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Emergency Managers: To Infinity and Beyond



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Would you say that you are a fan of New Year's Resolutions? If you had to choose your biggest takeaway/lesson from 2022 that you want to implement in 2023, what would it be?

Oh yes, I am definitely a fan. My biggest takeaway from 2022 is that **there will always be an emergency or crisis you're going to have to manage**. Whether it's a pandemic, social unrest, severe weather, gun violence, or arriving migrants, as emergency managers we are constantly asked to solve an array of difficult and thorny issues. The important thing I took away from last year, which I want to continue implementing in 2023, is showing grace to employees by **prioritizing collective mental health and self-care**. The reality is our workforces do so much to try and solve complex problems—in many cases, grappling with life or death. We need to ensure as leaders that we recognize our job is a marathon, not a sprint; as a result, we need to give employees an opportunity to take a break, breathe, and make time for self-care.

For me, it's not just about words or office policies. As leaders, we must live by **example**. We need to create a working environment tailored to wellness and mental health and show our employees that leaders also value their own self-care. In 2022, I double-downed on this perspective, and I endeavor to continue prioritizing the wellness of HSEMA employees, as well as my own, in 2023. I truly believe this approach will only make us **stronger** and more **effective** in serving the community.

Holding a position in the CIA is a great honor, and you were even recognized by the CIA and the Director of National Intelligence for your leadership and accomplishments! What was your favorite part about holding that position?

Wow, that's a great question. There are so many favorite parts. Working at the CIA was a remarkable privilege, and I cannot speak higher of the professionals and patriots there who keep our nation safe behind the scenes. I was hired by the agency in the aftermath of September 11th, which was the "Pearl Harbor event" of my generation. I am fortunate to have entered the workforce at such a critical time in our nation's history and to have served on the frontlines of the fight against those who killed 2,977 people on that fateful day. For most of my over 10 years at the CIA, I was a **counterterrorism analyst, targeter, and manager**, assisting in the hunt for those who caused us harm and continued to plot against the United States. This task took me all over the world—from **Iraq to Southeast Asia to Europe to Africa to Latin America**. It allowed me to have a front-row seat to briefing CIA leadership, the President of the United States, national leaders, and foreign dignitaries. It was an amazing—and impactful—career, and I wouldn't change anything about it.

All this said, my favorite part of the job was the deep bonds forged with my colleagues from working together to protect the American people and the Homeland. I still keep in touch with many of them to this day. The agency is a special place; there is no place like it in the US Government, and I would encourage anyone seeking a career in intelligence to consider applying. Finally, I've always been struck by a quote from a former CIA Director that greets you as you enter the agency's main lobby. It reads, **"We go where others cannot go, and we do what others cannot do."**

To me, that also sounds a lot like **emergency managers!**



What kind of influence has NEMA had on your career as Director of the DC Homeland Security and Emergency Management Agency?

NEMA is a great association and one that has taught me a lot about emergency management, despite the fact I have not been in the field very long. It has given me a deep appreciation for the nuances of EM and its long reach into so many issues that confront us. I have been extremely grateful for the mentorship of colleagues and their willingness to **listen, offer advice, and provide guidance**. NEMA facilitates these interactions, not just at annual meetings but throughout the year. It genuinely seeks to advance the profession in a way that I believe will help us reach **new heights**—not just in stature but in resources.

I am excited that as a new member of the **NEMA Board**, I can play a role in helping our President, Patrick Sheehan, and Vice President, Russ Strickland, advance NEMA's strategic priorities. The Board and its membership are well-positioned to bring even greater attention to the central role emergency management plays in the lives of our citizens and communities.

As Director, you always have community as your top priority. How would you describe the impact of your outreach to build and maintain relationships with faith-based communities? Is there a particular person that you have met through this process that has changed how you see emergency management?

Community outreach is an essential part of our agency's mission. I believe we have a strong impact on the community, especially as we apply lessons learned from public communications during the pandemic and social unrest of 2020-21. We have so many avenues to connect with our residents and citizens nowadays, but I fear sometimes our preparedness messaging or even taglines like "Make a Plan, Build a Kit" can get lost in an era of ubiquitous "noise." As emergency managers, we need to think differently about what "outreach" means in our individual jurisdictions and how it can be tailored to our unique constituencies. What works in Tennessee or Ohio might not resonate in DC, so knowing our communities is a critical element of impactful messaging.

In the District of Columbia, we have very strong **external affairs** and **outreach teams**, and I have encouraged them to continue innovating in the ways we do **community engagement**. In the nation's capital, we span state, county, and local functions, making outreach crucial to our mission.



Since the NEMA Mid-Year Forum is soon heading your way, we may need some recommendations! Where is your favorite local spot to grab a bite in DC?

There are a ton of great places across the District! However, since the Mid-Year is in Alexandria, I'll limit my responses to areas of the city that are easily accessible from 395. The obvious choices are the **Wharf** and **Navy Yard**.

On the Wharf, a good Italian option is **Officina**, while a more casual diner who likes pub food will enjoy **The Brighton**. For a great, up-scaly rooftop bar, check out **12 Stories**, which has amazing views of the river, Arlington, and National Harbor. In Navy Yard, I always go for **Atlas Brewing**, which has an **Andy's Pizza** inside. My favorites are the margherita and its custom mushroom and onion slices. As a native New Jerseyan, I'm a pizza snob, and Andy's is good (also try their cajun-seasoned fries!). **Mission-Navy Yard** is also a popular spot, serving Mexican food with a nice casual scene that has two levels right across from Nationals Park. A favorite spot for HSEMA employees is **Due South** right on the Anacostia River, which serves fantastic Southern comfort food in a semi-casual atmosphere. If you're in Navy Yard for breakfast, definitely hit up **Bethesda Bagels** and grab a coffee around the corner at **Gregory's Coffee**.

For those who want to venture on 395 and then turn north up 110/George Washington Parkway to Georgetown, not only will you be treated to one of the most beautiful drives in the country—with the Potomac River and DC skyline to your right—you'll also have access to some of the best dining in the city. I highly recommend the steak frites at **Chez Billy** or the pizzas at **il Canale** (Harrison Ford—yes, Han Solo and Indiana Jones—was a recent guest!). Afterward, take a stroll down Georgetown's streets and alleyways to the waterfront, which has magnificent views of Roosevelt Island, where President Theodore Roosevelt used to bathe in the Potomac, as well as the Kennedy Center and Washington Monument.

How would you describe your ideal/perfect type of day?

My perfect day usually starts with getting up sometime between 4-5 am, making some coffee, answering emails, and setting my cadence for the next 24 hours. My wife and three kids are usually up around 6-6:30, so I'll make breakfast, take my two daughters to the bus at 7:30 and then take my son to school at 8:30. After that, I'll head to the office for check-ins with my senior staff, take a lunch or coffee with a key partner, and then go for a run on the Mall around early to mid-afternoon. Exercise has become a regular—and essential—part of my routine because it helps me re-center and focus throughout the day. I usually make time to walk around the office to be seen, check-in (via text or calls) with my bosses downtown and ensure I'm able to complete tasks my staff needs from me—all the while keeping my eye on the big issues we need to tackle.

As I enter my 6th year as the Director in DC, I am fortunate to have built a phenomenal team, which gives me the leeway to ask myself three questions at the end of each day: **"Have you advocated for your people today?"; "Have you gotten them the**

answers/tools they need to be successful?"; "Are you looking around the corner and anticipating the agency's needs and challenges?" If I can answer all these questions affirmatively, I feel like it's been a good day.

You better cut the pizza in four pieces because I'm not hungry enough to eat six.

- Yogi Berra

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Registration for the [NEMA 2023 Mid-Year Forum](#) is open! [Register today!](#)



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