BIGGER THAN ALL OF US

Breaking Through the Barriers of Interagency Information Sharing

3/29/2009: FEMA Urban Search & Rescue Public Information Officer, Mark Stone documents volunteers (Andrea Booher/FEMA)

May 2024

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About this Report

This report is one of seven reports produced as part of a semester-long, innovative problem solving engagement between FEMA Region 8 and North Dakota State University's (NDSU) Emergency Management Academic Program. Each report in this series addresses a specific problem statement presented by FEMA Region 8 problem sponsors. These problem statements represent challenges that have been identified across the emergency management practice spectrum.

NDSU offered the model interdisciplinary course focused on innovative problem solving for FEMA in partnership with Daniel Green, Resilience Analyst in National Preparedness from FEMA Region 8. The goal was to bring the perspectives and insights of next generation leaders to current challenges facing emergency management practice from a federal perspective. Student teams worked with their problem sponsors and subject matter experts to understand and contextualize the problems. The data collected from interviews, coupled with an understanding of the existing literature, allowed the teams to develop and test solutions within a systems thinking framework, and offer specific insights and recommendations.

The teams approached problem solving from a research and development approach, similar to the approach used by the Pentagon's Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA). Using a Pasteur's Quadrant perspective (a use-inspired basic research approach) allowed the teams to seek a fundamental understanding of the problems they were addressing with a focus on dynamic solutions. This approach required a grounded understanding of the problem, and the context and systems within which it exists. The solutions offered often pushed beyond existing programs and workflows.

NDSU's evaluation of this model course's development and delivery is supported, in part, by a research award from FEMA's Higher Education Program. NDSU faculty, Drs. Carol Cwiak and Caroline Hackerott, will supply the entirety of the materials used in the model course as part of the evaluation to encourage other emergency management higher education institutions to engage in similar partnerships. It is envisioned that this model course can be used with partners at all government levels and across a variety of sectors to bring new perspectives to enduring challenges.

NDSU would like to thank the FEMA Region 8 problem sponsors, as well as all the emergency management and partner agency subject matter experts who graciously shared their time, energy, expertise, and guidance. In particular, the team thanks Daniel Green, who brought this opportunity to NDSU and fueled the faculty, students, and problem sponsors with a level of vision, commitment, and enthusiasm that set the tone for the entirety of the experience.

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Executive Summary

The problem statement, Bigger Than All of Us, focuses on the challenge of interagency information sharing necessary to FEMA's continuous improvement process. Through interviews with subject matter experts and research, the communication and collaboration challenges inherent in this problem were contextualized. It was learned that differences in practice and expectation across agencies can impede complete and timely information sharing, thereby affecting the quality and consistency of the federal After Action Report (AAR) process.

The NDSU team provided five recommendations to address the challenges identified: 1) Create a working group to establish the connection and process for information sharing between FEMA and the ESFs; 2) Implement an informal format as part of the current internal informal and formal AAR process that FEMA currently suggests; 3) Create a FEMA Independent Study (IS) course that supports capability development for federal partners regarding the expectations, process, and value of continuous improvement through the AAR process; 4) Incorporate the IS course and an activity segment into Master Exercise Practitioner Program (MEPP) curriculum; and 5) Establish a secured online document repository for agencies to access.

Problem Statement

BIGGER THAN ALL OF US

STRATEGIES FOR RESILIENCE

CHALLENGE

FEMA Continuous Improvement Programs need a framework for conducting simultaneous and collaborative disaster assessment in a multiagency setting in order to create a community of practice among federal change agents.

BACKGROUND

Continuous improvement practices exist in many federal agencies, but multiagency incident responses do not see a simultaneous effort to captured lessons learned and best practices by agencies' continuous improvement specialists. Cross-cutting issues that may impact multiple agencies can be lost due to siloing, or may only be partially understood by one agency's respective specialists.

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Problem Sponsor: Danielle Romero, Continuous Improvement Specialist
Senior Leader: Michelle Dolinar, Continuous Improvement Team Lead

Introduction

The FEMA Continuous Improvement Program (CIP) is a framework for conducting simultaneous and collaborative disaster assessment in a multi-agency setting to create a community of practice among federal change agents. However, similar continuous improvement practices exist in many federal agencies. As a result, multi-agency incident responses struggle to achieve a simultaneous effort that captures lessons learned and leading practices by agencies' continuous improvement specialists. Cross-cutting issues that may impact multiple agencies can be lost due to failure to share critical feedback or may only be partially understood by one agency's respective specialists. The image below illustrates the extent of potential communication points of failure in the AAR process.

Key

┤├ : Disconnect + Miscommunication between FEMA and ESF

⌐/∟ : Disconnect + Miscommunication between ESFs
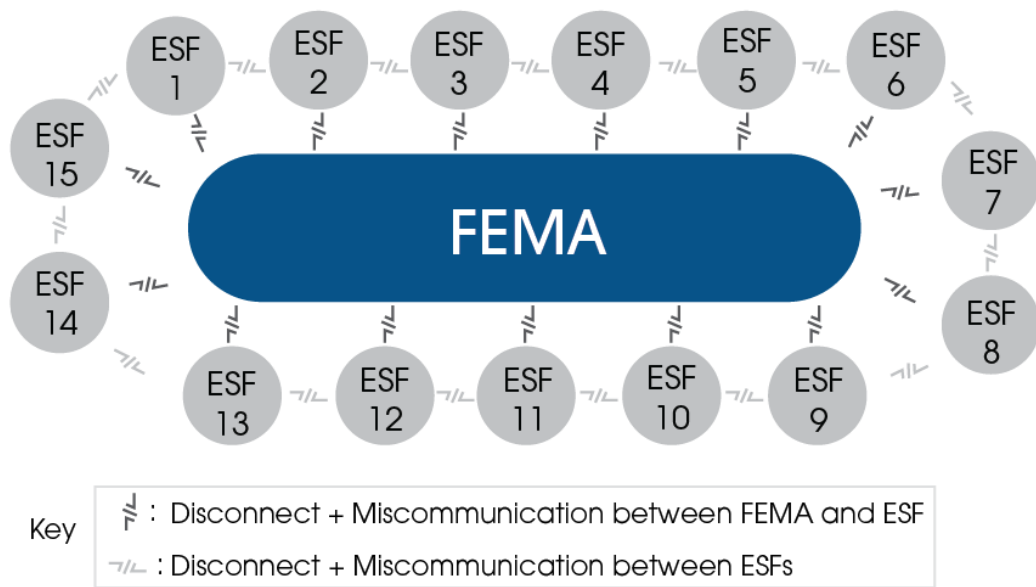
Communication Points of Failure

Through focused interviews and follow-up communications, the NDSU team analyzed the communication and resource sharing pathways between the Emergency Support Functions (ESFs) and the CIP. Interviews were conducted with the primary and support agencies that operate in ESFs 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, and 15 (FEMA, 2016). The interviews and follow-up specifically focused on the communication of lessons learned and AARs during the response and recovery phases. The NDSU team reviewed current policy, leading practices, communication programs, and other federally supported documentation to understand and contextualize the problem and inform possible solutions.

Understanding and Contextualizing the Problem

Four key themes emerged from the interviews—communication challenges, a need for safe spaces for sharing sensitive information, time and capacity issues, and record keeping barriers.

Communication, both within and across agencies, was widely noted to be a central challenge. Internal communications, up and down the chain of command, could use improvement. This lack of intra-agency communication has a ripple effect on the effectiveness of interagency information sharing. In addition, the lack of a consistent point-of-contact in each agency has resulted in inconsistent and unreliable communication chains.

The impact of these communication challenges is a failed collaborative effort and an incomplete AAR process. This derails the intent of the process and results in important information being lost in the failed communication spaces between agencies.
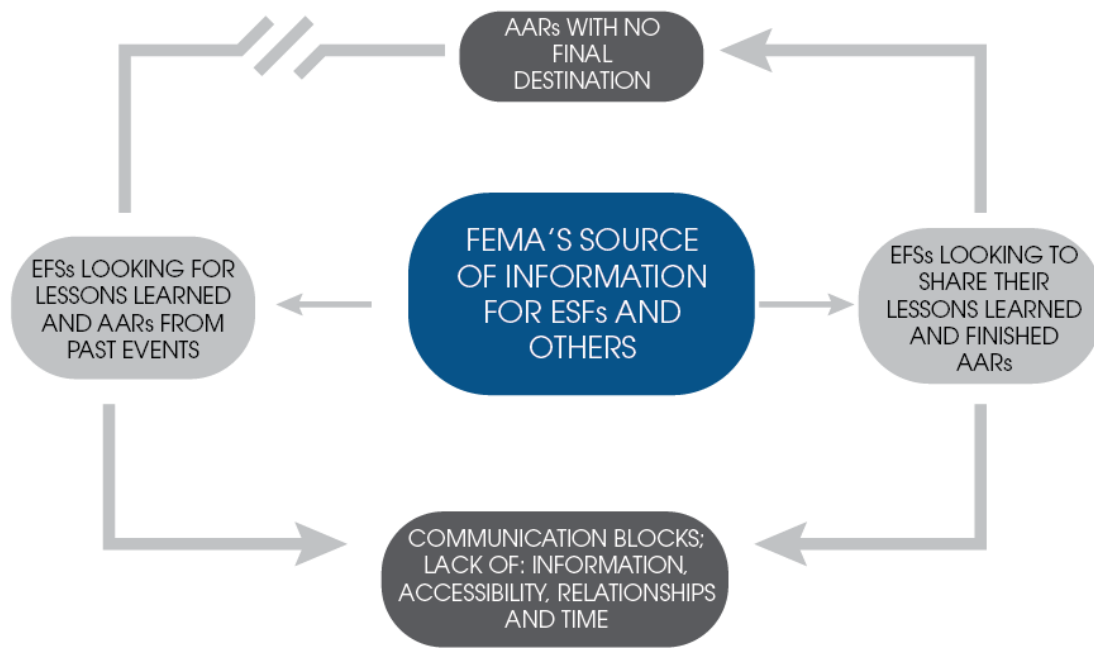

Often the information shared in the AAR process is sensitive, in that it may illuminate individual or agency errors or omissions. The ability to share this information without fear of retribution is essential to improving future processes. Hot washes and AARs are designed specifically to capture lessons learned and failings (along with the requisite problem ownership and accountability to resolve the failings). This information is essential to continuing improvement as it helps inform further training and development needs, process adjustments, and gaps in response and recovery efforts.

Time and capacity issues were identified as a consistent challenge given the limited number of individuals in any given agency specifically focused on the AAR process. This, coupled with different agency timeline expectations for hot washes and AARs, introduces time-compacted deadlines for some agencies and a timeline disconnect for others. For example, one agency's AAR might be done after a month before individuals move on to day-to-day activities or other events. Another agency's AAR
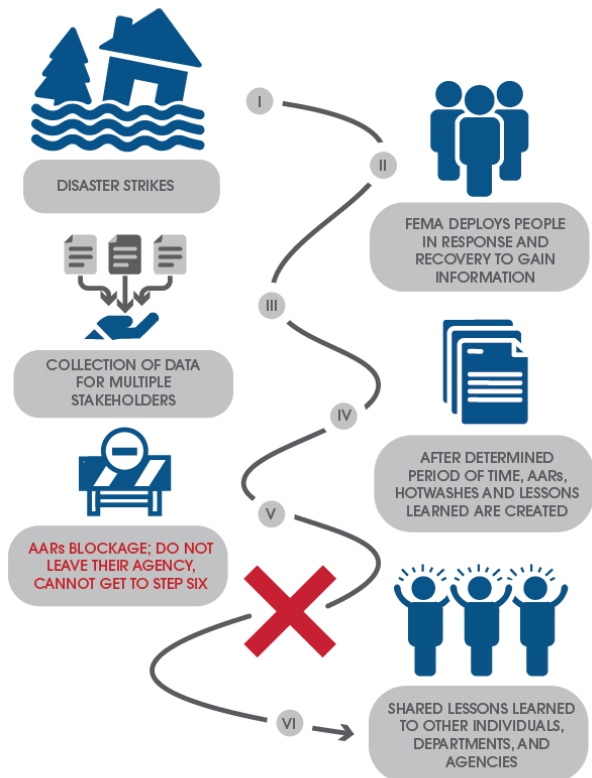
may be completed six months later. When the agency that completed the latter AAR reaches out to discuss what was learned, the agency that completed it months ago has already moved on. This disparity in timelines can affect the quality and effectiveness of AARS and strain relationships between agency partners.

Lack of record keeping, a common location for records, and difficulty accessing records have created information barriers that impede successful information sharing both in the development of agency AARs and collaborative interagency efforts. In some instances, access to records would be helpful to inform the understanding of AAR components; while in others, lack of access to information results in incomplete AARs. Training and education were highlighted as necessary to increasing the information shared for AARs. The image below illustrates the ways in which some of these barriers disrupt the ability to develop, complete, share, and store AARs.

AARs WITH NO FINAL DESTINATION

EFSs LOOKING FOR LESSONS LEARNED AND AARs FROM PAST EVENTS

FEMA'S SOURCE OF INFORMATION FOR ESFs AND OTHERS

EFSs LOOKING TO SHARE THEIR LESSONS LEARNED AND FINISHED AARs

COMMUNICATION BLOCKS; LACK OF: INFORMATION, ACCESSIBILITY, RELATIONSHIPS AND TIME

Communication Flow Disruptions

Discussion and Recommendations

Federal agencies have "statutory responsibilities for sharing and safeguarding information" and are expected to "overcome historically insular practices and policies" to work collaboratively as a government (United States, 2012). Yet, this collaboration does not necessarily come easy (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2023). As complex, crosscutting issues (i.e., climate change) that require collaborative engagement across government agencies increase, so too does the focus on improving interagency collaboration (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2012).

For interagency collaboration to be sustainable, interagency collaboration must occur through both people and processes (Fountain, 2013). This requires interpersonal skills to manage the cross-communication and project management skills to manage the collaboration process (Fountain, 2013; National Research Council, 2019). Leading practices in interagency collaboration include defining common outcomes, ensuring accountability, bridging organizational cultures, identifying and sustaining leadership, clarifying roles and responsibilities, including relevant participants, leveraging resources and information, and developing and updating written guidance and agreements (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2023).

The federal government views information as a "national asset" and notes that the purpose of sharing information across government agencies is to inform better decision making (U.S. White House, 2012). In regard to processes such as continuous improvement of government services (which is the role of the AAR process), information sharing and "collaboration across agencies allows the federal government to streamline, simplify, and improve policy making and implementation" (Fountain, 2013).

The National Response Framework (NRF) is structured on extensive interagency collaboration, clearly defined subject matter expertise, and agency aligned resources (FEMA, 2019). The NRF acknowledges that "any approach to the delivery of response capabilities will require an all-of-nation approach" and states that "all federal departments and agencies must cooperate with one another" as well as with the other government levels and other organizations engaged in disaster response (FEMA, 2019). This cooperation mandate is represented in large part in the ESF structure. The same is true in the National Disaster Recovery Framework (NDRF) with the Recovery Support Function (RSF) structure (FEMA, 2016).

These structures require effective collaboration and use of services. The AAR process is essential to ensuring that the efforts undertaken under both these frameworks continues to advance effective emergency management practice. Unfortunately, the AAR structure and process across agencies is not uniform. These agencies have differing AAR formats, timelines, skill sets, information access, agency cultures, level of engagement, and mantles of responsibility. FEMA, as the lead agency, has an onus to lead,

but also an astute understanding of the challenges inherent in leading agencies who operate autonomously.

Five recommendations have been identified as potential pathways forward to advance the federal AAR process. These recommendations will aid in breaking through the barriers of interagency information sharing, thereby increasing operational efficiency.

- **Create a working group to establish the connection and process for information sharing between FEMA and the ESFs.**

  The working group should be comprised of the identified lead for each ESF (e.g., ESF 11 Branch Chief, USDA) and the FEMA CIP lead. This working group can examine the ways in which interagency collaboration and communication (regarding AARs) can be improved and establish consensus-based approaches for engagement.

- **Implement an informal format as part of the current internal informal and formal AAR process that FEMA currently suggests.**

  This informal format is based on leading practices and would immediately increase information sharing with interagency partners through designated ESF leads. The following items would be added to their AAR reports:

  ⊠ A table added to agency documentation that lists by ESF all the response agencies involved.

  ⊠ Inclusion of the strengths of the agencies involved listed by ESF in the agency documentation.

  ⊠ Inclusion of the opportunities, or areas, for improvement for the agencies involved listed by ESF in the agency documentation.

- **Create a FEMA Independent Study (IS) course that supports capability development for federal partners regarding the expectations, process, and value of continuous improvement through the AAR process.**

  This 30–45-minute course would cover the importance of interagency information sharing as part of the continuing improvement process, explain the expectations for this process under federal policy, introduce all the elements included in an AAR, cover specific challenges in AAR development and strategies to address them, and share leading practices.

  Once developed, this course should be added to the required onboarding courses for new FEMA employees. It should also be provided as a continuing education expectation to existing FEMA employees to ensure consistency across the agency in regard to expectations and practice.

- **Incorporate the IS course and an activity segment into Master Exercise Practitioner Program (MEPP) curriculum.**

  Require the federal level AAR IS course as a pre-requisite for the Emergency Management Institute's Master Exercise Practitioner Program (MEPP) curriculum and create a course activity segment to be integrated into the MEPP curriculum that allows course participants to navigate some of the key challenges experienced with interagency information sharing.

- **Establish a secured online document repository for agencies to access.**

  A secured online document repository where AAR templates, completed AARs, lessons learned, and other relevant documents can be shared, stored, and accessed would ensure that information sharing concerns are addressed. It would also allow for increasing standardization to occur as agency representatives new to the process could look at materials developed by others to set their own expectations. This repository will enhance both connection and communication (as can be seen in the image below).
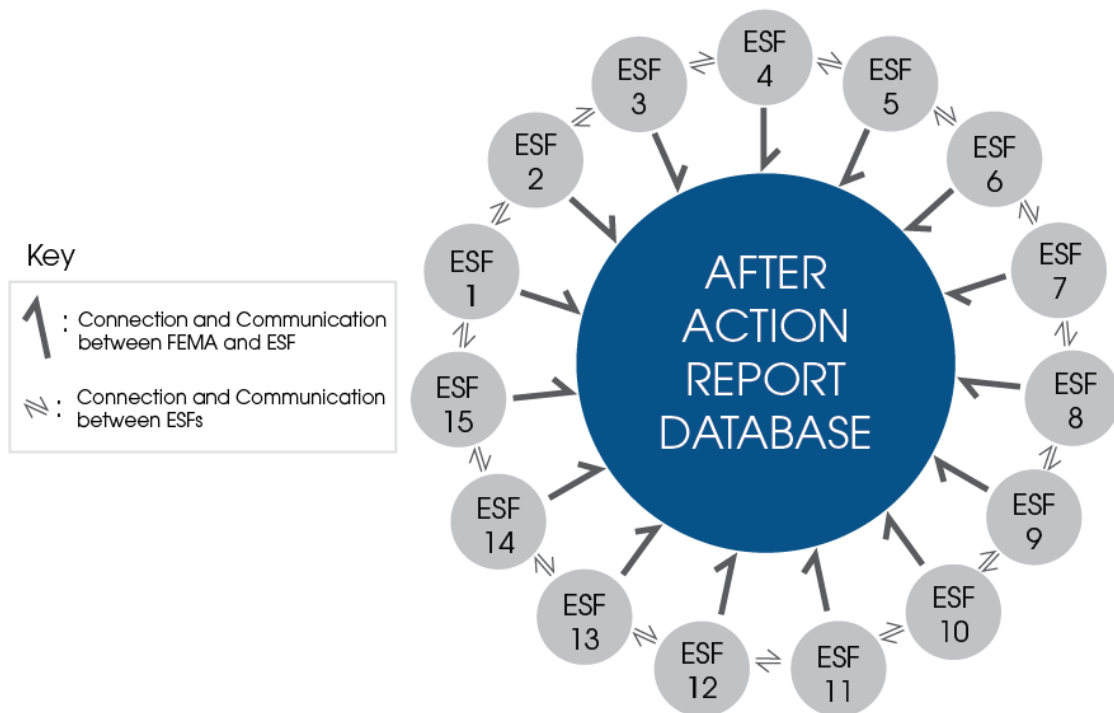
Summary

Through interviews and research the NDSU team identified and contextualized the challenges inherent in interagency communication and collaboration in the AAR process. These challenges are rooted in differing AAR formats, timelines, skill sets, information access, agency cultures, level of engagement, and mantles of responsibility. Continuous improvement efforts in disaster response and recovery between FEMA and its federal partners requires robust information sharing in a timely manner.

The recommendations offered in this report provide an opportunity to improve both current and future federal interagency communication and collaboration regarding AARs. In addition, the recommendations focus on integration of knowledge through training and standardization of AAR materials based on capture of past practice. These recommendations are in alignment with federal expectations of effective interagency collaboration and information sharing, and represent what we know to be effective practice in emergency management.

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