



A well-deserved seat at the table: A policy commentary on Economic Development's role in United States Emergency Management

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Abstract

Motivated by recent reductions in United States Emergency Management funding and increasingly-severe weather shocks, I call attention to the role of Economic Development in supporting the United States National Preparedness Goal. I discuss current Economic Development practitioner disaster response fieldwork and interventions, as well as related academic research, in the context of FEMA's Core Capabilities to make the case that Economic Development professionals are key stakeholders in the field of Emergency Management. I conclude by making the case that Economic Development Practitioners are vital members of the Emergency Management community and provide recommendations for their integration into planning and funding decision-making processes.

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When we think of who “does” Emergency Management in the United States, the typical cast of characters that comes to mind may include first responders, civil engineers and planners, utility workers and Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOADs), all operating with broader support from The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). United States federal funding for Emergency Management is in a state of major flux, with the Trump Administration's earlier termination of the Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) program recently being ruled unlawful (Horne, 2025; Santana, 2025; Raymond, 2025). At a time when extreme weather is here to stay (NASA Science Editorial Team, 2024), it is important to re-examine who may be prepared to step up to fulfill the country's increasing Emergency Management needs. I make the case that a nontraditional regiment of highly-trained professionals working in almost every community nationwide stands ready to create opportunity and security for the American people. Some of these professionals cut their teeth working in industry; others earned degrees in

urban planning; still others have operated for years in volunteer capacities. All operate out of service-oriented hearts. These professionals are your Economic Development professionals and they can, and already do, serve a crucial role in our country's approach to Emergency Management.

Before discussing Economic Development's role in Emergency Management, I first turn focus to FEMA's five “Mission Areas” of the National Preparedness Goal (NPG): Prevention, Protection, Mitigation, Response, and Recovery (FEMA, 2025). Thirty-two “Core Capabilities”, which may be thought of as Emergency Management activities, processes, or services, contribute to achievement of these mission areas (FEMA, n.d.). Capabilities can be cross-functional, supporting multiple Mission Areas, or can be specific to just one (FEMA, n.d.). In the discussion that follows, I discuss how Economic Development may support these capabilities, therefore making the case that Economic Development is Emergency Management.

To begin, Economic Development focuses heavily on supporting our national supply chain, which is, not sur-

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prisingly, heavily featured in FEMA’s “Core Capabilities” (FEMA, n.d.). The “Supply Chain Integrity and Security” capability refers to actions taken to “strengthen the security and resilience of the supply chain,” while the “Logistics and Supply Chain Management” capability refers to being able to “Deliver Essential commodities, equipment, and services... and enable the restoration of impacted supply chains” (FEMA, n.d.). Respectively, these capabilities support “Protection” and “Response” Mission Areas (FEMA, n.d.). These are also capabilities that align firmly with the type of work that Economic Development professionals already do. Economic Development professionals routinely use feasibility studies and economic impact assessments to evaluate a region’s supply chain and forecast how shocks may affect it. Impact analyses have generally taken a backward linkage approach, i.e. looking at effects on those who supply an affected industry, though recent advancements allow for forward-linkage analysis of how downstream businesses may also be impacted (Clouse, 2025). The social accounting matrices (SAMs) underlying impact analyses have a direct history of use in evaluating preparedness and resilience (Cole, 1995). Recent commentary on supply chain effects from disasters has occurred in the context of Florida hurricane damage and the COVID-19 pandemic (Doerfler, 2024; Morales, 2025). Collectively, these examples of literature solidify the role of Economic Development professionals in the context of supply chain Emergency Management by linking their research frameworks and tangible, relevant applications to FEMA’s Supply Chain related capabilities. With their analytical, forecasting, and impact modeling skills, Economic Development professionals are well-positioned to serve their communities in achieving supply chain-related NPG Core Capabilities.

In a closely-related line of work, Economic Development professionals’ work contributes to the Mitigation capabilities of “Community Resilience” and “Long-term Vulnerability Reduction” (FEMA, n.d.). The “Community Resilience” capability seeks to “empower individuals and communities to make informed risk management decisions necessary to adapt to, withstand, and quickly recover from future incidents” (FEMA, n.d.). The “Long-term Vulnerability Reduction” refers to the capability to “Build and sustain resilient systems, communities, and critical infrastructure and key resources lifelines...” (FEMA, n.d.). In the context of these capabilities, Economic Development shines, thanks to its leadership in workforce development. Local workforce development may be viewed as an ‘investment’ in economic resilience, as training individuals to secure employment after a disaster can expedite the return to pre-disaster wellbeing (Chauhan and Puhan, 2025; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2012). The importance of such local ‘investments’ is crucial in an era where FEMA’s role in mitigation and resilience is an ongoing question. The Trump administration’s recent cancellation of FEMA grants may be reversed, thanks to a recent federal court ruling the cancellation as unlawful (Angueira, 2025). Regardless, the implication of recent federal back-and-forth regarding FEMA funding means that state and local entities can no longer count on FEMA support always existing and must instead take greater respon-

sibility for mitigation and resilience. An example of local actors rising to meet new responsibilities comes from Tennessee, where organizations have recently made plans to leverage over \$3 million of grant funding to support post-Hurricane Helene workforce training as a means of achieving recovery (RLOWE59, 2024). Industry experts have published post-disaster workforce development guidelines for those looking to engage in such programming, in a general sense (International Association of Workforce Professionals (IAWP), 2025). Academics have also turned focus to the topic, with Madrigano, Chandra, Costigan and Acosta (2017) comprehensively evaluating and making recommendations for resilience-oriented workforce development, while works like Hung, Mashino, Chan, MacDermot and Balsari, 2021 and Langan, Lavin, Wolgast and Veenema, 2017 detail healthcare workforce development in the context of disaster preparedness (Madrigano et al., 2017; Hung et al., 2021; Langan et al., 2017). Workforce development’s role can therefore be twofold: it can support return to normalcy, if implemented post-disaster, but it can also reduce the impact of a disaster itself if implemented ahead of time, by creating a stronger workforce less vulnerable to financial hardship. Having established how regulatory and funding changes motivate hands-on, sub-federal workforce development and having documented the academic sector’s role in evaluating and learning from such interventions after the fact, it becomes clear that Economic Development professionals’ focuses on workforce development directly support responsive and ongoing efforts to achieve related NPG Core Capabilities.

In the event a disaster occurs, Economic Development professionals are well-suited to support the “Response” capability of “Situational Assessment”, i.e. the ability to “Provide all decision makers with decision-relevant information regarding the nature and extent of the hazard, any cascading effects, and the status of the response” (FEMA, n.d.). After Hurricane Helene devastated Western North Carolina, the Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina co-facilitated a 2025 regional partners survey to understand business-specific impacts, to support a clearer path forward (Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce and Economic Development Coalition of Asheville-Buncombe County, 2025). In a different region in response to a different crisis, Virginia Tech’s Center for Economic and Community Engagement engaged in a multi-year survey to evaluate how manufacturing and IT firms were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Ferris, Travis, Tate and K, 2022). In another context. The Los Angeles County Economic Development Corporation partnered to conduct a study of the economic impact of the 2025 Los Angeles Wildfires (Horton, Sedgwick, Adams, Wei and Skyberg, 2025). In the academic space, Xiao (2011) empirically evaluated Midwestern flooding in 1993 to understand how communities and agriculture were affected, demonstrating techniques to quantify the various impacts disasters may cause. The point stands again that Economic Development professionals are ready and able to contribute both immediate and retrospective Situational Assessment capabilities to support the NPG.

After a disaster has passed, Recovery capability activities begin. In my view, this may be where Economic Devel-

opment's role in Emergency Management and achievement of the NPG is most clear, as development professionals' work immediately translates to the "Economic Recovery", capability, i.e. work to "Return economic and business activities... to a healthy state and develop new business and employment opportunities that result in an economically viable community" (FEMA, n.d.). Economic Development professional focus in Western North Carolina, for instance, has been turned toward recovery after Hurricane Helene and the state's governor has advocated on behalf of the region for recovery-focused federal funding support (Castleberry, 2025, Office of Governor Josh Stein, 2025). In a federal context, the U.S. Small Business Administration provides disaster assistance loans to those affected by disasters, such as 2025 Texas flooding, California wildfires, Hurricane Milton, and Hurricane Helene, while the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) provides post-disaster recovery grants, and guides strategic recovery planning (U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA), n.d.; U.S. EDA, n.d.). Economic Development professionals thus advance Emergency Management recovery outcomes by not only advocating for grant funding, but also administering it directly, when one comprehensively considers their role in all levels of government.

It is at this point worth mentioning, however, that disaster relief funding shortfall dynamics and congressional supplementation cycles make federal grant funding somewhat unreliable. Generally speaking, though senators may request appropriations for federal funding to support stronger communities and economies, such requests require approval during a given year's appropriations cycle (Committee on Appropriations, n.d.). Similarly, the federal Disaster Relief Fund's replenishment requires congressional approval (National Governors Association, 2024). Such funds are not guaranteed and may not be sufficient. Disaster Relief Funding shortfalls in 2024 led to outcry from representatives of the National Governors Association, who voiced that mitigation and recovery would become increasingly challenging, without fund replenishment (National Governors Association, 2024). The fund was replenished with \$29 billion of appropriations in November 2024 (Painter, 2025). But, by January 2025, FEMA projected shortfalls to occur in July 2025, which motivated additional appropriations requests (Painter, 2025). Illustrating that such funds are, by no means, a sure bet, States were later told in Fall 2025 that they would have to wait until FY2026 for over \$10 billion of disaster reimbursements otherwise planned for FY2025 (Mattson and Freel, 2025). The implication is that, now, more than ever, response and recovery must be led at the local and state levels, which further carves a specific niche for state and local Economic Development professionals to support the "Economic Recovery" capability and advance Emergency Management outcomes in times of crisis.

Focusing again on the role of Economic Development during Recovery, it is worth noting that Economic Development professionals' work also supports the closely-related Recovery Capability of "Natural and Cultural Resources,"

i.e. the capability to "Protect natural and cultural resources and historic properties through appropriate planning, mitigation, response, and recovery actions to preserve, conserve, rehabilitate, and restore them consistent with post-disaster community priorities..." (FEMA, n.d.). Economic Development professionals know quite well the importance of these resources in their communities. A quick search online for "things to do" in a given area will likely yield a regional Economic Development organization or local chamber of commerce's prepared suggestions for hikes, historic sites, or other place-specific amenities.¹ Academically-oriented professionals, like Missikoff (2005), Santagata (2008) and Zhang (2025), also contribute to capability support by researching and advising on the role of culture and heritage for tourism as drivers of development. Federal professionals at The Department of the Interior maintain a "Natural and Cultural Resources Recovery Support Function" and UNESCO offers case discussion of how to support disaster resilience of economically-important cultural resources (Giliberto, 2021; U.S. Department of the Interior, n.d.). Industry and academia acknowledge the crucial role of tourism support in resilient disaster recovery and practitioners are leaning in on natural and cultural resources to drive visitation following real-world disasters like Hurricane Helene and Hawaii wildfire (London, 2025; Zhang, Lv and Sarker, 2024; Visit NC, 2025; Harper, 2023). This means that Economic Development's role in maintaining and marketing local resources position them not only to support the Natural and Cultural Resources Core Capability, but also to wield a comparative advantage in tourism and cultural expertise in Emergency Management discussions and processes.

In the discussion above, I've laid out the role that United States Economic Development professionals can play in achieving our National Preparedness Goal through a selection of relevant Core Capabilities. I'll admit, I've been somewhat flexible with who I consider to be an Economic Development professional, including traditional local practitioners, tourism support personnel, academic researchers, and federal stakeholders alike. But, a disaster is not the time to be the gatekeeper regarding who can or cannot be considered to be part of the team. What is absolutely clear is that the Economic Development field's professionals stand willing and able to build and rebuild strong, disaster-resilient communities. Emergency Managers may consider these professionals to be force-multipliers in Emergency Operations Center (EOC) planning, response, and recovery operations, thanks to their seasoned expertise and unique knowledge of supply chain and private sector capacities and contacts. This is doubly the case for Economic Development professionals whose offices have already taken steps to discuss continuity planning and grant funding support with their local business communities. Moving forward, federal, state, and local Economic Development professionals' involvement may be leveraged to guide funding appropriations and FEMA disaster reimbursements, to ensure efforts to mitigate, respond, and rebuild in a manner well-suited to local business conditions and nuances. Such conclusions

¹See Visit Williamsburg (n.d.) or SC Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism (2025) for relevant examples of publicly-supported marketing initiatives.

and recommendations may be readily extended to Emergency Management planning in other countries. After all, much of the supporting literature that has gone into this manuscript, like Giliberto (2021), is not United States Specific. Accordingly, when it comes to thinking about who has earned a seat at the Emergency Management table, I'll simply close with the following statement: Economic Development *is* Emergency Management.

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