

Wisconsin Emergency Management: Wisconsin Governor's Conference on Emergency Management and Homeland Security focuses on the future of emergency response

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MIDDLETON, Wis. – The increasing frequency and severity of storms, emerging cybersecurity threats and changing population demographics require an adaptive approach. To help collaborate and learn from how others are working to address those issues, emergency managers, first responders, public health workers and many others gathered last week for the 55th Annual Wisconsin Governor's Conference on Emergency Management and Homeland Security.

“What you do is so important to making sure this state is resilient and prepared to respond to the worst conditions, especially as we see new threats emerge and feel the impacts of climate change on public safety and our infrastructure,” said Lt. Gov. Sara Rodriguez while speaking during the conference's general session at the Madison Marriott West in Middleton.

The theme of the conference hosted by Wisconsin Emergency Management (WEM) was “On Track for the Future Together,” a recognition of how the many different professional paths involved in emergency response often cross or travel towards the same destination. Many presenters also highlighted the new types of emergencies responders are being called to assist with, beyond severe weather.

“We are continually impacted by severe weather and the risks are growing, but something else is happening and it's impossible to ignore,” said Wisconsin

Emergency Management Administrator Greg Engle. “Other risks are growing and getting more complex. These risks increasingly demand a coordinated, multi-agency approach.”

“We know there are many more situations that challenge you, and our other state and local partners on a regular basis. We’re routinely facing high frequency, high cost, extreme events that affect people’s lives and livelihoods, making it more important than ever that we stay ahead of evolving threats,” said FEMA Region V Deputy Regional Administrator Mike Chesney. “We simply cannot be effective without our vast network of partnerships.”

Some of the evolving risks facing emergency managers and other responders include pandemics, cyber-attacks, civil disturbances, and terrorism. This year’s conference offered different learning tracks for attendees, which allowed them to attend breakout sessions focused specifically on many of these issues and addressing the challenges associated with them.

“The format of offering different tracks drove home the idea that it takes a team approach for effective emergency management,” said Wisconsin Emergency Management Association President Keith Hurlbert. “It has a direct impact on making our communities more resilient, and safe. Those who live in our communities, trust that government agencies, non-governmental organizations, governing bodies, and the private sector are working together, to achieve these outcomes.”

The conference also provided an opportunity for many of those partnerships to grow, with emergency responders from different fields coming together. WEM works closely with its partners at the county and tribal levels to offer training during the conference that improves their operations.

While many presenters focused on new skills and knowledge that can be taken back and applied to emergency responses, there are also those who share the lessons they have learned during disaster responses where plans did not work as expected. North Carolina Emergency Management Deputy Statewide Interoperability Coordinator Brandy Osborne shared several hard lessons she learned while overseeing a 911 communications center during Hurricane Florence in 2018.

“Using the mistakes I made to teach other people in our field is very important,” Osborne said. “I don’t think you can ever fully plan, but everything we do will have a people component. If you think about the people, then you can alleviate some of

the burden on your staff and the burden on the public.”

WEM once again recognized the outstanding contributions of three members of the emergency management community, presenting awards for service, innovation, and lifetime achievement. The annual awards are based on nominations made by other members of the emergency response community.

This year’s Innovation Award was presented to West Allis Fire Department Assistant Chief Jason Schaak for his work on developing systems for personal protective equipment acquisition and distribution in Milwaukee County during the COVID pandemic. Wisconsin Capitol Police Deputy Chief Chris Litzkow was presented with the Service Award for his contributions to the Wisconsin Drone Network. The Lifetime Achievement Award was presented to Wisconsin Emergency Management Northwest Region Director Randy Books, as recognition for his more than 40-year career in public service that includes working as an emergency manager, police chief, and volunteer firefighter.

“Randy is a person who stands always ready to help and provide his expertise when it’s needed most,” Engle said. “His first-hand experience has given him a well-rounded understanding of emergency response and recovery that few professionals can match.”

More information about Wisconsin Emergency Management and the work emergency managers across the state do each day can be found at <https://wem.wi.gov/>.