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LESSON LEARNED

Incident Management: Forming Effective Federal-Territorial Partnerships During Disaster Responses

SUMMARY

The strong relationships between the American Samoa Governor, the Federal coordinating officer (FCO), and the defense coordinating officer (DCO) proved critical for effective joint field office (JFO) operations in the aftermath of the earthquake, tsunami, and flooding that struck American Samoa in September 2009.

DESCRIPTION

On Tuesday, September 29, 2009, at 6:48 a.m. Samoa Standard Time (SST), an earthquake with an 8.1 magnitude struck in the Pacific Ocean approximately 120 miles from the Samoa islands. The earthquake generated tsunami waves, the first of which struck the American Samoa island of Tutuila at 7:08 a.m. SST. The tsunami flooding resulted in 34 deaths, and 131 people reported to hospitals or clinics with injuries. Thousands of people were left without shelter or food, while more than 1.2 million cubic feet of debris were strewn across the islands. Critical infrastructure throughout American Samoa suffered major damage due to tsunami wave inundation.

American Samoa is an unincorporated territory of the United States. It has a total land area of 77 square miles and a population of approximately 65,000 people. American Samoa is located in the South Pacific Ocean 2,400 miles from Hilo, Hawaii, and 4,500 miles from San Diego, California.

President Barack Obama declared a major disaster (FEMA-1859-DR) on September 29, 2009, which initiated the Federal response. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Administrator Craig Fugate appointed an FCO while the U.S. Pacific Command activated its defense coordinating element for the first time in recent years.

Strong relationships formed between the American Samoa Governor, the FCO, and the DCO from the earliest stages of the disaster response. The three met in Hawaii immediately after the disaster to discuss operational priorities and to form an initial response plan. They returned to American Samoa together the next day. During this initial period of the response, the American Samoa Governor, FCO, and DCO built the foundation for the prompt and effective disaster response operations that followed. Their shared understanding of operational priorities was communicated to their respective staffs, which fostered a collaborative response among Federal and territorial personnel. The partnership between the FCO and DCO helped to ensure the prompt delivery of critical mass care supplies, personnel, and generators to American Samoa.

Several factors contributed to the strong relationships among the Governor, the FCO, and the DCO. First, FEMA Region IX and the American Samoa Government had worked closely in the years prior to the tsunami, which had resulted in an effective partnership. Second, the FCO had strong familiarity with Pacific Ocean area response operations. Third, the Governor,

FCO, and DCO employed the incident command system (ICS) from the beginning of response operations. Fourth, the Governor made it a personal priority to remain intimately involved with the emergency planning process coordinated by the unified coordination group (UCG). The Governor attended almost all UCG meetings and communicated his response priorities directly to the FCO and DCO throughout the planning process. His commitment to the Federal partnership communicated to the citizens of American Samoa that the JFO was a committed partner working to meet their needs.

The American Samoa Governor and FCO recorded a video discussion about the benefits of using the ICS after the tsunami. [Click here](#) to view the video.

The strong relationships led to a successful collaboration between the JFO and the American Samoa Government to conduct search and rescue missions, to provide mass care to victims, to restore power, and to provide financial assistance to victims, among other missions. Within a week of the disaster, FEMA and Federal partners had moved more than 26,000 meals, 14,000 liters of water, 1,800 blankets, 9 pallets of medical supplies, and over 20 generators to American Samoa. In the months after the disaster, the JFO overcame vast distances and other challenges to provide resources and assistance to American Samoa.

The strong relationships between the American Samoa Governor, the FCO, and the DCO proved critical for effective JFO operations in the aftermath of the earthquake, tsunami, and flooding that struck American Samoa in September 2009.

CITATION

Federal Emergency Management Agency. *The American Samoa Earthquake, Tsunami, and Flooding (FEMA-1859-DR) Joint Field Office and Pan-Pacific Regional Response Coordination Center After Action Report/Improvement Plan*. 09 Sep 2010.

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