

County Emergency Management Directors Discuss Emergency Preparedness

By W. Stuart Morgan III

South Carolinians have experienced hurricanes, tornadoes, flooding and ice storms in recent years, and major earthquakes in the distant past. For them, the threat of terror attacks also remains real since the terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

The federal Disaster Mitigation Act of 2000 (H.R.707) requires all localities to adopt a Natural Hazard Mitigation Plan, which identifies hazards, establishes mitigation goals and objectives, and identifies projects that will help prepare for and reduce the impacts of natural resources every five years.

So, the state's 46 counties should be prepared.

Recently, emergency management directors for Dorchester, Spartanburg and York counties described their county's state of emergency preparedness, and their responsibilities and experience handling disasters. They also explained how the Coronavirus Pandemic has affected their county's emergency preparedness, and how they felt about the threat of terror attacks.

All three emergency management directors offered some valuable advice.

Dorchester County

Mario Formisano, Emergency Management Director*

One thing is certain in this world of uncertainties—Job descriptions for county emergency management directors vary across the state.

Mario Formisano, Dorchester County's emergency management director, actually serves as the county's deputy administrator for public safety. He provides coordinated leadership to the consolidated dispatch center, emergency management department, emergency medical services, and fire

*Mario Formisano's official position changed just before this issue of *County Focus Magazine* was completed. Formisano has served as Dorchester County deputy administrator since July, but became the county's permanent deputy administrator when the county hired Tom McNeal to serve as emergency management director.

rescue. He also serves as liaison to the sheriff and coroner.

Formisano defined emergency management as:

“The responsibility of preparing a jurisdiction, such as a county,



for natural and man-made hazards—incidents that exceed the day to day single point emergency. It facilitates the emergency management cycle which includes preparedness, response, recovery and mitigation. During large scale emergencies/disasters, and in some jurisdictions special events, emergency management leads the emergency operations center, which manages information, coordinates resources, and advises the executive and policy levels.”

During the past 10 years, Dorchester County has experienced the Ice Storm of 2014, Thousand Year Flooding of 2015, Hurricane Matthew (2016), Tropical Storm Irma (2017), Hurricane Florence (2018) and Hurricane Dorian (2019). The county's emergency management staff has also participated in FEMA Emergency Management training exercises to prepare for earthquakes, an uncommon occurrence in South Carolina but one worth preparing for due to the state's seismic past.

One word, “continuity,” best describes why Dorchester County has successfully maintained a high state of readiness for



emergency preparedness.

“Many of our public safety leaders as well as administration, public works, water and sewer, IT, mass care, and other support agencies have been with us for more than five years,” Formisano explained. “So, we have a lot of knowledge and experience.

“Unfortunately, we’ve also had a number of disasters, which has allowed us to constantly identify strengths and areas for improvement,” he added. “After each Emergency Operations Center’s activation, we conduct an after-action review with all participating agencies. We identify lessons learned and corrective actions to mitigate issues in future response and recovery missions.”

The Coronavirus Pandemic has affected Dorchester County’s emergency preparedness efforts since early 2020, according to Formisano.

“The Coronavirus Pandemic has affected Dorchester County’s emergency preparedness efforts, primarily in the decision-making process and interaction with other departments,” he explained.

“Like other organizations, the current pandemic has made us more accustomed to making decisions with incomplete information and uncertainty,” Formisano added. “I also believe it has created even stronger relationships across not only public safety, but across other departments like human resources, risk management, and/or attorney’s office.”

The threat of terror attacks has also complicated Dorchester County’s emergency preparedness efforts since 2001.

“I do believe the threat of a terror attack exists, and will likely always be there,” Formisano said. “What makes preparing for and responding to such threats much more complicated than a natural disaster is that these threats—whether it’s an actual terror attack or an active assailant—are low in frequency but high in risk. Fortunately, they don’t happen frequently.

“But they’re complex, and there’s an increased risk for response actions to go wrong or be inadequate,” he added. “This is why it’s important for local jurisdictions to have robust training and exercise programs that cross discipline and jurisdictional boundaries. In many cases, for example, discussion-based or tabletop exercises create a great space for public safety leaders to walk through prevention, response and recovery activities in an effort to increase readiness for such events that typically have limited to no notice. Tremendous strides have been made since the attack of 9/11/01 to improve intelligence and information sharing between local, state and national level agencies. Dorchester County would certainly assist other counties if called upon for resources.”

Formisano offered some important advice on emergency preparedness for county leaders across the state:

“Get involved at all levels, especially at the executive and policy level. I would like to think that the pandemic has helped many local leaders better understand the role of emergency management, and hopefully, realize that for local emergency management programs to be successful, their involvement is critical. Be familiar with local emergency plans and procedures, and who is assigned to the emergency operations center. Synchronize emergency policy level actions with municipal leaders, and maintain lines of communication with them before, during, and after actions. Ask questions, lots of questions. Be engaged.”

Spartanburg County

Doug Bryson, Emergency Management Director

Doug Bryson, Spartanburg County’s emergency management director, describes his role as “very diverse,” which is an understatement.

He’s responsible for maintaining the county’s Emergency Operations Plan and a multitude of other required plans; ensuring that the county’s EOC is always prepared; researching and applying for appropriate grants; overseeing the county’s Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) program; and chairing the county’s Local Emergency Planning Committee (LEPC).

Bryson is also responsible for maintaining the county’s 24/7 on-call duty officer roster; building and maintaining relationships with all community partners; serving as a liaison to municipal, county, state, regional and federal emergency agencies; overseeing the county’s social media platforms; keeping the county’s chief administrative officer and county council members informed on the county’s state of readiness, grant opportunities and updating county leadership during and after significant events; and coordinating training exercises and logistics countywide.



There’s more.

He’s the primary media point of contact for the county’s emergency management department, and handles the majority of public speaking engagements, including those for the county citizen’s academy.

Prevention, preparedness, mitigation, responses and recovery are the five principles of emergency management, according to Bryson.

“Our Office of Emergency Management works to identify and analyze the hazards that may face Spartanburg County, and to develop contingency plans for each hazard,” he said. “The plans are regularly tested, refined and tested again, all with the goal of protecting or saving lives and protecting property. Another key element of emergency management is supporting first responders, primarily with resources that they may not have readily available.”

During the past 10 years, Spartanburg County has experienced four devastating tornadoes. Three ripped across the county during October of 2017, and one tore across the county in February of 2020. The county has also experienced flooding and winter storms.

“Our emergency management program subscribes to the all-hazards preparedness doctrine,” Bryson said. “This means we are as prepared as we plan/prepare for every possible hazard that could occur in our county—both natural and man-made events, including civil unrest and terror attacks, homegrown and domestic. I believe that terror threats against the United States continue to be a very real possibility, actually even more so now than after the terror attacks of September 11, 2001.

Because Spartanburg County, like many other areas across the state and country, experienced incidents of civil unrest during 2020, he believes Spartanburg County is much more likely to experience

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incidents of homegrown or domestic terrorism than attacks from foreign terrorists.

“We experienced civil unrest last year, the likes of which most of us had never seen before,” Bryson said. “We worked closely with our law enforcement, EMS and fire partners during these events to ensure they had the resources and support they needed to protect lives and property. We’re continuing to work with our local, county, state and federal partners to ensure we are prepared for similar events in the future.”

The Coronavirus Pandemic has affected Spartanburg County’s emergency preparedness efforts, especially the way the department operates, according to Bryson.

“Obviously, the pandemic has altered the way we all do business—especially in the public safety and health care professions,” he explained. “In April of 2020, the entire Upstate experienced numerous severe weather events, many during the overnight hours, which led to us activating our EOC.

“Due to the pandemic, we were not able to fully staff the EOC, and transitioned to a virtual EOC platform that worked well for us,” Bryson added. “We continue to utilize this format. Our operations, along with all of the county’s safety partners, are also much more aware of protocols dealing with personal protective equipment (PPE) during responses to emergencies as well as routine calls for service.”

Spartanburg County has a unique public outreach/education program that includes a robust social media presence, public engagements and one of the premiere CERT programs in the Southeast. The CERT program, which has trained more than 1,600 citizens since 2005, includes a core group of almost 100 volunteers who are vetted to respond to emergencies/disasters to augment emergency management staff.

The program is comprised of the six operational divisions:

- Support Services/Rehabilitation
- Search and Rescue
- Sheltering
- Disaster Animal Responses
- EOC Response
- Emergency Communications and Debris Services.

“The CERT program gives the average citizen an opportunity to receive hands-on personal emergency preparedness training,” Bryson said. “The program offers them advanced-level courses and the ability to join one of the six divisions.”

He offered some advice on emergency preparedness for county leaders across the state:

“I cannot stress the importance of building and maintaining relationships with your county partners, be it in schools, healthcare, private business/industry, nonprofit agencies, community service organizations, utilities, public safety agencies, other government entities, media and of course the citizens in general. All disasters start and end locally, which means at some point after a disaster, the federal resources such as FEMA will be leaving, and you will be left to continue the recovery process with your community partners. Having strong relationships with these partners BEFORE an event is paramount and will pay dividends in the long run.”

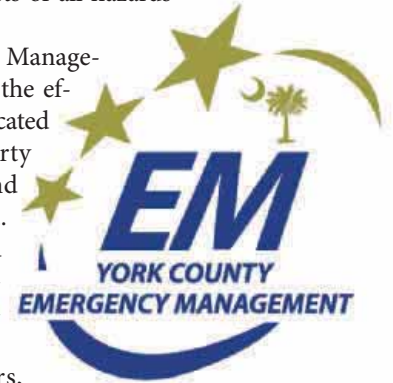
York County

Chuck Haynes, Emergency Management Director

Chuck Haynes provided another example of how much the roles of emergency management directors vary when he described his role as York County’s emergency management director.

Haynes said his role was simply to direct York County’s comprehensive emergency management program, which strives to minimize impacts and recover from effects of all hazards that threaten the county.

“Our county’s Emergency Management Department coordinates the efforts of the many partners dedicated to protecting lives and property during major emergencies and disasters,” Haynes explained. “These efforts include hazard mitigation, planning and preparedness, response, and recovery programs.”



During the past 10 years, York County has experienced severe weather—including tornadoes, flooding and extreme temperatures, a water infrastructure failure, large fires and several multiple casualty/fatality accidents. Although the county has not experienced any of the disasters that counties in eastern areas of the state have, the county’s Emergency Management Department continues to prepare for the same types of disasters, and to be capable of responding to all threats.

Haynes simplified his job description when he described his responsibilities as York County’s emergency management director.

But his responsibilities are not so simple.

York County must also be prepared to manage a robust radiological preparedness program because so many residents live in a densely populated area near a nuclear power plant, according to Haynes.

“Hundreds of responders are trained, thousands of pieces of equipment are maintained, and plans are written and coordinated each year on the many aspects of the program,” Haynes explained. “Neighboring counties in both South Carolina and North Carolina, along with both state governments, provide tremendous support to ensure the safety of York County citizens and visitors.

York County, like other South Carolina counties, always helps neighboring counties when they suffer disasters, including those that occur in other states. Whenever necessary, the county provides fire and rescue, EMS, law enforcement, communications, and emergency management resources.

“Our county continues to expand and improve capabilities in order to be prepared for future emergencies, including natural and technological hazards,” Haynes said. “Although natural hazards in York County remain the same, the population of our county has grown greatly as technological challenges continually change. We continue to focus on our department’s capacity to deliver services to more people, and on flexing our capability to meet new threats to keep York County prepared.

“Unfortunately, threats from human actors must continue to be considered in the emergency management program,” he added. “Consequences management from terroristic actions to single actors

wishing to cause harm remain a core function. Cyberattacks remain a real and constant threat that must be managed. Our county continues to prepare for all hazards, and if necessary, we'll respond to help other counties whenever needed."

Haynes said the Coronavirus Pandemic has affected York County just as it has other South Carolina counties, but he said it had actually strengthened his county's ability to handle emergencies.

"Through the efforts of many, remote working and virtual meetings," he explained, "we have had to realize and practice our county's emergency procurement, disaster logistics, continuity measures in both physical and human resources and other abilities."

As succinctly as Haynes described his responsibility as York County's emergency management director, he offered this advice county leaders across South Carolina:

"Simply support your county's emergency management program and the professionals dedicated to protecting lives and property.



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