

## Prepare for Rapid Evaluation of Needs and Assignment of Resources

*Presented by Mark Ashley, Operations Officer, Naval Construction Battalion Center (Gulfport, Mississippi)*

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**Lessons Learned:** Strong leadership prior to a disaster is essential for building partnerships through early collaboration and coordination. Strong leadership aids in the determination of priorities and focus for partners, facilitates collaboration and coordination, and ensures that needs and resources are matched. Partnerships increase knowledge and understanding of one another's mission, capabilities, and resources. Such partnerships prosper by reaching beyond community boundaries for resources and capabilities and simultaneously developing formal plans to coordinate between local government and federal assistance. Finally, it is critical to consider local staff, who will suffer the same disaster and the resulting trauma and stress in their own lives; increased planning and coordination are key to identifying available human capital and accounting for resulting workloads.

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For more than 50 years, the Naval Construction Battalion Center Seabees have been an important part of the Gulfport, Mississippi, community. After Hurricane Katrina, more than 3000 Seabees were deployed to assist with the recovery efforts at Gulfport. Immediately following the disaster it was clear that action needed to be taken, but with so much devastation, it was hard to know where to begin. Leaders had to set priorities rapidly and determine focus for the many key partners.

For example, the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) reported that sewer lift stations were not operational, which became an immediate priority as they were critical to establishing safe living conditions. The Seabees took primary responsibility for fixing them, working closely with local utility authorities to cap water mains, replace valves, and ultimately repair the lift stations. Another significant



issue was the reopening of schools. With schools closed parents could not return to work, which meant normalcy could not be reestablished. After evaluating the school situation, it was determined that 80 to 90 percent of the work was simply debris removal, but it took manpower to get the job done and leadership to ensure this job was a priority. The Seabees deployed 3000 individuals in small units to school districts along the coast and worked feverishly to get them reopened. With assistance from the Seabees, 85 schools were able to reopen earlier than anticipated, affecting more than 45,000 students on the Gulf Coast.



During the recovery process, one of the key lessons learned by the teams was that coordination and collaboration were essential. Gulfport learned that partnerships must be in place prior to the disaster in order to understand what resources and capabilities exist and how they will be best utilized following the disaster. Understanding interdependencies is vital when assigning responsibilities and coordinating efforts to ensure the many and diverse needs are met. “The first time we meet

each other should not be during the disaster,” said Operations Officer Mark Ashley. “Knowing the different partners, their missions, and the resources they can bring to the table is important for disaster planning efforts.”

It is also important to have a system in place to ensure that the supplies and services provided are matched with the needs of the community and, just as important, that there is a logistics plan for getting those goods and services into the community.

“After the storm we lost our supply line. We found that we had a distribution system, but we had no fuel; FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] had no distribution system, but they had fuel,” said Ashley. “We were able to combine forces and work together to get the supply line up and running. That’s

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just one example of why it’s important to know who can provide what services during the recovery process – it enables you to match needs with resources to get the job done.”

Today, the Naval Construction Battalion has liaisons at each of the county’s EOCs who assist with the coordination of the Seabees. Through this on-site presence an increased understanding of skills and capabilities is maintained toward meeting the varied and numerous community needs.

Finally, the Seabees learned that taking care of your own staff is tremendously important to recovery and resiliency efforts. Plans must be in place for their basic needs, such as clean clothes, accommodations, and meals, as well as for their mental health. Many of those left to clean up are without their families, have had their homes destroyed, and are enduring it all while trying to help the community get back on its feet.

