

My name is James K. Joseph, and I am the Vice President of Response for Tidal Basin Government Consulting based in Alexandria, VA. I have held positions in emergency management, security, investigations, and crisis management for over 20 years - 10 years for a global corporation and 12 at all levels of government.

In my opinion, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) should not just be a topic of discussion, it should be the very fabric by which we operate as a country. A few years ago, I had the honor of addressing nearly 200 individuals that before my eyes, raised their hands and denounced their birth citizenship and pledged allegiance to these United States of America. As one of the first people to welcome my now fellow citizens, the look on their faces were both inspiring and rich with pride. In my address to them, I shared how my parents, who were in the audience that morning, came to this country some 50 years ago and one day sat in the same seats they were in. And that by God's grace alone, in one generation, I was standing on the other side of the dais. I told them their children can be anything they want to be – homemakers, business owners, doctors, lawyers, elected officials, or even President.

But - could they be the next Emergency Manager? Having been an emergency manager at the local, state and federal level – I was most often the only person of color in the room and at the local and state level, there were few or no women. Recently, there have been more minority and female leaders in emergency management across the private sector and government positions. However, it is still important for us to ensure that we are a profession that builds the pipeline to leadership positions that identifies with the diverse communities we serve.

The following summarizes the thoughts of myself and my colleagues at Tidal Basin on how we can not only increase the presence of minorities and all gender identities in emergency management leadership positions, but also ideas on more equitable disaster recovery across social and economically disadvantaged communities.

### **Building the Pipeline**

While there have been many catastrophic incidents across the country recently, and we know they will continue in the future – much of America only sees the devastation and destruction of a natural or human-made incident on TV or read about it in print. The first introduction to emergency management that most will ever have, is the unfortunate and stressful experience that disaster survivors face during or after a disaster. They will interact with their local emergency management team, county or state emergency management officials, and non-profit organizations.

We must be deliberate about diversity. As the profession looks to diversify leadership roles, promoting recruitment into the emergency management profession not just in college programs, but in the K-12 grades are important. Agencies should not only look at colleges and universities with formal emergency management programs, but other emergency management and vocational training programs that tie into programs that FEMA manages. For example, many junior and community colleges have a variety of programs in environmental and utility programs. These programs have a direct cadence to important

roles within emergency management programs such as environmental and historic preservation and state or federal public assistance damage assessment or inspection.

From a federal government perspective, specifically my experience as a FEMA Regional Administrator – there are limitations that prevent federal agencies from being able to provide opportunities to students in college programs. When attempting to create opportunities for paid internship programs, there are lengthy and cumbersome application processes and documents required. While many federal employees themselves find the application process for positions and promotions difficult to understand and follow, a college student should not be expected to navigate that process. In addition, due to varying criteria, the ability to be presented to an agency hiring official on an official certification list for hiring consideration is also difficult. Therefore, it eliminates students from gaining federal experience while in their college or university programs, but more importantly, it creates a barrier to entry in the federal government.

If there was less “red-tape” in the application, evaluation, hiring and onboarding process for many federal agencies, I believe there would be much greater success in bringing employees and interns into federal agencies. Furthermore, as previous reports have indicated, the representation of minorities or females in leadership positions is lower within FEMA compared to employees in non-management positions.

We must be deliberate about diversity. This occurs when we are creating ways to attract, hire, and mentor people of all backgrounds and identity. It doesn't require creativity to do so – it requires dismantling the barriers to entry that exist and clearing a more direct path to hiring. I am proud to work for an organization that lives and exemplifies diversity as part of its culture through its hiring practices and supporting scholarships to minority students entering the emergency management field with our partners from the Institute for Diversity and Inclusion in Emergency Management (I-DIEM). I-DIEM recently announced the first recipients of the Julius Becton Scholarship, named after Lt. General Julius Becton, who was the first minority to head FEMA from 1985-1989. Tidal Basin sponsors this program annually through corporate and personal donations from its CEO.

### **Equity in Disaster Recovery Programs**

Equally important to hiring emergency managers that represent the diverse communities we serve, and mentoring them into senior leadership, is equity in disaster response and recovery programs. Often time, communities that have low to moderate income will be adversely impacted by events due to their inability to not only respond and recover the community, but also the financial constraint to mitigate against natural disasters. Providing common sense solutions that streamline the ability for communities to receive mitigation assistance, and individuals to receive disaster assistance, should be a focus at all levels of government.

As mentioned above, this is not a burden that should be placed on the federal government alone. Not all natural or manmade disasters are significant enough to result in a Presidential Disaster Declaration that brings federal aid to a community or individuals. Rather, it is often the municipality, county or state that

must respond to and recover from disasters without assistance from federal agencies. As such, it is important for local and state governments to identify and set-aside funds for mitigation and recovery. However, it would be tone-deaf to make such a statement across the board as if the financial resources of the nation are equal; we know they are not.

#### Cost Match Considerations:

For all communities to have access to federal funds for mitigation and recovery, there must be changes made to the cost match required in federal grants. These changes should be based on the applicant communities need as well as prioritization of areas that experienced repetitive loss. We know from a variety of studies that for every dollar spent in mitigation, there are savings that will be realized in future disaster response. The Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) grant managed by FEMA is a game changing tool in preparedness and mitigation. Giving local communities the ability to buy down the risk and prevent the repetitive cycle of damage and loss saves money in the long term. However, many communities that experience repetitive loss from disasters are unable to meet the cost match of grants – both mitigation and disaster recovery grants. While over a billion dollars were set aside for BRIC recently, more money will not increase equitable disbursement of the funds, because many communities that need to utilize those funds will not be able to meet the 25% match. This is not a race, gender, or functional access issue, but an issue local governments face that transcend across all social and economic status. The FEMA Administrator should have the ability to wave or eliminate cost match based on formula and strategy for adjusting cost share based on need from both a financial lens, as well as from the lens of mitigating repetitive loss based on where it has already or continue to occur. We have seen over the years that communities with high LMI (low to moderate income) populations will struggle in recovery – both community and individual recovery, so deliberate steps need to be taken to reduce or eliminate the cost match based on need.

After a Presidential Disaster has been declared, FEMA's Public Assistance program provides critical funding to help government and certain non-profits organizations in the form of reimbursements. As with other grants, there is 25% cost match required. While that match can be reduced based on the level of loss the state faces, the thresholds set for each state are extremely high and usually only met in catastrophic events. However, it does not take a catastrophic event to cripple communities – the impact is severe in areas that do not have a tax base to support strengthening infrastructure.

As there are many federal agencies that provide disaster recovery services and grants, coordination among these agencies to create a process for states to provide global match for grants is recommended. While a global match has been utilized across mitigation program such as FEMA's Hazard Mitigation Grant Program, which buys-out homes that have significant repetitive loss, the review process for such projects by multiple agencies is lengthy. As such, applicants that have applied lose patience and drop out of the program or suffer other financial losses while waiting for federal approval. I have seen firsthand the impact and heartbreak of homeowners that experienced devastating losses while waiting for a buy-out. It is paramount that agencies come together with the common goal of creating policies to streamline efforts and coordinate reducing the complexity of such programs for equitable recovery.

### Individual Assistance (IA) Considerations:

FEMA's Individual Assistance program should also have policies in place that help streamline services to disaster survivors. Like I mentioned above, those that have experienced loss during natural disasters know firsthand the stress, emotion and frustration that comes with recovery. When disasters impact a family or individual, the resources that provide support to kick-start recovery need to be quickly administered and delivered. While the employees of FEMA and other organizations have the disaster survivor in mind, their desire and calling to assist survivors is often hampered by red tape within the program.

The maximum funding available to individuals in an area covered by a disaster declaration, if Individual Assistance (IA) has been declared by the President, is around \$36,000 for uninsured losses. Furthermore, the number of individuals that receive the maximum amount is low, with average IA grants of around \$5,000. FEMA programs are not intended to make an individual whole, and I do not disagree with that. How assistance is delivered and the steps to apply for eligibility are cumbersome, and often confusing to individuals who have never had to apply for or be familiar with the program. Even still, it can remain confusing for individuals that have experienced repetitive loss and have applied for the program more than once. While insurance is the best source of recovery and will provide higher cost recovery than even the maximum allowable amount through FEMA IA grants, we must recognize that due to multiple economic factors, there will always be a segment of our country that can't afford insurance and is a risk they are forced to live with.

The application process for Individual Assistance can be confusing and frustrating. For anyone that has applied for disaster assistance in the past, there are processes that for many do not make sense and adds time to the determination process. For example, it has been a long-standing policy that prior to being deemed eligible for an IA grant, the disaster survivor must first apply for a loan via the Small Business Administration (SBA). Even if the homeowner knows they are not eligible for a loan - which is unfortunately those that have economic hardships face, they are still required to apply for a loan, only to be rejected, before they are eligible for an IA grant from FEMA. The loan process requirement can easily be eliminated to expedite the delivery of services to the survivor.

If an individual or family is displaced from their home, and if emergency lodging has been requested by a governor and approved, the path to receiving the hotel assistance with limited finances can be a long and arduous process. In an area affected by a disaster, there will be survivors with insurance and/or financial means that are able to secure a hotel room quickly. On the contrary, those without the financial resources to secure a hotel room near their homes must first apply for the assistance, await confirmation of eligibility, and then find a hotel room. While this process takes time, the likelihood of an individual or family without the financial resources to evacuate on their own means that hotel rooms near their home may be unavailable. Hotels may already be full of other evacuees often times placing those without means to evacuate on their own a significant distance away from their home. Thus, the recovery process becomes more stressful as access to begin recovery with cleanup and other repairs, if approved through the IA program, an even lengthier process. This is exacerbated further if the families evacuating do not have access to a vehicle or their own transportation and need to rely on other modes of transportation, including public transportation. Reform of the program to allow for quicker access to hotels, which will result in closer evacuation locations to their homes, is needed.

In many situations, being able to remain in their home while repairs are being made, so long as it's safe to be in the dwelling, is the best option for recovery. Not only will families remain within their community and close to other services they may typically utilize, but it allows them to start the rebuilding process without the perils of distance and transportation access. In the past FEMA managed a highly successful program called the Sheltering and Temporary Essential Power (STEP) program. This program allowed families to live in their homes while repairs were being made from damage due to a natural disaster. This program provided emergency assistance for life sustaining needs such as emergency repairs to roofs, walls, and electric and plumbing utilities. Due to some isolated misuse of the program, STEP was suspended and has not been utilized in years. However, the benefit to families being able to remain in their community, where they have built-in support systems, is often the best solution for temporary repairs concurrent to the IA application and adjudication process. In addition, a secondary benefit of the STEP program is that it reduces, and in some cases may eliminate the need for local sheltering and feeding programs, thus saving on additional disaster response and recovery expenses.

**Conclusion:**

Building a pipeline of emergency managers to lead programs, departments, and agencies, as well as making disaster assistance more equitable for our nation will not occur overnight. However, there has been significant discussion about diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) for years, and it is time that we act. Local, state, and federal agencies have a wealth of research and studies available to them, and we must be deliberate about DEI by building it into strategic planning, policy, and programs. DEI is not and cannot be a temporary topic of discussion but is something that we need to engrain in our minds and actions. The face of our nation, as it always has, continues to change. Let us do everything in our ability – including creating DEI champions in every department and agency that reports to senior officials to continuously advocate for equitable programs, agencies, departments, and delivery part of the fabric by which we operate. Let us do so as if the future of this profession depends on it. Because in my opinion, it does.