Hypothetical situation: A category III hurricane (Winds 111-130 mph) has made land fall over Charleston, South Carolina. The storm was expected to only reach category I status, and after three category I hurricanes over the past year, city officials and local residents have decided to ride this storm out. As the storm builds in strength to a category III it hits the city with a storm surge of 15 ft above normal. Structural damage to residences, utility buildings and government buildings has disabled local leaders’ abilities to communicate and make response decisions. EMS is slow to respond due to debris in roads and the inability to coordinate efforts with other units. There is considerable damage to trees and power lines. Power is lost across the city. Rising waters have cut-off low-lying escape routes. The worst of the storm is over, but the city’s Mayor is nowhere to be found and is presumed to be a victim of the hurricane. Police, fire and rescue are attempting to piece together their operations to begin immediate response efforts and eventual recovery operations.

Could this happen? Could key local leaders and emergency officials be in the dark as to who has authority to take action to respond, rescue and recover? What are other local leaders (utilities, financial, EMS, etc) roles and responsibilities if key decision makers and responders are incapacitated? What will the citizens do without basic services and leadership? Have local and state officials exercised their response and recovery plans?

This week’s readings discuss the various ways that local, state and federal agencies plan for, and react to, disasters. The focus is mainly on the all-important phases of response and recovery. There are old models (Continuity of Government) and new ones like the National Response Plan that are available to assist local leaders and emergency managers in mitigating vulnerability and to control the chaos immediately after a disaster.

The basic premise of the NCSU reserves article, A New Use for an Old Model: Continuity of Government as a Framework for Local Emergency Managers, is that with certain updates, the older Pre-FEMA Federal Continuity of Government (COG) model / plan may actually be a useful guide for today’s local emergency planners. As I read this articles I found it troubling to read that after 25 years of emergency management research and planning that “local emergency managers still have difficulty in placing their duties in the context of local government and have trouble
devising integrated programs to fulfill them”2. How can this be? What is so difficult with defining roles, responsibilities, etc? One hopes following Hurricane Katrina that the majority of emergency managers at the state and local levels began in earnest to review and revise their local emergency plans and policies in the hopes that if a disaster comparable to the scale of Katrina happened in their city that they were ready and prepared to respond and maintain order.

COG prior to FEMA in 1979 was virtually the only source of policy and program guidance even though it was directed toward maintaining the constitutional order in the event of nuclear attack2. I am in agreement with Stevens and Grant that COG can help coordinators cut through much of the existing confusion and that it can function as a cornerstone of local emergency management because of its simplicity and how it focuses on government at all levels playing a key role in maintaining community viability during disaster. I agree with the article that COG at its core can be modified to suit even local communities. At a minimum COG can be a starting point for local and state emergency managers in developing their plans. If only the 7 core elements of COG are followed chances of a more controlled and coordinated response and recovery effort will occur.

In the military there is something called the “Chain of Command”. Soldiers from Private to General know “their” Chain of Command. This COG type concept is very simple and is exercised during every possible training event. It is a simple tool to ensure that if and when the “Blank” hits the fans”, the unit will still be able to function. If the commander is incapacitated, there is an immediate succession of command based on team positions in the unit (executive officer, platoon sergeant, squad leader, etc). Why this model may be harder to develop and implement at the state or federal level may be due to the vast size of the endeavor and the ever-building list of what should be included in the response and recovery plan.

The current article I chose (FEMA watched closely after deadly twisters) reports about the devastating tornadoes that struck 5 states last week. It reported on FEMA’s response to the disaster and that “local and state officials warned Wednesday that they would not tolerate a slow response from the federal government”3. Even a Senator got involved in voicing his demands that “FEMA must not use bureaucratic excuses to avoid helping Arkansans”3. These tornadoes were the worst in almost 2 decades. Over 70 people were killed and the storms caused millions of dollars in property damage. State officials are awake and vocal to the fact that the federal
government does not want to relive its “Katrina” mistakes as being perceived to not care or slow in providing aid. FEMA by all accounts during this disaster has acted swiftly in response and early recovery phases. Citizens needing immediate basic assistance, housing, and financial assistance are getting it in a timely manner.

This week’s textbook chapter # 5 focuses on the federal level response and recovery. After reading the chapter you get a sense of the number of FEMA aid and internal departments designed to support communities after almost any disaster. As stated in the book “without a doubt the federal government plays the largest role in providing technical and financial support for recovery”\(^4\), however, along with the feds there are many private and volunteer agencies ready to support states when disaster strikes. This recovery process can take weeks, months and even years. In this phase one of the key tasks is identifying ways to further mitigate the local community’s vulnerability to future disasters. If done well mitigation may

When disaster strikes and the state requests federal assistance it all comes down to whether or not FEMA, with all its management and support teams, can get to where the aid is needed in a timely manner. The feds/FEMA, as is often the case, can be a huge dinosaur that’s hard to move and slow to decide on a focused course of action. Since Hurricane Katrina one can argue that this dinosaur is even bigger and still too slow. Thankfully for the citizens devastated by last week’s tornadoes, FEMA seems to be accomplishing its mission. This chapter had interesting case studies that described past disasters and the state and federal response and recovery efforts. There were many good stories about state and federal emergency agencies (response, logistics, financial assistance, recovery) working the way it was designed to.

I believe the way to ensure response and recovery plans are effective is to have multiple exercises a year. If well intentioned plans (COG model at the local and state level, FEMA support teams, state emergency responders, etc) have not had multiple exercises / training events to fine tune the execution of their tasks and practice the demanding and difficult logistics of getting aid to the points of disaster to help to keep government viable, we may see Katrina like disasters again.

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\(^1\) Hurricane Categories - http://www.nhc.noaa.gov

\(^2\) A new use for an Old Model - Handbook of Crisis and Emergency Management, pp. 283-292

\(^3\) FEMA watched closely after deadly twisters - http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/23006771

\(^4\) Introduction to Emergency Management – Haddow and Bullock, pp 157.