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Special Focus Edition on Workforce Sustainability

Emergency Management Isn't a Job Title: A Workforce Sustainability fix For Leaders Who Carry The Response

By Dr. Robin Shusko, Ed.D., CEM; Chief of Campus Police and Director of Public Safety; Frederick Community College

Emergency management workforce sustainability is often treated like a hiring problem: recruit harder, pay more, add positions. Those steps matter. But many organizations—schools, colleges, healthcare systems, utilities, local governments—are quietly dealing with a different sustainability problem: an operating model that concentrates emergency management capability in one person or one office.

When emergency management is treated as a job title instead of an institutional capability, the result is predictable: the EM lead becomes the translator of chaos, the coordinator of everything, and the “single throat to choke” when something goes wrong. Over time, that role absorbs not just workload, but anxiety, urgency, and institutional expectations that are impossible to meet consistently. Burnout rises. Turnover becomes disruptive. And the organization becomes fragile because preparedness depth is one-person-deep.

Workforce sustainability im-

proves when emergency management becomes distributed, not duplicated. The goal isn't to turn every leader into an emergency manager. The goal is to ensure leaders across functions have enough emergency management literacy to make decisions, communicate consistently, and support coordination under pressure—so the EM professional can do what only they can do: manage the system, anticipate needs, build relationships, and drive continuous improvement.

The Sustainability Problem Hiding in Plain Sight

If any of this sounds familiar, you don't have a staffing issue alone; you have a capacity design issue:

- “We can't activate without that one person.”
- “We have plans, but during an incident, everyone asks the EM director what to do.”
- “When the EM coordinator is on leave, everything stalls.”

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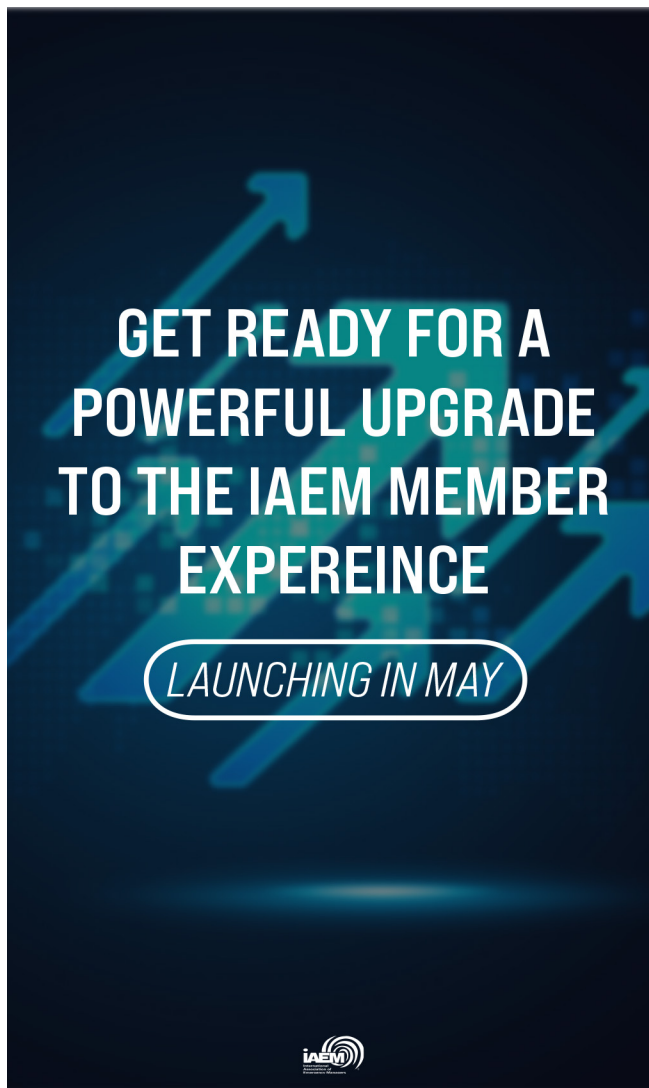
Submit an Article for the IAEM Bulletin

The IAEM Editorial Committee is currently accepting submissions for future editions of the IAEM Bulletin. Refer to the [Author Guidelines](#) for tips and techniques for successfully submitting your article for publication.

Special focus topics for the year include:

- April: Workforce Sustainability.
- June: Lessons Learned by Local Emergency Managers.
- August: Evolving and Emerging Risks.
- October: IAEM 2026: Charting through Preparedness Anchored in Resilience

- **Article Format:** Word or text format (not PDF).
- **Word length:** 750 to 1,500 words.
- **Photos/graphics:** Image format (png, jpg).
- **Email article, photos, and graphics to:** [John Osborne](#).



Is it Emergency Management?

By Michael Prasad, MA, CEM, Executive Director,
The Center for Emergency Management Intelligence Research

As August approaches, marking [National Emergency Management Awareness Month \(NEMAM\)](#), it is important to reflect on a fundamental question: “Is it emergency management?” This question, very different from “What does an emergency manager do?”, encourages us to consider the core principles and practices that define emergency management itself, and to assess whether our collective actions and strategies align with these essential concepts.

Emergency management (EM) is far more comprehensive than just emergency services or operational response activities. Its scope extends well beyond simply providing support to others during disasters. Emergency management is guided by established [core principles and practices](#) that address every dimension of the discipline—answering the “Who,” “What,” “When,” “Why,” and “How” of emergency management. The “Where” is, quite literally, everywhere.

The purpose of National Emergency Management Awareness Month (NEMAM) is to promote and reinforce this understanding among the public. Emergency management is both a field of study and a practical discipline. It is important to recognize that anyone can apply emergency management principles and practices in their actions, even if they are not officially designated or have the job description of an emergency manager. This is akin to how someone might complete their own taxes without being a certified public accountant. However, when the practice of emergency management – or worse actions under the

color of authority not aligned to the fundamental principles and practices of emergency management – is attempted by individuals without adhering to our foundational principles and practices, the consequences can be severe, resulting in significant and sometimes harmful or even fatal failures.

The strongest domestic case in point of this is the Flint, Michigan, water crisis in 2014. “Michigan (and 20 other states in the United States), have state laws which define an emergency manager as someone who takes over financial control of a municipality when they have a fiscal crisis. The long-term public health impacts from the catastrophic failures in Flint alone, signal the strong need for a comprehensive emergency management program to be implemented in every major community – before, during, and after incidents of scale.” ([Prasad, 2024, p. 303](#)).

While government organizations should establish dedicated emergency management departments, the roles within these departments are distinct. In times of crisis, the leader of the emergency management department often acts as a coach: guiding and supporting the response, rather than serving as the quarterback who directly executes every action. Importantly, accountability for [life safety](#) within a community or organization remains constant with the chief executive, regardless of whether it is during routine operations or during a disaster.

The question of whether emergency management is recognized as a profession is becoming a highly discussed topic within academic cir-

cles. Across the United States, many institutions of higher education (IHEs) have developed programs in emergency management at various levels—including certificates, undergraduate degrees, master’s degrees, and, more recently, even doctoral degrees. These institutions strive to align their curricula and academic standards with those of established professions, as is common for other academic disciplines. Currently, this is an ongoing challenge for emergency management.

Succinctly, one issue is that the United States Department of Labor (DOL) currently recognizes only one Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) for emergency management, which is the role of emergency management director ([SOC 11-9161](#)). This role is typically defined in practice as the lead emergency manager for a governmental jurisdiction.

It is unlikely that most graduates will move directly from college into the position of emergency management director. This contrasts with other fields, such as accounting or journalism, where graduates often step immediately into professional roles, or with terminal degree holders, for example, in medicine or law, who also enter their respective professions right after graduation and post-graduate credentialing.

There is a clear need for advocacy to expand the number of SOCs related to emergency management. Adding more classifications would better reflect the variety of specialist and management roles that emergency managers perform daily, not just those tied to operational response. Notably, the Department of Labor already recognizes 25 other

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U.S. Domestic Response and Disaster Aid Policy

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Conclusion: Summary and Implementation Challenges

The FEMA Review Council's draft recommendations represent the most comprehensive plan to overhaul federal disaster management in decades. Key reforms include retaining, but restructuring FEMA, shifting primary disaster response responsibility to states, drastically reducing the federal workforce, and modernizing aid allocation through parametric triggers and higher eligibility thresholds. However, the path forward is complicated by political divisions, legislative requirements, and significant operational challenges. Ensuring a smooth transition will require deliberate planning, adequate funding, and close coordination among federal, state, and local partners to avoid harming communities in need of assistance.

Citations

- FEMA Review Council Draft Statement (Draft 12/11/2025).
- The Fixing Emergency Management for Americans (FEMA) Act, (HR 4669) and the FEMA Independence Act, (HR 2308 and S 1246), Congress 2025-2026.
- Heritage Foundation Project 2025—Presidential Transition Paper, The Heritage Foundation 2023. pp. 133–155.
- OpenAI. (2026). ChatGPT. (Editorial Services Only).

Is it Emergency Management?

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management SOCs in addition to the single one for emergency management directors.

The question of “Is it emergency management?” can also be applied to actions and activities performed by an emergency manager as part of their scope of duties assigned, which are not considered emergency management practices or do not adhere to emergency management principles. More on this, in an upcoming “Part 2” article.

Please take some time ahead of this year's NEMAM to both ask and answer such basic questions for yourself and your area of responsibility. As IAEM-USA members, please utilize [IAEMConnect](#) to help ensure that our efforts remain focused, effective, and true to the mission of emergency management and the benefit of professional emergency managers. ◆

Standing at the Edge

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must nurture those relationships—remaining approachable, supportive, and intentional about staying in touch. As a field built on institutional knowledge, experience, and continuous improvement, textbook knowledge will never be enough. To remain resilient, the emergency management community needs to expand. The key to resilience lies in connections, and through those connections, we can continue to strengthen our homeland security for centuries to come. ◆



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EM Calendar

April 20-24	2026 NJEPA Conference Hard Rock Hotel & Casino, Atlantic City, New Jersey
April 23	Lunch & Learn – Practical AI for the EM Webinar
May 10-15	Governor's Hurricane Conference Palm Beach, Florida
May 26-29	TDEM Conference Fort Worth, Texas
July 29-30	IAEM-USA Region 7 2026 Conference University of Nebraska Omaha, Omaha, Nebraska
Aug. 10-13	National Homeland Security Conference Kentucky International Convention Center, Louisville, Kentucky
Aug. 11-12	IAEM-USA Region 9 Symposium 2026 Japanese Cultural Center of Hawaii, Honolulu, Hawaii
Nov. 6-12	2026 IAEM Annual Conference Long Beach, California

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