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5 Ways Departments Can Better Prepare for Natural Disasters

Featuring Scott Flitcraft, Division Chief of Training at Panama City Fire Department, FL



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Natural Disasters Over Time

In the emergency response field, disaster preparedness is just another part of the job. However, with the amount and severity of natural disasters regularly increasing over the last few decades, the need for all agencies, even those not located in disaster-prone areas, to be prepared has skyrocketed. It is no secret that climate change has been causing harmful effects on our planet but what many may not realize is that it may be the cause behind the increasing amount of natural disasters affecting our communities. Between the years 2000 and 2009, there were three times as many natural disasters recorded than compared to the amount between 1980 and 1989¹.

Number of recorded natural disaster events, All natural disasters

The number of global reported natural disaster events in any given year. This includes those from drought, floods, extreme weather, extreme temperature, landslides, dry mass movements, wildfires, volcanic activity and earthquakes.

Our World
in Data



Source: EMDAT (2019): OFDA/CRED International Disaster Database, Université catholique de Louvain – Brussels – Belgium
OurWorldInData.org/natural-disasters/ • CC BY

2018 brought record-breaking natural disasters including the most destructive wildfire season in the history of California with over 7,000 fires burning 1.5 million acres². The Woolsey and Camp fires were two of the most significant in terms of acreage (over 250,000 acres burned between the two³), destruction (20,000+ structures lost⁴), and deaths (88 lives lost⁵).

(1) <https://www.accuweather.com/en/weather-blogs/climatechange/steady-increase-in-climate-rel/19974069> (2) http://cdfdata.fire.ca.gov/incidents/incidents_stats?year=2018
(3) http://www.fire.ca.gov/communications/downloads/fact_sheets/Top20_Acres.pdf (4) http://www.fire.ca.gov/communications/downloads/fact_sheets/Top20_Destruction.pdf
(5) http://calfire.ca.gov/communications/downloads/fact_sheets/Top20_Deadliest.pdf

Hurricane Michael was just one of the major storms to hit in 2018 and, at a category 4 intensity, it is the strongest hurricane on record to strike the Florida panhandle. It was the third-most-intense hurricane to make landfall in the continental U.S. on record in terms of central pressure (919 mb), and the fourth-strongest in terms of maximum sustained winds (155 mph⁶).

Many Emergency Reporting (ER) customers were among those first responders that risked their lives during and after these events. Scott Flitcraft, Division Chief of Training at Panama City Fire Department (PCFD) in Florida, was one of them. Chief Flitcraft and his department saved countless lives during and following Hurricane Michael. While it may be difficult to be 100% prepared for something as unpredictable as a natural disaster, Chief Flitcraft offers some tips based on his own experience to help other emergency response agencies prepare as well as possible.

Tip 1

Review policies & procedures regarding phases of the disaster.

“Living in Florida, hurricanes are a part of life, and we have been impacted many times as a department. Each year before the beginning of the hurricane season, we review our policies and procedures regarding the phases of a hurricane. Doing this enables all of our personnel, not just the Operations Division, to be clear on what role they will play if a storm comes our way. Our plan places staff in roles before an event, lays out what function they will perform within our incident management system and how they may participate at the County Emergency Operations Center, which is where we receive our dispatching. The documentation we utilize is specific in that we track ‘storm-related’ calls with mileage to recoup funds if possible. We also look for damage to equipment, firehouses, and apparatus and attempt to manage this efficiently.”

(6) <https://www.noaa.gov/media-release/destructive-2018-atlantic-hurricane-season-draws-to-end>



Tip 2

Pre-order necessities.

Chief Flitcraft suggests pre-ordering necessities early on so they can be utilized quickly after the natural disaster passes. Some things he wished his department had at the time of a previous storm were antennas, “to get some local TV channels, which would have enabled us to have some knowledge of resources coming, the degree of damage, and other essential news.”

Chief Flitcraft also mentioned necessities such as shower, laundry, and restroom facilities, which he says “could have been pre-ordered and staged outside the storm's path, then quickly brought in afterward.” With no grocery stores or restaurants being open in the aftermath of the storm, Chief Flitcraft’s department relied on whatever they had to feed essential workers at the training facility. This included generous outside donations and MREs for backup. He suggests that departments have a large stash of nonperishable food items handy and a plan in place for times when the power will be out for an extended period. Since no gas stations inside the city were open either, the Panama City Manager was able to get all city employees ten gallons of gasoline each day they came to work during this time, which Chief Flitcraft said was a great help. “Working with city officials to get plans such as this in place beforehand could be an invaluable asset later on,” he said.

Tip 3

Evacuate whenever possible, as soon as possible.

Evacuation before a natural disaster can be hard because of the unpredictability of the event. In terms of a hurricane, Chief Flitcraft says that people should evacuate whenever possible, especially if the storm is a category 3 or above. “When your personnel are in fear for their families' lives, they are not prepared to be at work and care for others. There is no good answer for this except to encourage employees to evacuate their families in advance. In other hurricanes, all of our city's evacuation routes became clogged when the storm was 24 hours away, meaning if you were going to get out you had to get out early, ride it out at home or at a firehouse, or risk being in a shelter or on the roadside when conditions deteriorated. In Hurricane Michael, I believe everyone felt it was too late to leave when the morning of the 10th dawned, and the storm was stronger and still gaining momentum.”

Since Hurricane Michael moved so fast and was much stronger than expected, many people were not evacuated in time. Chief Flitcraft mentions that during other hurricanes he has experienced, such as Hurricane Opal in 1995, traffic can become a big problem when everyone is trying to evacuate at the same time, so anticipating this and getting a plan in place to minimize gridlock is an essential part of preparing for a disaster.

Tip 4 Plan for the worst.

Chief Flitcraft and his department were aware early on that Hurricane Michael would not be like the other storms they had encountered before. He suggests preparing for the worst that could happen as one of the most critical tips for emergency response agencies. He recalls the planning that his department did early that morning before the storm hit: "We split the city, approximately 34 square miles, into two divisions each with two Chief-Level Command Officers to manage activities. We fully staffed all of our reserve apparatus with 'call in' personnel and filled every seat on our primary apparatus. A typical day at PCFD consists of almost 25 OPS personnel making calls, and for this hurricane, we were able to bump that to 45 OPS. All personnel were assigned ICS positions. The East Side Command and West Side Command managed all crews throughout the morning of October 10th as the call volume began to increase with the approaching storm. Our policy and safety briefing that morning reconfirmed our stance that we would continue making calls until the wind speed reached 50 miles per hour sustained. We are a BLS fire service, so we depend on the county-run ALS transport service to take patients to the two emergency departments at both Panama City hospitals. The county decided early that morning to suspend all EMS dispatches until after the storm passed. We advised them to continue to dispatch us, and we would do whatever we could for our citizens."



PCFD also had plans in place for how to proceed after the storm. Chief Flitcraft said, "Our primary objective after the storm was search and rescue of damaged homes, but we never thought the devastation would be so widespread. We realized trees and power lines had all of our apparatus blocked in and saltwater from the nearby bay had risen quite a bit, we guessed, due to the water in the neighborhood directly across from our Firehouse (we climbed on top of our training tower to get a clue as to where to focus our search). We split our group into two teams each outfitted with a two-way radio, med bag, chainsaw, rope, roof hooks, and a set of irons. All teams were given a safety briefing, and any broken skin had to be covered, as we did not know if sewage was in the floodwater."

Tip 5 Know your limits.

During natural disasters like hurricanes, there comes a time when the only thing to do is sit and wait it out. Chief Flitcraft noted that around 11 am on the day of the storm, they had to stop running calls and hunker down for a few hours in the firehouse while the eye of the storm passed. He described their time waiting out the storm and how it was much different from any storm they had ever encountered before:

“The pressure changes and ear popping was continual. Walls were flexing outward, the storm-shuttered windows rattled, debris was striking the firehouse and rolling across the metal roof, interior windows between the office and the bay flexed, and all power was lost, causing our natural gas generator to kick on as intended. All cell service, internet, and cable was lost early on, and we could hear trees striking metal roofs on homes across the street from us. Our East Side Command location, Central Firehouse, was severely damaged, losing walls on opposite sides when the wind took a wall off and buckled a bay door.” While Chief Flitcraft and his team could hear all of the destruction going on outside, it was imperative that they stay put to keep himself and all personnel safe. Fortunately, none of the PCFD employees suffered serious or fatal injuries during Hurricane Michael.



“Prepare for the worst and hope for the best.”

- Chief Scott Flitcraft

Preparation for natural disasters is a year-round job. During the off-season for hurricanes and wildfires, reviewing and revising plans as well as pre-ordering necessities is a good idea for all emergency response agencies. Departments can educate their communities on ways that civilians can prepare themselves and their homes for natural disasters common in that area. Communicating with local government ahead of time to set up procedures and plans to help emergency responders in the event of a natural disaster is also very important and can make all the difference when the time comes. As for Chief Flitcraft's biggest piece of advice for first response agencies: "Prepare for the worst and hope for the best."

About Chief Scott Flitcraft



Chief Scott Flitcraft

Division Chief Scott Flitcraft has been a professional firefighter since November of 1983 and was a volunteer firefighter for a year prior to that. He has held the position of Firefighter, Driver/ Engineer, Shift Lieutenant, Station Captain, Battalion Chief, and was promoted to Division Chief of Training in October of 2015. Chief Flitcraft has a heavy background in Technical Rescue and served as trainer for the Department's Technical Rescue Team since its inception in 1998. He also currently holds the position of "Team Co-Manager" for Panama City Fire Department's Light Technical Rescue Team 101, which was created in 2005 as part of the State of Florida's Urban Search & Rescue Teams. Chief Flitcraft has been a licensed Emergency Medical Technician since 1991 and has assisted in medical first responder training, equipment updating & use, and CPR certifications, along with other aspects pertaining to emergency medicine. He also was tasked with "Personal Escape Training" for PCFD's entire Operations Division personnel for over 12 years. Recently, Chief Flitcraft has been responsible for coordinating training involving Region 1 of the State of Florida's Light Technical Rescue Teams, training with various military units, and coordinating and planning multiple State of Florida sponsored rescue exercises along with a railway exercise involving over a dozen different agencies.

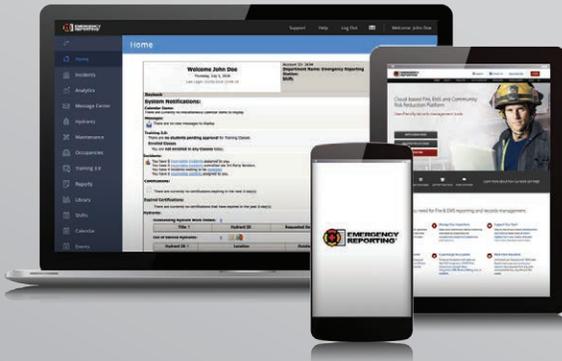
Chief Flitcraft holds an associate degree in Fire Science and is currently pursuing a bachelor's degree in Occupational Safety and Health. He holds a Fire Officer II certification, Instructor I, and is a Chief Instructor in Rope and Confined Space Rescue. He oversees the Training Division which includes a Logistics Captain, a Records Management Specialist, and a Maintenance Worker.



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About Emergency Reporting

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