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PAPA 5315 Government Administration 1: Behavioral Skills

Case Analysis

Collaboration amid Crisis: The Department of Defense during Hurricane Katrina

Brief Summary

In late August of 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast of the United States and the city of New Orleans, Louisiana. Hurricane Katrina is one of the most destructive and devastating hurricanes to ever impact the United States. Hurricane Katrina was “responsible for 1,833 fatalities and approximately \$108 billion in damage (National Weather Service, 2022). In response to the disaster, the United States Department of Homeland Security (DHS) deployed the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) while the United States Department of Defense (DOD) was called upon to assist with recovery in New Orleans as Louisiana entered a State of Emergency (Moynihan, 2010).

Challenges Faced

Several challenges affected the response to Hurricane Katrina. The first was the DHS’s use of the Incident Command System (ICS) (Moynihan, 2010). The ICS model had a centralized department or authority organization that would streamline decision making during an emergency to provide quick, efficient, communication during a crisis. Unfortunately, FEMA’s implementation of the ICS during Hurricane Katrina “failed to provide unity of command and clear direction to responders during Katrina,” (Moynihan, 2022). The lack of command in the DHS response resulted in delays for relief and confusion during the New Orleans emergency. Another challenge was the response by local officials. In New Orleans, “much of...local emergency infrastructure was destroyed, and first responders were themselves victims of the flood...many local responders lost response assets, evacuated, or were isolated by the flooding” (Moynihan, 2010). This factor put severe pressure on Federal responders to be as effective as possible in their disaster response. The DOD’s internal cultural also presented a challenge during Hurricane Katrina response. There was pressure to only use the DOD in militaristic or war

related situations. Members of the DOD had concern for “mission creep.... [which in turn resulted in the acronym] MOOTW: Military Operations other than War,” (Moynihan, 2010). The organization did not normally focus on what it considered to be civilian missions.

However, the most prominent challenge affecting FEMA and the DOD’s response to Hurricane Katrina was a difficult collaboration. The DOD was newly formed in response to the tragedy of 9/11, and FEMA lost “its ability to maintain its traditional role as lynchpin of intergovernmental emergency relationships,” (Moynihan, 2010). In addition to the ICS, DHS had implemented a National Response Plan (NRP) listing the key people and organizations who would respond to a crisis (Moynihan, 2010). The plan featured a Federal Coordinating Officer (FCO) with FEMA, a Principal Federal Officer (PFO), and the Joint Task Force for Katrina (Moynihan, 2010). While the ICS and NRP tried to present a unified force and called for collaboration, the DOD had a separate set of guidelines. The “official stance of the DOD is that it cannot be part of any incident command not under the control of DOD officials.... [as it] cannot be commanded by any civilian other than the president and the Secretary of the DOD,” (Moynihan, 2010). Despite this clear rule, the DOD had the ability to help civilian organizations with the use of a Defense Coordinating Officer to take control of the Joint Task Force (Moynihan, 2010). There were disagreements between DOD officials and FEMA officials on the speed of the DOD’s response in the face of extreme chaos and crisis in Louisiana, with slow communication between FEMA, DOD, and officials in the Pentagon affecting relief (Moynihan, 2010).

Recommendations and Implementations

In response to these challenges, I propose several recommendations. First, a clear emergency response plan is needed that can be followed during moments of extreme crisis and

uncertainty, like Hurricane Katrina. An emergency response plan would identify exactly which department would be in charge, the officials who would lead each subsequent office, and exactly what their duties would be, providing clear rules revolving around involved departments. The development of an emergency response plan contrasts the confusing and unclear structure of the ICM. The appointment of a clear leader is crucial to emergency response and management successes. A clear leader is someone who “clearly [recognizes] their previously latent needs, desires, and potentialities and to work together toward their fulfillment,” is needed in a crisis. (Denhardt, et.al., 2019). This leader would be selected by the Secretary of DHS and would immediately begin communicating with necessary stakeholders per the emergency response plan. The selected individual would lead the officials DHS, FEMA, and DOD to relieve any confusion during an emergency.

The establishment of a defined leader for organizational collaboration is supported by the Organizational Process Model, which aims to connect and help multiple organizations arrive at a decision (Denhardt, et. al., 2019). Decision-making during an emergency is intense and stressful, even with a clearly defined plan. There can be a lot of uncertainty in disaster response. To mitigate stress, FEMA, the DOD, and DHS should follow the previously mentioned Organizational Process Model (Denhardt, et. al., 2019). The Organizational Process Model allows for “the possibility of multiple agents in the decision-making process,” and can help coordinate “the behavior of a large number of individuals,” (Denhardt, et. al., 2019). To do this, FEMA, DHS, and the DOD would have to be organized to work together, recognize any constricting behavior in the departments, acknowledge shifting cultures, and “create capabilities for performing tasks that otherwise would be impossible,” (Denhardt, et. al., 2019).

Another recommendation is the use of discretion in managing emergency situations. “Discretion is often necessary for things to get done in emergency situations requires efficiency and effectiveness...the prevention of loss of life, recovery of life and property and security, public safety, relief and reconstruction become paramount” (Denhardt, et.al., 2019). Establishing a set of discretionary regulations from the federal government would be used as a guideline to bypass certain federal, state, and local regulations in extreme cases of crisis to best respond during a disaster.

Additionally, the “unnecessary adherence to federal and state policies may slow down the response” as clearly noted in the “criticism [of] the government of Louisiana encountered in her response to the 2005 Hurricane Katrina” (Denhardt, et.al., 2019). The response from DHS, FEMA, and the DOD was not as coordinated as it needed to be due to communication failures. To be prepared for the next emergency or natural disaster, clear communication must occur between the DHS, FEMA, and the DOD. To increase communication between the agencies, a series of meetings should be held between each organization’s leaders to agree on the details of such plans. Clear communication would result in a more streamlined and effective disaster response between FEMA and the DOD.

Stakeholders, Priorities, Trade-Offs

There were multiple key stakeholders in this case. FEMA, DHS, DOD, are considered a major stakeholder. Local officials and residents of New Orleans and Louisiana are stakeholders as well. Despite being in different fields, these stakeholders shared the same goals and priorities: rebuild and recover after Hurricane Katrina. The use of an organized emergency response plan with clear leadership, as previously mentioned, would help achieve and highlight the priorities of these stakeholders. A trade-off between these stakeholders would be the idea of “governmental

red tape,” (Moynihan, 2010). Essentially, if there was an extreme emergency, like Hurricane Katrina, these stakeholders would have the ability to do whatever they could in the immediate aftermath to alleviate the situation.

Post-Implementation

After the implementation of these recommendations, there are a few considerations to keep in mind. First, maintaining a working and cooperating relationship between DHS and FEMA, and the DOD is crucial. If there was a breakdown in that partnership, then the emergency response plan and recommendations would become moot. Additionally, the scale of a future crisis should be considered. Hurricane Katrina was record-breaking in 2005, but there have been several intense hurricanes and natural disasters in the last year alone (Environmental Defense Fund, n.d.). An important consideration of post-implementation of recommended actions and implementation strategies would be the changing climate and intensity of storms. Reflection and updating emergency response plans are crucial to address the uncertainty of storm strength and frequency.

References

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