
MEMORANDUM

April 21, 2020

To: Governors' Offices
From: Bill McBride, Executive Director
Re: Operational Coordination for COVID-19 Response and Recovery

Introduction: As the COVID-19 pandemic grows in scale and complexity, so does the number of state, federal, local, nonprofit, and private assets deployed to assist in the response. Governors play an important role in ensuring these partners can, and are, working together to define strategies and achieve goals. This operational coordination enables unity of effort, reduces misuse, errors, and duplication of activity, and optimizes the amount of human, physical, and financial resources available for various missions. To be effective, operational coordination will need to be applied across all phases of the COVID-19 crisis lifecycle, from immediate response and long-term recovery to mitigation of future outbreaks.

Overarching Norms and Frameworks for Coordination

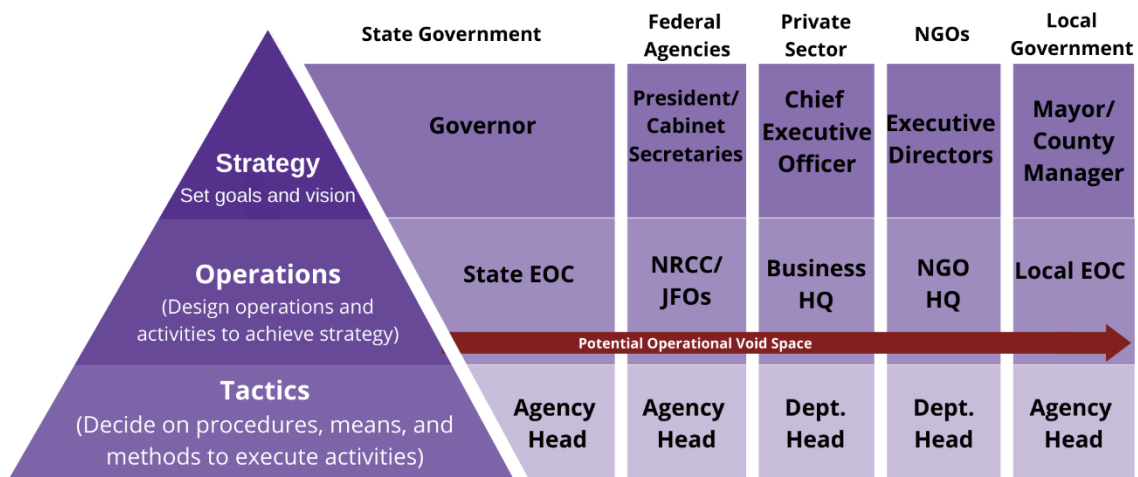
Pandemics are challenging emergencies for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the tremendous coordination required between disparate agencies across multiple levels of government, including emergency management agencies, their public health counterparts, private sector healthcare organizations, federal coordinating agencies, and local first responders, to name a few. Depending on how a state's government is organized, these disciplines may not have strong working relationships or many experiences working together. Without clear leadership and expectations for coordination from state executives, response and recovery activities may stall.

The following best practices can aid in building unity of effort across the enterprise:

- **Utilize established coordination frameworks.** Government agencies, private sector partners, and non-profits have spent nearly two decades learning, training, and exercising protocols outlined in national standards such the [National Response Framework](#) and the [National Disaster Recovery Framework](#). While COVID-19 may present novel challenges, the principles for communication, resource management, planning, and cooperation set forth in these governing documents are applicable to all hazards, including infectious disease. COVID-19 does not require new blueprints for integrated response.
- **Clarify and deconflict roles and responsibilities.** With a variety of agencies participating in the response and recovery, governors and their senior officials will need to identify and communicate the jurisdiction, duty, and mission of each one. Governors should strive to ensure that all participating agencies understand “commander’s intent”—their vision for mission success. Furthermore, governors should empower asset- and process-owners to adapt plans, modify policy, or adjust strategy as needed to overcome unanticipated obstacles to achieving that success.
- **Adopt an inclusive and comprehensive approach** to coordination that harmonizes the goals of state government agencies with those of federal and nongovernmental organizations. Encouraging diverse perspectives can help lay the groundwork for developing innovative

solutions, and welcoming different views promotes cooperation.¹ Research has shown that with this approach, groups can realize their objectives more effectively and efficiently.²

- **Know your partners.** Governors’ offices should understand the authorities, capabilities, and limitations of mission partners and stakeholders. For instance, while a state agency may want to open a field hospital at a centrally located high-school gym, the placement of this asset may have unintended consequences for the local government, who may find their transportation, security, and communications infrastructures overwhelmed. Governors and their key advisors should also consider the speed at which partner agencies can plan and operate.
- **Understand how agencies are filling the operational void.** Translating strategy into tactics requires operational planning, both within the state government itself, but also with non-governmental partners. Differences in agency structure, authority, permissions, capabilities, capacities, and budgets can impair collaboration between partners and impede mission accomplishment. This dysfunction is typically referred to as an “operational void,” and response and recovery activities will become increasingly uncoordinated without a strong platform for intra- and inter-agency coordination. To fill this void, state governments typically rely on their emergency operations centers. Partner organizations may fill the void with a normal, permanent structure, such as a business headquarters, or a temporary, ad hoc organization, such as a joint field office.



Interagency Planning and Execution: In an effort to promote a coordinated approach to emergency response and recovery, the federal government has promulgated the use of the National Planning Frameworks, which in turn leverage the [National Incident Management System](#) (NIMS), to guide both vertical and horizontal collaboration between participating organizations. Both these guides use an “all hazards” approach, including prescribed best

¹ Hewlett, Sylvia Ann, et al. “How Diversity Can Drive Innovation.” Harvard Business Review, 1 Aug. 2014, hbr.org/2013/12/how-diversity-can-drive-innovation.

² Phillips, Katherine W. “How Diversity Makes Us Smarter.” Scientific American, Scientific American, 1 Oct. 2014, www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-diversity-makes-us-smarter/.



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practices for emergencies that are appropriate for implementation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Governors should feel comfortable leaning on these frameworks to plan and coordinate their operations internally; however, with COVID-19 affecting all 55 states and territories simultaneously, the normal mechanisms for federal, private sector, and interstate coordination may require adjustment.

- **Promote the utilization of NIMS.** State, federal, and local government agencies have spent decades training to the emergency response standards laid out in NIMS. Governors can encourage agencies to utilize their training and conform NIMS standards to ensure that a common playbook is being used to plan, resource, and execute critical operations.
- **Provide a location, either in-person or virtually, to conduct coordination activities.** Governors should ensure their Emergency Operations Center (EOC) and other multiagency coordination groups are active and appropriately staffed. Co-locating interagency planning, resource inventorying, procurement, and forecasting functions will increase the likelihood of collaboration and information sharing. Governors may consider using these platforms to facilitate recovery operations as well.
- **Normal federal coordination mechanisms may be adjusted.** During major emergencies, the federal government will often stand up a [joint field office](#) (JFO) to provide on-site, in-state coordination of operations. Given current personnel and resource limitations, it may not be possible for the federal government to conduct coordination in this way, and states should prepare for the possibility of a virtual JFO or other service augmentations.
- **Support localities.** Many local governments have under-resourced emergency management capabilities and lack both the human and physical resources to effectively understand, implement, and support state operations. Governors can assist by supplying technical and financial assistance—personnel, guidance documents, templates, and funding—to ensure that local partners have the capacity to effectively collaborate.
- **Go beyond executive-to-executive.** While executives may be most comfortable communicating with other executives (such as governor to mayor), they should ensure that their state agencies are also communicating with local counterparts. Ensuring vertical, two-way communication at multiple points of government will ensure maximum coordination.

Ensuring Information Flow and Uniting Data from Disconnected Sources: Good information drives good decision-making. Governors should make every effort to design information-gathering processes that are proactive, timely, and relevant. Because of the large number of agencies responding to COVID-19, governors likely need to make decisions on information that is incomplete, inaccurate, and inconsistent because of differences in information gathering, processing, and sharing practices between partners.

Bridging information gaps and acquiring real-time situational awareness can be achieved through the development of a common operating picture (COP). The COP may be defined as a shared understanding of an incident based on data shared between agencies through interoperable communication systems using standardized information and intelligence sharing protocols. COPs can take many forms, from daily reports, to visual dashboards, to regular briefings. But, no matter the form, a common understanding of the incident is built between agencies and shared.

Governors can achieve this by considering the following actions:

- **Address information sharing and collaboration requirements between partner agencies.** Develop processes to share information with all stakeholders, information systems, and communications networks. Interoperability is often driven by human behavior and agency protocol rather than technical limitations, and governors can provide the necessary mandate to ensure agencies are sharing information appropriately. By balancing “need to know” with “need to share,” leadership can create a collaborative culture of information exchange. If



necessary, governors can use their emergency powers to adjust regulations that inhibit data sharing between agencies as well as with non-governmental partners.

- **Ensure the agencies are equipped with interoperable communications.** Governors can empower the Statewide Interoperability Coordinator (SWIC) to elevate and resolve interoperability issues quickly, and they may consider adjusting regulations that limit the placement and operation of portable communications infrastructure, including cells-on-wheels (COWS) and cells-on-light-trucks (COLTS.) Regularly evaluating encryption needs, encouraging joint planning for operational communications, and sharing radio channels and equipment can also promote interoperability.
- **Ensure that appropriate agencies are sending liaison officers to the state EOC.** Liaison officers (LOFRs) serve as the single point of contact for representatives of departments and agencies, as well as for jurisdictions, nongovernmental organizations, private sector businesses. They represent their organization and their interests throughout the operational planning process. Liaison officers also assist in deconflicting interagency issues, providing institutional knowledge of their organization, and aiding multi-lateral decision-making. (FEMA [Liaison Officer Job Description](#) and [Position Task Book](#).)
- **Leverage modeling.** In the absence of data, modeling may assist in filling information gaps. Governors may use modeling to inform decisions on when to acquire or release resources, adjust social distancing policies, or enact recovery activities. Identify, either internally or externally, dependable sources of modeling data. When possible, assist localities with modeling if they do not have the appropriate technical expertise.

Protecting and Promoting Operational Coordination through Joint Messaging: As the elected official in charge of crisis management within the state, the governor is accountable to the public for emergency response. The information shared with residents should be coordinated as carefully and as intentionally as the response operations; doing so will build public confidence, reduce confusion, and save lives. Some best practices on joint messaging include:

- **Ensure that public messages are coordinated between organizations.** NIMS provides guidance on establishing a Joint Information System (JIS) through Joint Information Centers (JICs). Agency’s public information officers, as well as communications and public relations specialists from partner organizations (e.g., public health departments, emergency management offices, federal partners), should be invited to develop, deconflict, and distribute messages through a JIC. This type of collaboration will reduce errors, misinformation, and confusion in public communications.
- **Conduct joint pressers and other briefings, when possible.** Creating a joint platform for public information underscores a “whole community” response to COVID-19. Organizations should work together to coordinate statements, media alerts, and FAQs to ensure a cohesive, impactful event. Joint briefings aid in keeping appropriate agencies and partners accountable.
- **Designate senior-level spokespeople to assist with public outreach.** Public confidence can be enhanced when elected officials and senior-level spokespeople engage with them throughout emergency response and recovery. Toward that end, governors will want to ensure key officials are connecting with the public on a regular basis, and that these activities are coordinated with other partners.

Mobilize and Manage Resources: Acquiring the right resources and applying them at the right time has been a particular challenge for states during the COVID-19 response. The sheer volume of supplies, equipment, and personnel needed has created challenges related to resource acquisition, as well as resource application. Apart from deconflicting issues related to competition, governors can ensure that once resources are acquired for their state, they are managed prudently and efficiently to ensure undue financial burdens are avoided.



- **Acquisition:** Strategies for acquisition are detailed in the following NGA memos:
 - ✓ [Governor Actions to Address PPE and Ventilator Shortages](#)
 - ✓ [The Defense Production Act & Executive Action Taken in Response to COVID-19](#)
 - ✓ [NASPO's Coronavirus Crisis: How to Quickly Modernize Government Procurement Before It's Too Late](#)
- **Manage and track resources with NIMS principles in mind.** Utilizing the national system for sourcing physical resources and qualifying human resources will ensure that these resources can be integrated between agencies more easily.
- **Understand when resources can be released.** In any given emergency the demand for resources outpaces availability until capacity is developed. Governors can work with their mission partners to determine rates of resource consumption against demand, using modeling as needed, and they will want to consider the trade-offs between sharing resources and maintaining caches. (Utilize the [Emergency Management Assistance Compact](#) to facilitate transfers of resources across state lines.)
- **Diligently track costs and prepare for disaster cost recovery.** The process for federal reimbursement of disaster-incurred costs has always been complex. While the supplemental packages passed by Congress created additional monies for response and recovery activities, they also added additional complexity. Governors should immediately evaluate and bolster their capability to track disaster costs to maximize potential reimbursements. Although activities like grant management are typically associated with recovery, governors should consider bringing additional resources on during the response to facilitate a smoother transition between phases.

Conclusion: Coordination is rarely an accident. Governors have both policies and powers to ensure it occurs between the agencies operating in their state, and doing so will enhance public safety, accelerate achievement of response goals, and hasten the advent of recovery. Existing frameworks provide a reliable blueprint for intentional cooperation across a wide array of partners, and governors can adapt them to help ensure a successful state response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Resources:

[NIMS Elected Official / Senior Leader Quick Reference Guide](#)
[Congressional Primer on Responding to Major Disasters and Emergencies](#)

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