

Dept. of Military Affairs: County, tribal emergency managers are front line of coordinated response

Posted on Friday, Aug 14, 2020

>> WisPolitics is now on the State Affairs network. Get custom keyword notifications, bill tracking and all WisPolitics content. [Get the app or access via desktop.](#)

The onset of a pandemic thrust many people who serve the state in public safety roles into the spotlight. That includes Wisconsin's county and tribal emergency managers, who normally work in the background to coordinate the response to fires, tornados, flooding, civil unrest and COVID — but they also lead the effort to make their counties and tribes whole again after the disaster.

“Our county and tribal directors are the heart and soul of what we do in emergency management for the state of Wisconsin,” said Dr. Darrell Williams, Wisconsin Emergency Management administrator. “They proudly and selflessly serve on the front lines of securing crucial supplies and funding for their counties during any disaster, and I commend them for the tireless work they do.”

County and tribal emergency management directors are responsible for preparing their area to respond to any kind of crisis, and they guide their communities through the crisis and its aftermath. They also write emergency response plans and assist local units of government with their emergency plans.

“I have always enjoyed public safety and emergency preparedness, and decided to pursue a career in the field,” said Eau Claire County Emergency Management Coordinator Tyler Esh. “I enjoy the outreach with the public and emergency services agencies the best. I like to say that the less I am at my desk, the better and more effective I am.”

And that love for his community and training has been put to the test through the state's response to COVID. Local emergency management agencies are the first

point of contact when businesses, schools, volunteer agencies, citizens, and other stakeholders request personal protective equipment (PPE).

“COVID has been a beast in terms of complexity and length of the event,” Esh said. “Wisconsin Emergency Management has been a partner in obtaining PPE, which has helped our logistics section and local response efforts.”

Every two weeks county and tribal emergency managers are asked to complete a comprehensive survey about the PPE supplies they are unable to source locally. The State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC) distributes PPE to the counties/tribes based on a population-based formula. Once the allocations are made, the SEOC relies on emergency managers to distribute PPE locally based on their pre-established criteria.

“The role of emergency management is still not understood by most, as we are the background support to the forward-facing response,” said Natalie Easterday, Wisconsin’s Emergency Management’s response section supervisor, who functions as the operations section chief for the SEOC on a rotating basis. “As a former emergency manager, I know that acquiring PPE is a time-consuming process that emergency managers are juggling, along with preparing next year’s budget, applying for sustainment grant funding, responding to summer storms, and a host of other local responsibilities.”

Each emergency manager brings a different skillset and managing style to their office. While Esh finds fulfillment out in the field in Eau Claire County, others say coordinating the effort from within their office is their strong suit.

“What I found that I liked was the ability to stay close to public safety and still be ‘part of the team’ without needing to be a boot on the ground,” said Door County Emergency Management Director Dan Kane who has a background in law enforcement. “I felt the job duties of organization, coordination, logistics, and planning really met my strengths more for me. I love that I get to learn about so many different organizations, people, and resources that I can help bring to a disaster to aid in the response.”

Through the COVID response, Kane has held many roles — Emergency Operations Center manager, public information officer, and he has managed volunteers for a Wisconsin National Guard testing site. He also carried out other duties related to CARES Act funding.

Dane County Emergency Management Director Charles Tubbs has been called upon to guide his county through numerous disasters. Whether it was recent civil unrest that resulted in riots and looting in Madison or a 2018 natural gas explosion in Sun Prairie that killed a firefighter and devastated a portion of the city's downtown, his passion and dedication are to those who need him the most.

"Protecting the vulnerable citizens of the county is important to me, including minority groups, homeless, people with special needs, and the elderly population with limited resources," said Tubbs. "The responsibilities I have allow me to work professionally with all disciplines and the ability to serve all people."

Tubbs has had an impressive career, serving 30 years with the Beloit Police Department, as Capitol Police Chief, and currently he lectures and serves nationally as an adjunct instructor, observer and controller for the United States Department of Homeland Security and FEMA Integrated Emergency Management Courses (IEMC). He gives credit to his staff, including Dane County Executive Joe Parisi, for how the county staff works together in times of crisis.

"I continue to focus my efforts on being a visionary, recognizing that tragedies could happen right here in our county," Tubbs said, "and it takes planning, preparation, education, training, and delivering a response and recovery plan for these situations."

Whether it's in Door County, Eau Claire County, Dane County or in any of the counties and tribes that make up Wisconsin Emergency Management, serving is at the heart of what all emergency managers do and who they are.

"They are the shoulders we stand on as the fight to keep our citizens safe is an ongoing effort at the state level," Williams said. "For that, we are truly grateful."