

Dept. of Military Affairs: What is Wisconsin Emergency Management

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by Christine Bellport

Wisconsin Emergency Management (WEM) has responded to multiple natural and manmade disasters over the years. The COVID-19 pandemic has placed a spotlight on the agency and its partner agencies tasked with helping cities, counties, tribes and the state through a crisis. Many citizens may not know that WEM has been helping the citizens of Wisconsin, behind the scenes, for decades.

“Wisconsin Emergency Management is the lead agency that manages the state’s response to any disaster,” said Dr. Darrell L. Williams, Wisconsin Emergency Management administrator. “We are the quiet, but critical guiding hand that assists our resilient Wisconsinites through disaster and back to recovery. COVID-19 is an extraordinary situation and our people are doing what they do best as they help lead the state’s response to this crisis and will continue to do so in the months to come.”

WEM’s mission is to coordinate the state’s planning, preparedness, mitigation, response and recovery efforts in disasters. WEM answers calls reporting hazardous materials spills, requests for state assistance in search and rescue missions, severe weather events, and other threats to public safety.

The agency also coordinates any requested state assistance, such as Wisconsin National Guard (WING) or State Patrol resources. A local incident commander or civil

authorities at the local level make a request to the state for a resource. WEM works to find the best resource to fill that request. WEM recently worked with both as civil unrest unfolded in several Wisconsin cities due to the death of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police officers in May.

“The Wisconsin National Guard and Wisconsin Emergency Management have a close, tight-knit relationship at all times, and never is that more apparent than during an emergency,” said Capt. Joe Trovato, spokesperson for the Wisconsin National Guard. “The recent civil unrest was no exception, and the Guard worked closely with WEM and local officials to ensure we were responsive to requests for assistance from the local and state levels.”

Wisconsin is known as a home rule state — the state’s constitution grants municipalities and counties the ability to pass laws to govern themselves. Like the National Guard, WEM will not self-deploy until contacted for assistance from a regional emergency manager, or a county or tribal emergency manager. For example, during the initial response to COVID-19, WEM worked to secure personal protective equipment (PPE) after regional, county and tribal emergency managers reached out for assistance. There are six regional offices in the state. Each county and many of the state’s federally recognized tribes also have their own emergency management director.

“During disasters like COVID-19 we are the state’s eyes and ears on the ground assisting county emergency managers with information, coordination of state resources and relating a counties’ needs back to the State Emergency Operations Center,” said Ben Schliesman, Southeast Region Director for WEM. “When COVID-19 became more prevalent in Wisconsin, I would get questions and resource requests almost on a daily basis from counties, non-profits and the private-sector.”

WEM worked with the governor’s office and the Department of Health Services to secure PPE from various sources, including the Strategic National Stockpile, donated items, and items purchased by the state to enhance response capabilities. The state also made a request to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) for assistance with purchasing PPE to help supply workers responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. To date, FEMA has sent Wisconsin 1,479,490 N95 masks, 565,800 gloves, 140,202 gowns, and other PPE. It’s being used to support state operations and distributed to county and tribal emergency managers who allocate them to their communities. WEM has also started the process of shipping more than 2 million cloth face masks and more than 4,200 infrared thermometers from FEMA to

K-12 public, charter and private schools throughout the state.

“Since the start of our response back in March, we’ve been focused on expediting the delivery of critical personal protective equipment, supplies and other resources to the areas where they’re most needed, including the state of Wisconsin,” said Kevin M. Sligh, FEMA Region 5 acting regional administrator. “Through our strong partnership with Wisconsin Emergency Management, we remain focused on protecting public health and safety during this pandemic, while continuing to build a more prepared and resilient nation against all-hazards.”

It’s not just supplies. Disaster assistance is also a critical portion of helping communities after disaster strikes. WEM is the conduit through which money and other supplies flow to affected areas that request assistance. WEM helps determine eligibility for disaster recovery programs, such as the Wisconsin Disaster Fund, FEMA’s Public Assistance Program and others.

Robby Stoikes, Recovery Section supervisor, said his team works with federal and state partners to help communities with financial recovery by maximizing funding opportunities and potential.

“A great example of that is when the De Soto Area School District lost their athletic fields in 2016 due to flooding,” Stoikes explained. “WEM staff worked with the school district, FEMA, the Department of Natural Resources and other agencies to incorporate design changes to create a more flood-resilient field and school grounds, and while maximizing funding amongst agencies to move the project forward.”

It takes a well-organized system to produce a quick and effective response to any disaster, and a skilled team to help a county, tribe and state recover from it. From preparedness to recovery, WEM has a system in place and roll to fill each step of the way.

“WEM has been steadfast in providing excellent support during some very challenging times and everyone has played some part of that,” said Greg Engle, Wisconsin Emergency Management’s Bureau of Planning and Preparedness director, as he thanked staff for their efforts thus far in the COVID-19 response. “I am confident that the effectiveness we have already demonstrated will continue as we are integral to the success of our state’s COVID-19 response.”