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OEM Gets a Seat at the Cabinet Table

Having the **autonomy and authority** needed to accomplish your organization's mission is something earned – but also a necessity. When emergency management organizations are embedded within overarching systems of state government, it can hamper the effectiveness of disaster mitigation, response, and recovery – all of which require swift and appropriate actions.



The elevation of existing emergency management organizations to the state level should be seen as a commitment to disaster risk reduction in the state, and Oregon has recently made that commitment. This year, **Oregon officially moved the Office of Emergency Management (OEM)** out from the Oregon Military Department and elevated it to a cabinet-level Department of Emergency Management (maintaining the OEM acronym).

Effective July 1, 2022, the transition garnered the backing of state legislators, the Oregon Military Department, and Governor Kate Brown. This support was crucial as the change required legislation to be introduced, passed, and signed by the governor. Investments and support like this reiterate the state's focus on the increased severity and frequency of incidents and managing their consequences.

While this change will have huge benefits in day-to-day and long-term operations, the actual **goals and mission of OEM have not changed**. OEM continues to emphasize risk reduction and advocacy for local emergency management with an intentional programmatic focus on people, policy, and programs. After decades of being under-resourced, OEM has doubled its staffing levels to help implement its **vision of an established, equitable culture of preparedness empowering Oregonians to thrive in times of crisis**. As part of its expansion, the department has created a strategic planner position to do a deep dive on processes and practices – looking to implement potential long-term changes.

OEM now has additional authorities and requirements, including the creation of two advisory councils – the Emergency Preparedness Advisory Council and the Local Government Emergency Management Advisory Council – both charged with providing recommendations to the Governor's Office and OEM on emergency preparedness, response, mitigation, and recovery. Additionally, OEM Director Andrew Phelps has been assigned as the Governor's Homeland Security Advisor. These added responsibilities provide opportunity to cultivate relationships with communities and state leadership, strengthening emergency management coordination efforts as a whole.

While oversight might increase, the transition offers expansive benefits. When embedded within the Military Department, OEM served as part of a response-oriented organization. As its own department, the agency is better positioned to further objectives to modernize emergency management by prioritizing risk reduction and mitigation, building a foundation of equity and accessibility, and increasing diversity of the workforce and discipline. In focusing policy and processes toward mitigating the impacts of a changing climate from the ground up while prioritizing marginalized communities, OEM looks to reduce the weight of consequence management.

Growing pains are among the biggest challenges OEM has experienced in filling out its new role. Recruitment, staffing, and onboarding – ongoing challenges that form a common barrier to emergency management organizations across the country – have impacted the new department.

Some of the advice that OEM has to offer would surround the way a transition like this is managed internally – having good management practices and communication in place for this type of elevation is invaluable to an organization. The **change is no small feat and needs to be thought out and deliberate to ensure operations continue, but also that staff and employees understand how the change will impact their roles**. Emergency management professionals have such a challenging role and increasing the scope of work without proper foresight and preparation could impact emergency response operations.

**Come gather 'round people
Wherever you roam
And admit that the waters
Around you have grown
And accept it that soon
You'll be drenched to the bone
If your time to you is worth savin'
And you better start swimmin'
Or you'll sink like a stone
For the times they are a-changin'**

— Bob Dylan, The Times They Are A-Changin'

If you would like more information or have a state practice you'd like to highlight as part of this ongoing series, please contact [Jamie Logan](mailto:jamie@nemaweb.org)

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