.” Local elected and public managers have a lot of other priorities, and it is the job of emergency responders—police, fire and EMS agencies to build trust in the profession. In fact, it is awkward to discuss the limits of local capabilities which might have the effect of undermining trust in those agencies who see their primary role as upholding the public trust. This is an impediment when the very topic of emergency preparedness is to discuss the limits of local capabilities. Emergency professionals are also not eager to engage citizen leaders who might begin to meddle or act beyond their level of understanding. Elected officials are not

first responders, but this does not mean they have no role in preparing their jurisdiction for the worst. One concern of response professionals is that elected may believe they have a role in the Incident Command structure—that is to say, the “front line.” They most certainly don’t. Where they may have a role, though, is in a functional group that is part of the support structures housed in the Emergency Operations Center in which the next layer of response is coordinated. Elected officials in the survey overwhelmingly knew where their EOC was located even if they didn’t have a known or defined role within that facility.

Question #5. Do you know where your local Emergency Operations Center is located?

Those responding “yes” to this question were 86%, with only 14% not knowing. This is important because each county has an EOC which is where the functional groups would meet in time of disaster, and is likely the location where elected would interface to get their information. The next question is a bit of a trick question because in a way all elected officials have a role in case of emergency, but not all have talked about that role or had it heightened to a clearly identified functional role with one of the 14 functional groups.

Question 6: Do you have an identified functional role in case of an emergency?

Thirty five percent said yes, while 65% said no.

Challenges: Lack of Disaster Experience in Northwest Colorado

Turnover among municipal and County elected officials (as well as managers) tends to be rapid compared with the 5-10-year cycle for updating preparedness plans. Across Colorado, awareness tends to be most organized in communities which have recently suffered natural or man-made disasters, and since the FEMA Pre-Disaster Mitigation planning evolved in the years since Hurricane Katrina. This is not the case in the NAHEMR region. Colorado communities, especially some of the largest “front range”

communities, which have experienced major disasters in recent years have adapted to meet those rather complex expectations surrounding “bottom up” pre-disaster preparedness through painful experience. Both the northern front range—City of Boulder (population 97,385)/Boulder County, and southern front range—City of Colorado Springs (population 416,427)/El Paso County, have recently experienced cycles of major wildfires in their watersheds that were disasters by-their-own-right; followed in subsequent years by severe storms which lead to flooding, landslides and mudslides which were compounded by occurring on recently fire-scoured environments. These communities and the public organizations within them as well as the individuals that represent these communities, have learned from experience the practice of local preparedness. These larger communities also have diverse and robust organizations with a large employee base and departments that are large enough to afford a degree of specialization in preparedness, response and resiliency. That capacity is not a luxury shared by most Colorado communities which are of a much smaller scale and have not yet directly experience a major natural or man-made disaster. Structurally, these smaller jurisdictions are at an increased risk to disaster due to a lack of local preparedness, and a lack of awareness of the responsibilities of local elected officials in that preparation.

Local jurisdictions must work years ahead of incidents to provide the local scaffolding for processes to which these state and federal agencies can dovetail when requested. Many local elected officials, and senior management make risky assumptions when it comes to preparedness. Thirty percent of those surveys self-rated as not prepared while thirty percent believed they will learn what they need to “as necessary” meaning, it will be explained to them during a disaster event.

Question 8: Rate your understanding of your own role as an elected official when it comes to pre-disaster preparedness?

30% Not Prepared

35% Sufficiently Prepared

5% Very Prepared

30% I believe I will be prepared and informed of my role as necessary

It is, ironically, perhaps a result of our trust in others—local first responders, and in those institutions—state and federal agencies, so often criticized-- that local elected officials who have so many other areas of important focus, assume that their community is prepared, or that in case of an event they will simply learn their role on the fly and that the superheroes will arrive. This perception was underscored by survey question 9 which in contrast to question 8 asks not about their own preparedness, but about that of “your community’s overall preparedness.”

Question 9: Rank your community’s overall preparedness

11% Not Prepared

32% Somewhat Prepared

43% Sufficiently Prepared

14% Very Prepared.

In other words, clearly local elected officials rated their community’s preparedness higher than their own, believing that preparedness is happening, even if they don’t quite know their role in it. I would challenge that if elected officials who tend to be some of the most connected and aware citizens in a community—many of which are quite small communities--don’t know where disaster preparedness is coming from, but believe it must be happening in spite of their lack of involvement in it, that this is a significant perception gap.

Challenges: Size of Organization

The scale of most of the communities in the NWAHEMR region has a direct effect on the number of roles leaders must play. Though there are many possible metrics useful to illustrate this challenge faced in diverting focus to a non-urgent role such as pre-disaster preparedness, such as number of employees per department, number of employees per capita, total general fund budget. For the purposes of this project, the metric chosen is population as an index of the capacity of those jurisdictions. The population of a community has a direct effect on the capacity to have specialized staff, or enough staff to adequately focus on all-hazards preparedness.

Challenges: Population as a Metric for Organizational Capability

In 2015, the total population of Colorado was 5.457 million. The concentration of population in Colorado is quite dense with three Cities—Denver, Colorado Springs and Aurora—comprising 1.3 million people, each with accompanying organizational scope and structures to be expected to manage the civic realm for close to half of a million residents. Of the next 21 most populous cities in Colorado with populations between 150,000 and 20,000, only one of that scale is in the NWAHEMR. There are 18 cities in Colorado with populations between 20,000 and 10,000, of which only one, Steamboat Springs is in the region. So much of the NWAHEMR jurisdictions are like the other 229 incorporated towns in Colorado with under 10,000 residents, and the smaller staff and citizen officials that go along with that. It is these jurisdictions also which have the most to lose with a lack of preparedness, and the most to gain from even the most cursory education and planning. Most of Northwest Colorado is in this category.

Within the NWAHEMR, by far the largest population center is Grand Junction with 58,556. This is the only bona fide “city” across a region that encompasses roughly a quarter of the total geography of Colorado. The next highest population center is Steamboat Springs with 12,088, Glenwood Springs with

just under 10,000, then Aspen, Eagle, Gypsum, Avon, Carbondale and Vail each which roughly 6,000 year-round citizens. By most definitions, these are “small towns,” hardly qualifying as self-respecting suburbs if they were on the Front Range of Colorado or along any other urban corridor in the United States. Breckenridge’s full-time population is 4,540, but like Aspen, Vail and Avon as resort communities these high-profile destinations with relatively low permanent populations are an anomaly.

Gypsum and Eagle are two of the relatively larger, growing communities in the region. Each has fewer than 50 employees and annual general fund budgets of less than \$5,000,000. For towns like Kremmling with 10 employees, and the Town of Redcliff with 2, not only are employees playing multiple roles with their valuable time, they are spreading precious financial resources as thinly as possible. Such employees, especially those in management and administration are generalists, not specialists. Asking staff in these communities to prepare with the same degree of sophistication as Ft Collins with an employee base of 1,400 is unreasonable. In ten years with the Town of Eagle as an elected official, and then three years later as a town manager, we never had an identified point person for emergency management, nor was it discussed with the board. I don’t think this is unusual in Western Colorado. The size of these populations is a limiting factor on their revenue base, and therefore on their employee which combined with the challenge of the many roles they already play, has a tendency to put emergency preparedness understandably low on the list of priorities, if it is even identified as a municipal scope of work. Elected officials tend to take their cue on prioritization of issues in such places from the staff, and staff from the town board. In these smaller places, education of staff is just as important as education of elected officials, but packaging of that information in a readily digestible and actionable format is absolutely vital to it being utilized. There are very few community leaders whose entire job is sit at a desk for 40 hours per week, 50 weeks per year to contemplate disaster preparedness, perhaps none beyond the 10 County emergency managers in the region.

Caveat to the Challenge of population being a limiting factor to preparedness: Resort Towns

The resort towns in Northwest Colorado deserve an asterisk for emergency planning, since the visitor base puts them in a different category than much of the rest of the region if only viewed through the lense of permanent population. Because these resort towns organize very large-scale events requiring a tremendous amount of preparation which inherently includes elements of disaster preparedness, they possess larger and complex management organizations with greater resources at their disposal than towns of the same population. The Town of Vail, for instance, has a year-round employee base of 200 (adding 100 seasonal employees in the winter) and an annual general fund budget with a cash reserve of over \$60,000,000. This is what it takes to respond to a “World Class” peak season population of 45,000 when all the beds are full of visitors, with or without a major event.

Hosting major events which nearly all staff and most elected officials are involved, provides the practice of preparedness and raises the awareness of the importance of preparedness. Sophisticated logistics and incident command structure were put in place during the 1999 Beaver Creek World Cup ski championships at which the FBI rehearsed for counter-terrorism tactics before the 2002 Salt Lake City Olympics with local agencies. That kind of experience has helped these resort communities become more prepared, and many emergency managers from across the region participate. To return to the applicability of population as a metric across the rest of the NWAHEMR, for perspective. In these cases, when these events were held or first organized, they involved those who were elected officials then. This does not mean that current elected officials in those places know their roles if any of these planned events were to be compounded beyond local capabilities with a natural or man-made disaster, and that elected are prepared for their role given that heightened risk.

Even with the caveat of the Resort Towns, the metric of population, employee base relative to the ability to place significant focus on disaster preparedness must still be kept in perspective.

Challenge: Inconsistent Preparedness Plan Transparency via Websites

For the second research portion of this project, a cursory search was conducted via internet to observe the presence of certain documents on County websites as an indicator of how engaged their local jurisdictions and officials are in the Emergency Preparedness process. Since websites are the standard tool for posting important public documents, and preparedness documents are supposed to be derived from a process of public engagement, if emergency planning documents existed, it would make sense for them to be easily searchable. Their absence from most local jurisdictions websites, and the lack of standard practice for which documents are posted makes clear the lack of standard or template for providing such information.

At Eagle County, searching the county website for emergency management, it is easy to learn how to fill a sandbag, since that instructional page comes up several screens ahead of continued screen choices which would lead to the adopted Pre-Disaster Mitigation Plan. The Town of Vail within Eagle County has an extensive evacuation informational tool designed for public consumption, showing evacuation plans for various neighborhoods, but no mention of key documents. Other municipal jurisdictions in Eagle County do not have any listing on their websites under emergency preparedness. Without an actual staffed “department” of emergency management, this scope seems to not exist if a lack website presence is any indication. While, it is un-common for municipalities or special districts to post their plan or to have anything that matches an emergency management search. Summit County is the exception in our region.

*Summit County’s 548-page All Hazards plan, comprehensively updated in August of 2013, is called the Summit County Multi-Hazard Mitigation Plan. In that plan, each of the municipalities and key special district—water, fire and metro districts within the county which each have their locally developed plans contained within the larger County document. Each of those local plans

contains a brief profile; maps with hazards identified, an asset inventory, a list of threats, and profiles of identified mitigation projects with dates and responsible parties. On the Summit County website, there are direct links to each of the specific jurisdiction plans. Across the Northwest Colorado region, Summit County's is, by far, the one that most clearly shows the fingerprints of local jurisdictional involvement. On the Town of Breckenridge's website under Emergency Preparedness, the content is for evacuation routes for neighborhoods is identified as a part of a multi-hazard evacuation plan. The Town of Frisco's website has contact information and useful emergency preparedness links, most prominently, a link to Summit County's Emergency Preparedness website, as does The Town of Dillon. Because these two municipalities have close to identical pages under emergency management as a pull down "department," this appears to be the start of a template. It would be useful if each municipality in each county had that same format at a very minimum.

*Rio Blanco County's Emergency Operations Plan is posted on their county website under one of four tabs. This plan is 25 pages and was updated in 2015. It does not list a municipal partner jurisdiction. It contains the adopted Resolution through which the County adopted the plan. Rio Blanco does not appear to have a Pre-Disaster Mitigation Plan document.

*Moffat County, and Grand County each have Emergency Management department websites, with no document links.

*Jackson County has a very basic website, primarily with contact information. If there is a "department of emergency management," it is omitted from the list. The County Administrator acts in that role.

*Routt County's 237-page Multi-Hazard Mitigation Plan is posted off a documents page link along with a number of other documents. Adopted in 2010, it is listed as a multi-jurisdictional

plan including the 4 municipalities and 5 fire districts within the County. The plan notes the dates when each of those jurisdictions adopted the plan. The next document notes that the “Basic Disaster & Emergency Operations Plan” is currently being updated.

*Mesa County’s office of emergency management appears to be housed within the Sheriff’s office. Their website does not list any Emergency Management documents.

*Garfield County’s emergency management office is also housed within the Sheriff’s office. Garfield County has the basic 62-page Emergency Operations Plan from 2015 posted on its website

*Eagle County’s Emergency Management Page has the 121-page 2012 Pre-Disaster Mitigation Plan as a link under Emergency Preparedness. The Emergency Operations Plan is listed on the next link. Eagle County’s plan is stated to “encompass” the seven listed towns and six fire districts within the County, and lists various staff from those jurisdictions which participated in the project as well as a checklist of jurisdictions that have adopted the plan (no dates are filled out in the posted document). Each community in the plan has a profile which includes a table of identified hazards, and has some listed project for pre-disaster mitigation from 2012, including a detailed project description page.

*Pitkin County’s website, on the Emergency Management department page has on the cover page, “below the fold,” pdf links to the four primary documents, including in order, Community Wildfire Protection Plan, the Continuity of Operations Plan, the Emergency Operations Plan and the Pre-Disaster Mitigation Plan. The last plan was updated in January of 2012 and consists of 256 pages. It is an update of a 2005 plan which covered both Pitkin and adjacent Eagle County. The updated plan lists the participating jurisdictions on the three municipalities in the county and 4 Fire Districts which cover the county. One useful innovation of the Pitkin plan are rather

detailed Local Mitigation Plan Review page templates already citing action elements, page referenced in the plan with responsible parties identified. This would make it very easy for clear follow up to an identified mitigation project.

One might argue post September 11, 2001 that listing local vulnerabilities and action plan in case of disaster is not a good idea. Law enforcement might take this perspective, which might be why some communities who house emergency management in the sheriff's office seem to have the least transparency. Summit County is the exception to that observation. In any case, FEMA expects that a jurisdiction as a part of pre-disaster preparedness actually engage it's citizens in identifying risks, and assessing capacity limitations. This is the part where "Disaster preparedness is a Civil Right" comes in. Some counties note some kind of an advisory group and suggest contacting the emergency manager about that group. This is a long ways from actual outreach in engaging citizenry. None of the counties post meeting times or dates and minutes from meetings of these groups. At the very least the public they should be engaged in this through their elected officials having an open dialogue.

Clearly from the survey, most elected officials believe preparedness is happening. For one, most elected believe that a Continuity of Operations Plan exists. Even though almost none of the jurisdictions posted their COOP plan on the website.

Question 7: Does your jurisdiction have a continuity of operations (COOP) plan delegating specific emergency authority and outlining the emergency functions for the organization and assignment of responsibilities for all departments during an emergency?

Yes	70%
No	30%

Answer: Yup. But this does not at all align with the findings of what is posted on jurisdictional websites (none of which posted a COOP plan), though it is possible that some perceive this as somewhat confidential information and may not be eager to make it readily available. This project did not attempt to confirm which jurisdictions actually do have an adopted COOP plan or Emergency Operations Plan, two documents which go hand in hand in preparedness if they existed somewhere other than the jurisdictions website within a few key searches.

It was beyond the scope of this project to investigate the actual existence of these plans for each jurisdiction; if they existed as a binder on a shelf, or of actual documented involvement of staff, elected officials or the public in such preparations. The State Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Management, when asked, does not appear to keep records or a spreadsheet of which jurisdictions dates of adoption of various documents. That alone would be a good idea, including sending notice to those jurisdictions which are out of compliance.

The clear lack of a template for how these websites post the key documents, whether they even post any or all of these documents is one sign that there is no standard for posting of these documents coming from a state agency that would allow the public and elected official to have clear expectations of WHAT THEIR JURISDICTIONS ROLE in emergency management is. If the expectations are not clear, and no clear standard appears to exist, then it is no mystery how local elected may be unclear of their role in preparedness.

When a disaster occurs in a local jurisdiction, how disaster response has changed

It beyond the scope of this project to dive deeply into the evolution of disaster preparedness policy, yet some overview of that change is useful because perceptions have not caught up to this change unless a jurisdiction has had a teachable moment. Most jurisdictions in the Northwest Colorado region have not had such a moment.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is an agency which has been reorganized and radically adjusted its approach to disaster response over time. A common misnomer that bureaucracies within large agencies don't adapt from their mistakes. Created in 1979 as a consolidation of departments separately managed within the United States government, FEMA became the federal agency charged with responding to major national disasters. It was heavily criticized for responses following some of the most high-profile disasters in United States including Love Canal an environmental pollution disaster in Upstate New York, Three Mile Island nuclear core meltdown in Pennsylvania, the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center "twin towers" in New York City, and Hurricane Sandy in New Orleans.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) today has specific pre-disaster preparation expectations which require local involvement by a wide variety of stakeholders including requirements that pre-disaster mitigation management structures, preparations, processes and plans be developed and kept current at the local level for the federal department's resources to be deployed in a time of need. Parts of the state have learned about this the hard way which is why by state statute in Colorado, each of the 64 Counties must employ an Emergency Manager specifically to spearhead the local emergency planning effort. These managers are supported by The Colorado Division of of Homeland Security & Emergency Management (DHSEM). Within those counties, there are 271 incorporated municipalities.

Analysis of possible solutions, and implementation steps:

Solution #1: Create a "One Page" resource to point Elected officials towards local resources

Write a "Five Questions" document so that elected officials ask their managers or emergency managers about these elements and discover on their own what is in place and what isn't. This is a solution pursued within the scope of this project and is attached. This document is designed to prompt elected

to ask the right questions about emergency preparedness and let them come to their own conclusions about their how prepared their jurisdiction may be, and the inquiry format also allows elected officials to take ownership in leading their jurisdiction towards improvement. Coupled with increased resources available at NWCCOG or elsewhere about what other jurisdictions are doing, perhaps highlighting best practices where they exist would lead enough elected to push their jurisdictions (and themselves) toward improvements in Emergency Preparedness. As a 2-page document, “The Five Questions that local elected officials should ask about emergency preparedness” can easily be digested and distributed. This follows the simplicity principle to cut through the complexity of the subject. It also prompts the right discussions at the place where they should be occurring—within that jurisdiction.

Solution #2: Build a simple Educational Platform for On-Boarding Elected Officials in EM

Create a template for orientation of newly elected officials in this content area. This template could take many forms. It could be a website with a power point, a 15-minute (or less) video training, and a checklist, or it could be a “handbook.” Having attended a 4-hour state agency facilitated local elected official training with nearly 100 power point slides, which left elected with little more clue about what their specific role is, there is a place for entry level education. There is no reason such a training couldn’t start simple and “scaffold up” from that simple platform so that an elected official or non-emergency-management-professional staff could learn the basics. FEMA already has a relatively simple set of courses that increase in complexity and become very much for EM professionals. These starter kit may be best coming from an entity closer to those jurisdictions than the state. Many Counties do not actively engage their municipal jurisdictions for a variety of reasons. This might be a next step project with content area partners to prompt those engagements.

Solution # 3: Standardize the Elements of a Plan and website posting,

It would be possible for an entity like NWAHEMER or NWCCOG to create a template for best practices in the region for the various plans utilizing elements from each of the best existing local plans and web postings cited above. This may be more digestible to the local control culture of rural Colorado than coming from a state agency, not to mention a federal agency. In many respects, this is probably a job for a state level agency like the Department of Local Affairs or Colorado Municipal League and Colorado Counties Inc, or better yet, Colorado Department of Emergency Management and Homeland Security to take on to standardize this across the state. Whether it is presented as an optional “best practices” or as a mandate would have a great deal to do with how well received it would be in Northwest Colorado. If this were to be a bottom-up voluntary effort rather than a top-down “regulatory” mandate, it may have better buy-in.

Solution #3: Compelling Stories from other Elected Officials from Communities with Experience

We are compelled by stories. Stories about communities and how they reacted and were impacted and recovered from disaster are out there. Elected officials especially might be receptive to hearing videos or live presentations from colleagues of theirs who have experienced disaster. Whether these stories as informal, post-event assessments would increase the urgency among local elected, especially if coupled with a risk identification and capabilities assessment project. Create case studies, with narratives from elected officials in counties which have dealt with incidents about what local elected officials should know in their experience. It would be useful if these included testimony from like-sized communities in Colorado to those within the NWAHEMR; for instance Lyons or Evans, as well as from the larger entities which might provide a better analogue to the resort towns. One of the challenges of breaking through the gap is the lack of a sense of urgency that such stories could provide. Coupled with some clear action items, this could be a powerful motivator.

Impacts if implemented:

Elected officials better educated in emergency management will not prevent disasters, but it would help them drive a dialogue locally which would lead to better preparedness for the community especially in Northwest Colorado where many local jurisdictions do not have someone on staff focused on this important content area. Involvement by local elected officials could demystify the discipline, and lead to better packaging of information, and eventually to better preparedness and alignment of local jurisdictions with state and federal agency expectations.

Core Competencies associated with CPM course work, most relevant in developing this project:

Competencies identified by the National Certified Manager Consortium utilized in this project include: An awareness of the challenge of local jurisdictions to be “managing work,” as well as “leading people” by articulating a vision for how awareness of Emergency Management can be improved. (Emergency Management was the final class in the CMP course). The competency of “developing self” is utilized by the author since a lack of awareness of this issue as a 10-year small town trustee (and mayor), 5-year county commissioner and 3-year town manager is a primary motivation for wanting to raise awareness of those currently in those roles. Providing resources and support for local jurisdictions is one of the missions of NWCCOG. The paper and conversation about packaging of the content to elected officials shows a “systematic integration” competency. The entire project is at core, a “public service focus” and is directed squarely at “change leadership.”

Attachments:

The “5 Questions Local Elected Officials Should Ask About Emergency Management” Document
10 County Survey of Elected Officials Summary Results