



NEMA PRIVATE SECTOR COMMITTEE

Building Trust, Enhancing Resilience Recommendations for Public-Private Alignment

This white paper emphasizes the importance of public-private partnerships in emergency management, offering solutions to overcome barriers and strengthen resilience.

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Executive Summary

The National Emergency Management Association (NEMA) Private Sector Committee is responsible for fostering relationships between public and private sectors, encouraging the integration of private sector representation into government-lead incident management, and providing technical assistance to the association membership to build relationships that will support the full spectrum of emergency management.

This white paper is published by the NEMA Private Sector Committee to serve as an exploration of the advancements and primary impediments to public and private sector integration in emergency management. Furthermore, the paper discusses the necessity of these partnerships (including the different types of private sector entities and the unique support they provide before, during, and after disasters). Finally, the paper outlines priority recommendations for NEMA members to enhance public/private integration while considering the challenges emergency managers face. These recommendations also highlight the mutual benefits of collaborating across these sectors, reinforcing solutions that strengthen whole-community resilience.

Through these insights, this paper aims to equip all NEMA members with the knowledge, strategies, and tools needed to build collaborative, resilient solutions utilizing the full breadth of the resources available.

Introduction

The NEMA Private Sector Committee is comprised of all private sector members of the organization spanning for-profit companies, non-profit organizations, and infrastructure operators/service providers. This large committee of representatives is actively engaged in the full spectrum of emergency management at all levels of government. While the Committee acknowledges the notable advancement of public/private partnerships over the years, there are still significant impediments to meaningful collaboration and mission alignment. This white paper aims to address the roots of those obstructions and propose ways on how NEMA Membership may work to overcome them. The goal of this document and the NEMA Private Sector Committee as a whole is to support the evolution of public/private sector partnerships to create more resilient emergency management programs.

Defining Public-Private Partnerships

The broad terminology of “private sector” encompasses a very diverse group of businesses, non-profits and community-based organizations, infrastructure operators, and service providers ranging in employee size, revenue size, capacity, geographic location(s), and industry type. The range of private sector entities can include (but is certainly not limited to) local businesses essential to economic health, emergency management consulting firms, volunteer and philanthropic organizations, disability-led and access and functional needs (AFN)-focused organizations, public and privately held critical infrastructure operators (energy, telecom, water, financial services, etc.), and more.

Regardless of the type of private sector entity, robust public-private partnerships can tap into the private sector’s rich resources to serve as a catalyst for joint action, leading to better community outcomes. For example, a small local hardware store has a wealth of supplies, tools, and resources to assist its city’s or county’s response and recovery efforts. Similarly, a regional construction firm has local personnel and moving equipment that may be able to lend a hand. Furthermore, small to large firms that specialize in emergency management functions can always be used to scale up qualified emergency management response and recovery personnel.

It is important to clarify the nature of public-private partnerships as typically experienced by disaster practitioners. Clarifying the definition of such partnerships may also help practitioners be more intentional about forging meaningful relationships. While unique unto themselves, these partnerships share benefits with the government and private sector like co-planning, information sharing, joint training, and coordinated response.

It is equally crucial to ensure that businesses are able to maintain operations during or shortly after a disaster, as they serve as the backbone of their communities, act as trusted community partners, and significantly contribute to overall community resilience. Including them in preparedness, response, and recovery operations facilitates that relationship and improves their ability to respond and recover.

Vendors and Contractors: Service providers (typically for-profit) that must be acquired in adherence to government procurement standards and typically represent companies with service lines tailored specifically to emergency management functions. These stakeholders may offer a wide range of

capabilities, including (but not limited to) disaster cost recovery, logistics management, sheltering and mass care, construction, housing, staff augmentation, environmental services, communications, commodities, and more. When it comes to engaging vendors and contractors, the main advantage is to enhance or fill capability gaps that exist at the state and local levels, which offers a high level of control and oversight on behalf of government contract holders.

Local and Regional Businesses: This category of private sector stakeholders represents entities that are economic drivers in their respective communities and/or regions. Large employers and small business communities whose restoration is critical for a state’s ongoing economic livelihood also provide critical services in certain geographic areas like grocery, pharmaceuticals, fuel, etc. Public sector engagement of these partners does not necessarily require a resource exchange but may invest response resources to expedite their restoration for the good of the community.

Infrastructure and Critical Service Operators: These entities are responsible for overseeing as well as operating essential services and infrastructure lifelines (such as water, energy, communications, supply chain, etc.). These entities support the systems necessary to recover the economic health of a particular area such as hotels, restaurants, transportation, and community organizations providing direct services to vulnerable communities. Partnerships with these stakeholders are best framed to be mutually beneficial in facilitating information sharing and restoration coordination. Such partnerships do not typically involve a monetary exchange but may be mutually beneficial due to shared infrastructure protection and recovery goals.

Nonprofit and Voluntary Organizations: These organizations provide direct services at the community level and play a vital role in advancing whole community resilience. By filling critical gaps in government services (such as providing case management, emotional care, building materials and supplies, and other resources) and acting as trusted conduits to underserved populations, they ensure that response and recovery efforts reach those who might otherwise be overlooked. Nonprofits often serve as force-multipliers for governments, bringing essential “boots-on-the-ground” visibility, local trust, and culturally responsive approaches that strengthen connections between emergency managers and the communities they serve.

The Need for Mission Alignment

Evolution of Public / Private Partnerships in Emergency Management

Historically federal, state, tribal, and local private sector liaisons and emergency managers have made great strides in building systems and support structures to align missions across the emergency management spectrum. Such strides have included the development of Business Emergency Operations Centers (BEOC), integration of state- and local-level Private Sector Liaisons (PSLs) tasked with enhancing these relationships in disaster operations, advancement of critical infrastructure collaboration, and prioritization of private sector integration in law and policy. While this paper focuses largely on the existing opportunities to strengthen public/private partnerships, it is important to acknowledge and validate the foundation that has been built.

State PSLs and BEOCs have built trusted, operational relationships with corporate operators, crisis management teams, business continuity professionals, and community-based organizations that extend far beyond procurement and contracting functions. These trust-driven partnerships (strengthened through both “blue sky” preparedness and “gray sky” disaster operations) have repeatedly supported supply chain stabilization, infrastructure restoration, coordinated communications, and overall community resilience without relying solely on contractual mechanisms. While ethical and procurement frameworks remain important considerations, contracting represents only one component of private sector engagement. The PSL role is centered on coordination, information sharing, and mission alignment across all sectors during all phases of emergency management, operating within appropriate legal boundaries while reinforcing the whole-community approach.

The variable existence, role, and authority of PSLs in government is a factor that limits engagement across the public/private sector community. Many states employ PSLs as previously mentioned, and they have worked to build trust through open dialogue and inclusion in preparedness and response activities. Many state PSL frameworks are quite advanced, while other less-resourced states do not have staff devoted to this function. Assigning dedicated staff to this function creates intentionality and focus toward enhancing relationships that are more essential to improve post-disaster outcomes. PSLs should be embedded within incident management structures with defined authorities, clear reporting lines, and access to operational decision-makers. While their role is not to advocate for specific companies, they are an important bridge to coordinate lifeline restoration, facilitate information flow, and support situational awareness between sectors.

Through the efforts of private sector and governments at every level the foundations of public/private integration are strong but the full benefits of meaningful collaboration between emergency management professionals and the private sector are currently not being realized to the greatest potential. The root causes vary depending on geographic area and density of potential private sector partners as well as an inconsistency between emergency management programs regarding resources and staffing to support these partnerships. In some cases, these dynamics may have stemmed from incidents of nepotism or negative media coverage involving improper public sector benefits or conflicts which have soured the overall inclusive culture leading to caution, pronounced risk aversion, and lingering sense of mistrust. In other cases, commitments to resource support have not been carried out leading to dis-trust and a hesitancy to rely on the private sector partner in the future. Emergency management challenges are growing in complexity and scale, requiring innovative, adaptive solutions that no single sector can develop or implement alone. It is now more important than ever for public sector representatives to explore, test, or openly discuss new ideas with their private sector counterparts. Overcoming this disconnect will require a deliberate shift toward building trust and fostering partnerships for both public and private entities, which is one that recognizes that collaboration is not a liability, but rather a necessity for effective, next-generation emergency management.

Several interconnected factors contribute to existing barriers to meaningful, mutual engagement between the public and private sector. For example, some public sector leaders must operate within a culture that prioritizes process over outcome, with a strong emphasis on protocol, public accountability, and regulatory compliance. Historical instances of vendor favoritism, corruption, and failed public-private partnerships have understandably deepened institutional caution. Forward-thinking public sector leaders who seek to engage beyond conventional boundaries may face scrutiny or accusations of impropriety,

bringing negative consequences to their reputations and respective agencies. At the same time, the checks and balances embedded within the emergency management structure, while essential for safeguarding public funds and maintaining trust, may inadvertently reinforce a culture that discourages innovation.

The continuing perception that private sector motives are fundamentally profit-driven, and therefore inherently at odds with public interest, creates a reinforcing cycle. Driven by past experiences where private partners fell short of delivering on government contracts or public-private initiatives, skepticism breeds hesitancy on one side and distance on the other, making even well-intentioned collaborations difficult to establish. Yet, breaking this cycle is not only possible: it is essential. By fostering transparency, setting clear expectations, and building relationships grounded in shared goals, both sectors can move past outdated assumptions while unlocking more resilient, innovative solutions that bring exponentially greater benefits to the communities.

Knowledge is Power When Enhancing Public / Private Relationships

With trust as the cornerstone of emergency management any perceived or actual impropriety, conflict of interest, or fulfillment shortfalls between public and private sector partners can overshadow even the most successful efforts leading to aversion to beneficial collaboration. This not only impacts post-event response, but it also restricts development of new ideas and proven resiliency programs.

Regarding procurement boundaries specifically, the Uniform Rules within 2 CFR Part 200 rightly emphasize the need to prevent impermissible conflicts of interest.¹ However, these rules, while critical to safeguarding public trust, can inadvertently stifle innovation when interpreted or applied in an overly restrictive manner. For example, the prohibition against soliciting or accepting gratuities/favors from contractors is straightforward and generally manageable due to the tangible nature of the compliance (or noncompliance).² Yet more abstract provisions (such as the restriction on private sector entities that help develop specifications, statements of work, or bid invitations from competing for those same procurements³) can cause confusion and lead to overcorrection.

Historically, compliance with conflicts of interest rules have been analyzed in terms of three primary areas: (1) Impaired Objectivity; (2) Unequal Access to Information; and (3) Biased Ground Rules. Notably, each of these concerns can be addressed with risks mitigated through the implementation of strong standards of conduct,⁴ a keen awareness of any nonpublic information shared through the relationship and transparency to the greatest extent possible in the event of a related procurement action, and robust documentation of development and evaluation processes utilized to select any vendor on a project to be funded in whole or in part with public funds.

Some local, tribal, and state emergency management agencies have successfully overcome certain limitations by inviting vendors and contractors to present their capabilities (either in person or virtually).

¹ 2 CFR § 200.318(c)(1) and (2).

² *Id.*

³ 2 CFR § 200.319(b).

⁴ Pursuant to 2 CFR § 200.318(c)(1), this is a requirement regardless of any public sector entity that will be the recipient or subrecipient of federal grant funds, “The recipient or subrecipient must maintain written standards of conduct covering conflicts of interest and governing the actions of its employees engaged in the selection, award, and administration of contracts.”

These presentations often occur outside of the formal procurement cycle and prior to the release of any formal solicitations on behalf of the government. Emergency managers seeking to better understand available resources and capabilities have conducted preliminary market research to align potential solutions with their agency’s operational needs.

In the event of any perceived or actual conflict of interest, respective parties must acknowledge and fulfill their responsibility to mitigate or resolve the conflict using “common sense, good judgement, and sound discretion.”⁵ However, if emergency managers shy away from engaging with a significant portion of the private sector on new ideas or proven solutions, opportunities to tap into external expertise, streamline recovery processes, and enhance public value are often left unexplored. While collaboration may require more careful consideration (especially when public funds are involved), it is both possible and necessary. In establishing both a clear understanding of regulatory frameworks and commitment to ethical engagement, both public and private sectors can pursue partnerships that unlock critical expertise, accelerate recovery, and build a more resilient, responsive emergency management system.

The Value of Public / Private Relationships in a Complex Political Environment

Simultaneously, while addressing the realities and challenges of extreme natural hazards as well as multitude of made-made threats, there is now a very evident push by federal authorities to shift the majority of financial responsibilities of emergency management (particularly regarding mitigation, response, and recovery) to local authorities. With scarcity in resources and fluctuating political priorities, the stress on the state, local, and tribal emergency management spectrum is poised to expand.

These multifaceted, everchanging landscapes and challenges have no single answer to provide successful outcomes. However, a meaningful outreach effort between state, local, and tribal entities to form more public/private partnerships may offer an answer to relieve the existing and future mounting burdens on local emergency management officials while also serving as a conduit to whole-community resilience.

While the benefits of effective and proactive public/private partnerships are typically easily acknowledged, the reluctance of public entities to engage in these collaborative efforts can be hampered by a lack of transparency on behalf of private entities during rapidly developing emergency situations. In order to build trust through transparency, it is important to avoid reliance on reactive “post-disaster” engagement with the private sector. Through ad-hoc engagement on “blue sky” days, trust and transparency can be built both ways. For example, the public sector can gain insight into the capabilities of the private sector in their jurisdictions, whom to contact when the need arises, and to build the legal frameworks for use in agile and transparent ways. Meanwhile, the private sector can engage in dialogues on what the public sector may need during emergencies and how to deliver, as well as be compensated, in compliance with legal and ethical frameworks. In this way, private sector partnerships can help enact whole community resilience not as an ancillary consideration but as a central benchmark of successful public-private collaboration and resilient emergency management systems.

⁵ See *Matter of: Daniel Eke and Associates, P.C.*, Comp. Gen. B-271962 at 3 (July 9, 1996) (quoting FAR §§ 9.504 & 9.505 and citing *Person-System Integration, Ltd.*, B-243927.4 (June 30, 1992)).

The emergency management public sector faces well-known structural limitations, including dependence on grant funding, stringent procurement regulations, and human capital shortfalls to address the myriad priorities each state must implement. These factors create challenges such as an inability to hire or retain adequate personnel at the pace needed as well as an inability to procure sufficient supplies and equipment in anticipation of emergencies. With limited funding and staffing capacity and ever-increasing disasters, emergency management offices are often behind when it comes to leveraging the latest tools and resources that can optimize their response and recovery capabilities. The private sector operates with less of these constraints, enabling businesses to rapidly scale workforce up or down, redeploy or recategorize employees, and provide equipment without multifaceted approval processes. When necessities like excavators, shelter, water, food, case managers, logisticians, engineers, and/or monitors are suddenly needed during emergencies, private sector agility can efficiently complement public sector efforts and deliver successful outcomes.

Strategic Recommendations

The NEMA Private Sector Committee has compiled the following recommendations tailored for both public and private sector members to enhance relationships and forge new capabilities at both the state and local level. Perhaps the most important goal of public/private sector coordination practitioners is the explicit recognition that focusing government response efforts on reestablishing private sector supply chains and capabilities is preferable to using government aid to supplant those commodities and services that have been disrupted by a disaster. It is with that exact goal in mind that these recommendations were compiled. These may be undertaken by NEMA membership but additionally have broad applicability for any emergency management program seeking to enhance its own public/private partnerships.

For Public Sector Emergency Managers

1. **Relationship-Building:** Emergency managers should actively foster collaborative relationships with the private sector by adopting an open-minded approach that values diverse perspectives and innovative problem-solving. This includes creating structured forums and regular dialogue opportunities where businesses and organizations can share new ideas, field-tested best practices, and emerging technologies that may enhance response and recovery capabilities. By recognizing the private sector as both a critical resource provider, strategic partner, and key leader in the community, emergency managers can leverage its agility, specialized expertise, and logistical capacity to address evolving challenges. Encouraging a two-way exchange of knowledge (one where public agencies remain receptive to unconventional solutions and adaptable in integrating them) can strengthen operational resilience, improve coordination, and ultimately accelerate community recovery after disasters.
2. **Legal and Ethical Requirements:** In order to have a productive two-way discussion, it is necessary to ensure that emergency managers have a thorough understanding of legal and ethical parameters concerning what is allowable under their own procurement regulations and policies. This is critical to ensure the public sector is proficient in understanding how to leverage private sector capabilities, services, and information sharing in a dynamic disaster environment. Overly conservative interpretations that have been handed down over the years may put emergency managers at a disadvantage, causing over-reliance on government to accomplish what private

sector may be able to effectively support. For example, in some states, the utilization of public resources to re-establish a private operation can be allowed when it is in the public's interest. Conversely, private resources, if and when offered free of charge, should be received and deployed without delay when it is in the public's interest.

3. **Pre-Established Agreements:** Establishing pre-event agreements such as Memoranda of Understanding with non-profit organizations and critical infrastructure to facilitate information sharing or contractual agreements with vendors to address critical resource gaps may provide a familiar, comfortable framework leveraged as an extension of the overall disaster response and recovery enterprise. By formalizing these relationships in writing prior to an event, there is likely to be less suspicion surrounding the motives of vendors, and all stakeholders will operate with a greater level of confidence that post-event priorities are mutually beneficial. Furthermore, emergency managers can establish these agreements tailored to the specific needs of their community such as multi-lingual alerts and information sharing through community-based organizations or the acquisition of medical equipment and power to safeguard life-sustaining systems needs for those with access and functional needs.
4. **Public/Private Partnership Liaisons:** Positions specifically devoted to enhancing these relationships are becoming more frequent within emergency management agencies. This is an extremely important step in integrating private sector entities into response and recovery opportunities. However, the mere presence of the individuals occupying these positions is not enough; PSLs must be empowered to bring the private sector to the table to actively contribute, engage as a member of the leadership of the emergency management organization, and support the private sector in its response and recovery operations. It is crucial that these positions are integrated into operations as an equal arm of the incident management structure to ensure they are not operating in a silo. Meaningful engagement and relevancy will ensure innovative ideas are heard and that inefficient practices are revised based on private sector input.
5. **Collaborative Engagement:** Emergency management agencies should establish structured forums for engagement with private sector partners (including industry Councils and Consortiums) in an effort to foster collaborative preparedness, response, and recovery operations. These forums would serve as vital platforms for sharing resources, aligning priorities, and coordinating strategies across sectors before, during, and after emergencies. By integrating private sector expertise, supply chains, and infrastructure capabilities into planning and decision-making processes, emergency management can enhance resilience, reduce response times, and ensure more effective recovery outcomes for communities.
6. **Explore Cooperative Purchasing:** State members of NEMA should explore the viability of multi-state or national cooperative purchasing agreements to balance the capabilities of jurisdictions with many resources versus those without. Cooperative purchasing could also lead to uniform vetting practices, pricing, and services to build the foundation for deeper trust in those companies that are a part of the agreement. As a first step, NEMA should examine the legal requirements needed for cooperative purchasing and engage the private sector in understanding the technology, human capital, and policy requirements necessary to develop a cooperative purchasing body with the authority to support multiple states.

For Private Sector Stakeholders

1. **Relationship-Building:** The same expectations should be true of private sector stakeholders in that these need to actively foster collaborative relationships with public emergency management officials. Likewise, their first step should be to adopt an open-minded approach that values not only diverse perspectives and innovative problem-solving but also one that fosters an understanding of the strict regulatory frameworks that govern the public sector. This applies to private sector stakeholders of all sizes, types, locations, etc., whether that be the mom-and-pop hardware store to large consulting firms to non-profit organizations providing direct support to disaster survivors. The private sector should take the time to truly understand emergency management processes and structures. Businesses and other organizations should also take the time to recognize and be respectful of legal, ethical, and compliance structures in jurisdictions where they operate. As a result, being aware of and navigating conflicts of interest will likely open more doors.
2. **Pre-Incident Support:** Building relationships prior to disasters will always remain paramount to successful response and recovery outcomes. When permitted, stakeholders should attend exercises and networking events while also ensuring they take part in jurisdictional committee meetings and engage with elected officials to seek introductions. It is not necessary (and often not efficient) to wait to be invited by the public sector; rather, local and regional private sector groups should invite public sector emergency management officials to their meetings and events.
3. **Transparency and Trust:** Perhaps most importantly, the private sector must maintain an approach that is both transparent and non-transactional. For example, being clear about intentions, capabilities, and constraints all serve to build trust. Just the same, the private sector should focus on value-adds to the mission of the public sector authorities in an effort to extend beyond just transactional services.
4. **Planning and Preparedness:** Private sector partners must be prepared to ensure their own continuity of operations during disasters. Whether the entity is a critical infrastructure operator, vendor/contractor supporting disaster response and recovery, community-based organization, or locally based large or small business, business continuity practices are essential to operations regardless of disaster impact. Implementing these practices will reduce entities' reliance on government support while positioning them to be a trusted provider of support post-disaster.

Joint Actions for NEMA Members

There are several initiatives that NEMA private and public sector members can undertake together in order to foster healthy, mutually beneficial relationships in the emergency management space. The recommendations below outline steps that the NEMA Private Sector Committee and leadership may consider when supporting the advancement of public/private sector partnerships.

1. **Templates and Guidelines:** Develop model guidelines and/or checklists in a central repository at NEMA to inform public sector partners on ethical and legal engagement with all segments of the private sector.
2. **Learning and Education:** Host regular cross-sector learning sessions specifically targeted toward increasing public sector knowledge and understanding regarding ethical and legal engagement with vendors and contractors.

3. **Private Sector Sub-Committees:** Establish sub-committees of the NEMA Private Sector Committee to represent vendors/contractors, infrastructure and critical service operators, and nonprofit/voluntary organizations to allow for greater collaboration and increased visibility among private sector members.
4. **NEMA Forum Content:** Ensure best practices and examples of excellence in public/private partnerships are shared during each NEMA Forum to shine a light on innovative ways states are working in alignment with their private sector partners.
5. **Private Sector Liaisons:** Expand knowledge sharing of state PSL and Private Sector Crisis Team Coordination. Much of the most impactful work during and after disasters happens between state PSLs and corporate crisis teams, crisis response, and recovery teams. This work should be highlighted in future NEMA forums or educational opportunities to encourage implementation as a standard in public/private coordination.
6. **Capability Repository:** Create a reference library and capability crosswalk of NEMA private sector members that may be accessed by NEMA's member's-only portion of the website to allow for information sharing regarding the capabilities of private sector members. This portal should include company bios and service/specific search engines to allow public sector representative ease of access.

Conclusion

The full membership of NEMA offers a unique opportunity to strengthen public/private relationships and maximize utilization of innovative resources and methods to address significant challenges faced by emergency managers. With disasters increasing in frequency and severity coupled with the complexity of the social, political, and economic environment, the culture of collaboration between sectors must evolve to meet the needs of disaster survivors. By implementing the recommendations outlined in this document, local, tribal, state and federal emergency managers can reimagine proactive, ethical, and inclusive partnerships ensuring that resilience strategies serve the whole community in all phases of emergencies. It is imperative to realize and recognize that tangible change is necessary in order to modernize disaster state-level mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery programs across the nation. The NEMA Private Sector Committee stands ready to support the implementation of these recommendations and supports meaningful integration of public/private sector partnerships.