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## LESSON LEARNED

### Joint Field Office Operations: Assigning Liaison Officers to Assist Local Government Officials

#### SUMMARY

Joint Field Offices (JFOs) should consider assigning a dedicated Liaison Officer (LNO) to assist senior local government officials. This can ensure that the local officials have a single point of contact (POC) into the JFO to facilitate information sharing and facilitate Federal assistance to the impacted locality.

#### DESCRIPTION

##### *The May 22, 2011, Tornado*

On Sunday, May 22, 2011, cold and warm fronts clashed throughout the central United States, creating a supercell thunderstorm that generated several tornadoes, wind damage, and flash flooding across southwest Missouri. The National Weather Service Forecast Office in Springfield, Missouri, issued a tornado warning for Joplin at 5:17 p.m. Central Daylight Time (CDT), providing residents with 24 minutes of warning of the tornado. At 5:41 p.m. CDT, the  $\frac{3}{4}$ -mile-wide Enhanced Fujita-5 (EF-5) tornado touched down in Joplin with winds in excess of 200 mph and moved through the city at less than 20 mph. At 6:12 p.m. CDT, the tornado ended after traveling 22.1 miles.

The city of Joplin is located in Jasper County, Missouri, in the southwest corner of the state, near Arkansas, Kansas, and Oklahoma. Joplin has a population of 49,024; the Joplin metropolitan area has a population of 400,000, making it Missouri's fourth largest metropolitan area.

The tornado resulted in catastrophic loss of life and destruction during its 6-mile track through Joplin. The tornado caused 161 fatalities and approximately 1,371 injuries as of May 27, making it the single deadliest U.S. tornado since 1947. The EF-5 tornado destroyed 4,380 homes, damaged an additional 3,884, and impacted other structures, including St. John's Regional Medical Center, Home Depot, and Wal-Mart. Additionally, the tornado caused the loss of 130 transmission poles and power outages that left approximately 18,000 customers without power. The area impacted by the tornado spanned nearly 30 percent of Joplin and generated an estimated 3 million cubic yards of debris.



**Tornado damage in Joplin (Source: FEMA)**

### ***The Emergency Response***

Federal, State, regional, and local government agencies, private sector, and voluntary organizations responded immediately after the tornado to assist Joplin, Jasper County, and Newton County. Medical and emergency medical services (EMS) personnel began providing critical care to victims at triage sites across the city. Joplin residents conducted search and rescue operations, and communications and power companies began working to restore Joplin's infrastructure. Joplin and Jasper County activated their mutual aid agreements with their regional partners. Missouri requested and received assistance from Illinois, Kansas, Oklahoma, and other states through the Emergency Management Assistance Compact. Within 24 hours of the tornado, more than 800 police cars, 300 ambulances, 400 fire trucks, and 1,100 responders had arrived in Joplin to contribute to response operations.



**Missouri National Guard soldiers conduct search and rescue operations hours after the tornado.**

**(Source: Missouri National Guard)**

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) had been conducting disaster response and recovery operations in Missouri in the months prior to the Joplin tornado. A JFO had been established in Columbia, Missouri, to manage Federal assistance after severe spring storms and flooding. On May 23, 2011, an amendment was issued to DR-1980 to include counties affected by the Joplin tornado (see map below). A division was established in Joplin to manage FEMA response operations for the tornado. The Joplin Division Office (JDO) reported to the JFO's Operations Section, following both incident command system principles and JFO procedures.

Spring storms brought damaging tornadoes and flooding to Missouri, principally in the southern tier. On May 9, 2011, President Barack Obama issued a major disaster declaration (FEMA-DR-1980) for five counties in Missouri.

### ***Assigning Liaisons to Joplin Officials***

The Federal Coordinating Officer (FCO) assigned dedicated LNOs to senior Joplin government officials shortly after the tornado struck. The LNOs provided these officials with a single POC into FEMA, which facilitated the sharing of information between FEMA and the locality. A Joplin official noted that working with FEMA can be "daunting" because "people don't understand how FEMA works," and that its disaster personnel rotate frequently. City officials could turn to the LNO whenever they had questions about FEMA programs rather than being forced to find the appropriate JDO program person. The LNOs worked with the local officials to help them navigate the various requirements and deadlines for receiving assistance from FEMA. The LNOs strengthened the JDO's situational awareness by alerting it to the city's priorities and concerns. JFO and JDO officials noted that the ability to build a personal rapport with the city officials was critical for the effectiveness of the LNO. Overall, the assignment of FEMA LNOs to Joplin officials contributed to an effective partnership that facilitated Federal support to the city during response and recovery operations.

Numerous officials recommended that FEMA should make the assignment of a LNO to senior local government officials a common practice for disaster operations, depending on the size

of the disaster and local conditions. The LNO should serve as their POC for questions and information about FEMA support; the LNO should not be assigned any other disaster responsibilities. The LNO should be a direct report to the FCO, the JFO operations chief, or the division supervisor, as in Joplin. This position would be akin to a special assistant to the FCO. JFO officials noted that having this LNO report through External Affairs or another section would dilute their overall effectiveness. Personnel serving in this capacity must have the interpersonal skills to work with senior local officials, including the ability to convey that they understand the local needs and how FEMA can address them. As one FEMA official commented, "We need to lay out the tray of what we can do and not play FEMA language with the local officials. We don't say 'here's the smorgasbord.'" The JFO Standard Operating Procedures and other relevant guidance should be revised to include situations when the FCO assigns a LNO to local government officials.

The LNO should have standard materials that he or she can provide to the officials, such as checklists and fact sheets on how to work with FEMA, what to ask for, and how to keep track of deadlines and requirements. The LNO should provide the local officials with an updated organization chart of the JFO and/or Division whenever their senior staff is replaced. As one Joplin official stated, "I'm getting hundreds of calls and e-mails, so I don't have the time to go through them all to find out. It's easiest just to hand me a chart of the organization." Finally, the FEMA Office of External Affairs, Intergovernmental Affairs, should collaborate with a local government professional association to develop a brief guide for local officials about FEMA disaster assistance. This guide should be brief, focus on key questions local officials will face after a disaster, and be modeled after similar guides developed for governors.

#### **CITATION**

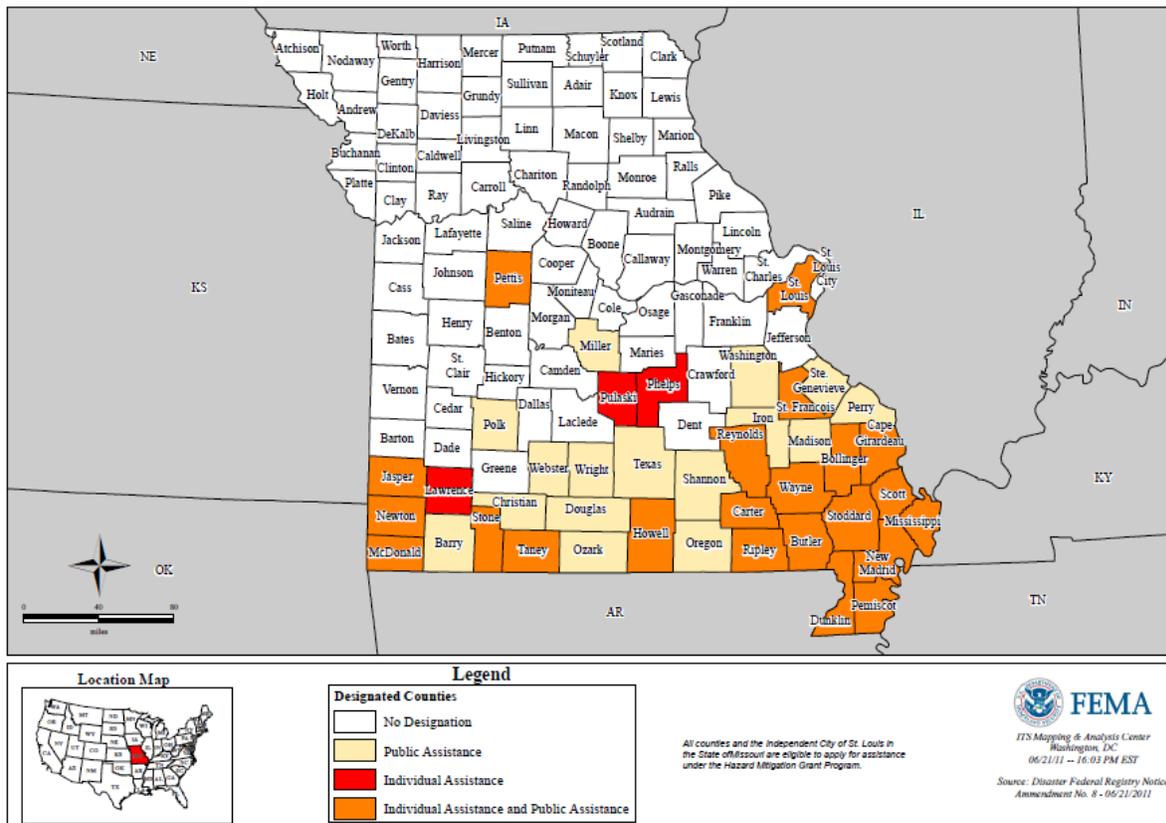
Lessons Learned Information Sharing. *The Response to the 2011 Joplin, Missouri, Tornado; Lessons Learned Study*. 20 Dec 2011.

<https://www.llis.dhs.gov/docdetails/details.do?contentID=54802>

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## FEMA-1980-DR, Missouri Disaster Declaration as of 06/21/2011



**Map of DR-1980. (Source: FEMA)**