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International Association of Emergency Managers

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IAEM PLUGGED IN
Virtual Conference
April 20-21, 2023

Special Focus Issue: "IAEMstrongerstories"

My #IAEMstrongerstory

By Carrie Speranza, CEM, IAEM-USA Second Vice President,
Director of Emergency Management Solutions, Esri

My story took place on Jan. 6, 2021. At the time, I worked at the District of Columbia’s Homeland Security and Emergency Management Agency (HSEMA), and my husband worked on Capitol Hill. As deputy director, my role that day was as executive-in-charge of the emergency operations center (EOC), working alongside the EOC manager and team.

Since we both worked in the District as emergency managers, my husband and I would often do status checks when incidents would occur, which I attempted to do on Jan. 6. But not long after the Capitol building was breached, I lost contact with him, which I wouldn’t regain again for another five hours. Working in the EOC, each one of those hours was filled with a barrage of images, videos, and radio traffic from the scene, which only made it feel like an eternity of silence.

Naturally, as a wife and mom, my thoughts spiraled into very dark places. I wondered if he would be injured, or worse. I thought about how I would tell that story to my young children, and I contemplated the words I would use to describe what happened that day. I also wondered

Content Warning: The stories published in this March Issue of the IAEM Bulletin represent the experiences, thoughts, and emotions of each author. Some may contain sensitive or graphic details, and it’s possible that reading the stories may invoke somber and contemplative thoughts. **Readers are strongly encouraged to consider their own mental health before reading the stories of others.** And remember, please offer kindness and support to those who share their stories below.

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From the IAEM-USA President

Take Care and Remain #IAEMStrong

By Cathy Clark, MA, IAEM-USA President

Recently, I participated in the FEMA Vanguard Executive Crisis Leadership Fellowship Program, which expanded my professional network with emergency management colleagues across the local, state, tribal, federal, and private sectors. As part of the Fellowship Program, cohort members shared their own crisis leadership stories, including reflections on lessons learned. The discussions that followed these poignant reminders of the challenges emergency management professionals face today helped members of our cohort forge supportive relationships and a strong desire to remain connected as we continue to improve collaboration across all levels of the public and private sectors in an integrated crisis

event and/or disaster.

Throughout my career in emergency management, I embraced crisis situations and thrived in this leadership role. These events provided me an opportunity to share my skills in crisis and risk communications as I served elected/appointed officials and jurisdictions, working proactively to share important messages to help keep citizens informed during response and recovery operations. Over time, the complexity of these events has continued to grow along with perceptions of widespread distrust of the news media and misinformation campaigns being shared—especially on social media platforms. Today, I find comfort in IAEM's Stronger Stories initiative to help colleagues navigate the ongoing burden of stress related to crisis events facing today's emergency managers. I wish this program had been in place following the collapse of the Interstate-35W Bridge in 2007.

At the time, I was working as a planner in the Minnesota Department of Transportation's (MnDOT) Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Management. Aside from the information sharing and coordination with other state agencies and jurisdictions following the bridge collapse, our agency experienced a crisis within the crisis. The director of MnDOT's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Management didn't return from a training event and was subsequently relieved



*Cathy Clark, MA
IAEM-USA President*

of her duties triggering questions from the news media and legislators, which eventually resulted in multiple internal investigations. Due to my previous work in emergency management, I was tasked as the agency's Acting Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Management Director. The resulting stress became overwhelming at times as this incident played out internally within our agency and externally in the media. I truly would have appreciated an opportunity to talk with trusted colleagues who could have assured me and my co-workers we hadn't done anything wrong; and in fact, help us recognize we had helped our agency prepare to respond through the training and exercise events we had led in the months prior to the bridge collapse. While I've been able to work through the stress and profes-

A promotional graphic for the IAEM Virtual Conference. The top part features the text "IAEM PLUGGED IN" in large, bold, blue and black letters, with "Virtual Conference April 20-21, 2023" in smaller text below it. The middle part shows a laptop screen with the text "Join IAEM Online #IAEMVC23" in white on a black background. The bottom part is a blue banner with the text "SAVE THE DATE iaem.org/virtualconference2023" in white.

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**Take Care and Remain
#IAEMStrong**
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sional challenges that disaster event exposed for me; reflecting on the days and weeks that followed—along with testifying in front of numerous legislative committees—still unleash stress for me. That said, I know I’ve made changes in how I process these challenging events personally and professionally and please know, I am a strong advocate for more support for mental health and wellness in our profession. Together, we are stronger! Thank you for all you do! Please continue to take care and remain, #IAEMStrong! ♦



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[Elizabeth B. Armstrong, MAM, CAE](#)

The *IAEM Bulletin* is published monthly by IAEM to keep members abreast of association news, government actions affecting emergency management, research, and information sources.

The publication also is intended to serve as a way for emergency managers to exchange information on programs and ideas. Past issues are available in the members-only [IAEM Bulletin Archives](#).

Publishing an article in the *IAEM Bulletin* may help you to meet IAEM’s certification requirements. Check out the [author’s guidelines](#).

Articles should be submitted to Bulletin Editor John Osborne via email at john@iaem.com.

DISCLAIMER

The views and opinions expressed by author(s) of articles appearing in the *IAEM Bulletin* are solely those of the author(s) in his/her/their private capacity and do not necessarily represent the views of the International Association of Emergency Managers, Inc. (IAEM), its officers, directors or volunteers or IAEM’s management company (ASMI), or any of ASMI’s employees and contractors. Responsibility for the information and views expressed in an article lies entirely with the author(s).



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data architect for Crisis
Cleanup
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Organizations Active in
Disaster (VOAD) in
Colorado

MODERATOR:

Regina Zick
Occupational Therapist
NYU Steinhardt

IAEM in Action



On Feb. 14, IAEM members gather at the Colorado State Association conference in Loveland, Colorado. From left: Mike Gavin, IAEM Conference Committee Member; Mike Willis, director, Colorado OEM; Valerie Lucus-McEwen, president, IAEM Region 8; Kevin Klein, director, Colorado Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management.



IAEM Director of Government Affairs Thad Huguley joined the Alabama Emergency Management Association on Capitol Hill to meet with Senator Katie Britt (AL-R). Senator Britt was recently appointed to be Ranking Member on the Senate Homeland Security Appropriations Subcommittee.



Government Affairs Committee member Chasity Schmelzenbach was recently in Washington and met with IAEM Government Affairs Director Thad Huguley to discuss her interest in facilitating a discussion about aligning the disaster programs, from all federal agencies, in a more collaborative way. Chasity was in Washington for the National Association of Development Organizations (NADO) Policy Conference. As executive director of Buckeye Hills Regional Council in Ohio, Chasity works at the intersection of emergency management and economic development.

IAEM Plugged In: Two Days of Virtual Learning

IAEM will host IAEM Plugged In on April 20-21, 2023. This can't-miss two day training provides learning sessions with expert speakers—including live Q&A sessions, a full day of training opportunities, and attendee-only networking. Learn more about IAEM Plugged In and start planning your conference schedule on the [IAEM website](#).

IAEM Plugged In Has Something for Everyone

The program provides opportunities to learn about a variety of topics to meet diverse needs, including sessions on freight rail disruption, airport emergency management, human trafficking, the electrical power grid, career changes, climate change, mental health, and more. All registrants will have access to content-on-demand following the conference, training courses on day two of the conference, and bonus content that includes most [plenary sessions](#) and [EMvision Talks](#) from the 2022 IAEM Annual Conference. IAEM Plugged In delivers up to 15.5 hours of content you may use towards the IAEM Certification Program and up to an additional 18 hours of training depending on the number of courses you attend. View the IAEM Plugged In [full program](#).

IAEM Plugged In Session Availability Filling Quickly

The training sessions with limited seating during IAEM Plugged In are filling up quickly. [Secure your spot today](#) to ensure you have the

top selection of available sessions. Several training sessions, including MGT 312 Senior Officials Workshop for All Hazards Preparedness, AWR 329 Leveraging Tools for Coordinated Community Disaster Communications, MGT 481- Disaster Recovery: A Strategic Overview of the Public Assistance Process, and several other sessions have limited availability and are offered on a first come, first served basis.

Fun Networking Opportunities

Join your fellow emergency management professionals in two days of networking, connecting with speakers, and getting to know all that IAEM has to offer through our new platform. Plan to stick around at the end of the first day for IAEM's Emergency Management Jeopardy. Contestants will be eligible for prizes.

Registration Options to Meet Your Needs

Registrants may opt for the [All-In registration](#) pass which includes registration to both the April IAEM Plugged In event and full registration to the IAEM Annual Conference in Long Beach, California, Nov. 3-9, 2023. [Register now](#) and be sure to take advantage of the discounted rate for IAEM members, IAEM emerging professional members, IAEM student members, and even non-members today. ♦

71ST IAEM ANNUAL CONFERENCE & EMEX

2023
Annual Conference & EMEX
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LONG BEACH, CA

NOVEMBER 3-9, 2023

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Virtual Conference
April 20-21, 2023

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IAEM Conference News

Now Open: IAEM Poster Showcase Call for Speakers

At the Annual Conference every year there is a stunning display of the ever-expanding Poster Showcase. Open to everyone, the IAEM Poster Showcase is an opportunity to share your knowledge or findings obtained through experience or research. Participants' posters are prominently displayed in the large foyer of the convention center for all to see as you pass from session to session, to registration and the Exhibit Hall, plus there is a presentation session during the Tuesday morning program break.

Choose from Two Divisions of Participation

1. Competitive Division:
 - a. Choose a category - Practitioner, Academic or Student (Undergraduate or Graduate)
 - b. Present your poster to a group of evaluators to qualify for gold, silver or bronze recognition from IAEM.
2. Non-Competitive Division
 - a. No categories, participants share their research or practice to others at the conference.

All participants chosen to display their posters and who have completed the requirements of the Poster Showcase Division will receive a certificate of participation documenting credit towards the IAEM Certification Program under Professional Contribution Category F, Speaking. The Poster Showcase is open to individuals to share their work but not organizations. The Poster Showcase poster, video, and competitive division virtual evaluation sessions are intended for a single participant per poster. Other collaborators are welcome to attend the annual conference and participate in the Poster Showcase presentation session for attendees. Requirements can be found on the [conference website](#). ◆

Start Planning Today for the EMvision Talks Call for Speakers



Opening April 3, the Call for Speakers for the EMvision Talks is your opportunity to be a part of this very popular session live on the plenary stage at the IAEM 71st Annual Conference & EMEX in Long Beach, California. The EMvision Talks are modeled on the well-known TED™ talk format. The Talks provide a forum for people to share a personal connection to an idea, experience, or passion related to emergency management, leadership, health and wellness, inclusion, communication, community engagement, or other related topics. Since debuting at IAEM in 2015, this session consistently garners rave reviews from conference attendees. Learn more about the submission process on our [conference website](#), plus view the [videos](#) of past year's dynamic lineup of presenters. ◆



POSTER SHOWCASE

SUBMIT BY APRIL 21ST

Competitive and Non-Competitive Opportunities for Practitioners, Students, and Academics

IAEM Certification News

Updated Certification Certificates Launching in 2023

This year, IAEM is introducing a new AEM/CEM presentation format to give the certificate a contemporary look and to better accommodate standard-size framing and filing options.

A sample of the fresh, new version can be found to the right of this article. It is formatted as an 8 ½" x 11" size with landscape orientation. This change facilitates you putting it in a file or inserting in a frame, suitable for hanging in your office. We are looking forward to celebrating the new class of AEMs and CEMs in Long Beach, California at the President’s Banquet on Wednesday, Nov. 8, 2023! Contact IAEM Headquarters (info@iaem.com) if we can be of assistance on your certification journey. ♦



Student Spotlight: Massachusetts Maritime Academy

By Sarah Cowan, IAEM Student Member, Disaster and Emergency Management, York University

Situated on the coastline of Buzzards Bay, Massachusetts, Massachusetts Maritime Academy (MMA) is home to a growing IAEM student chapter. For this issue of the *IAEM Bulletin*, I had the opportunity to sit down with current MMA IAEM Student Chapter President Ethan Rego. Ethan is a junior at MMA studying Emergency Management and Homeland Security and is currently on exchange in Denmark at the University College of Copenhagen.

Sarah Cowan (SC): What led you to study emergency management and homeland security at MMA?

Ethan Rego (ER): Originally, I thought I wanted to be a graphic designer. I attended a technical high school where I had the opportunity to explore other options, and I realized that I really liked legal and protective services. For most of high

school, I had my eyes set on becoming a firefighter—I have family friends who work in the field, which inspired me to explore that career path. When it came time to pursue further education after high school, I saw value in the breadth of emergency

management and the wide range of career options. Wanting to stay within Massachusetts, I really only had three options to pursue a degree in emergency management. MMA appealed to me because it is publicly-funded, has a great reputation, and provides a unique regimented structure. I saw the regimented structure as a valuable opportunity for students in the EM program to gain familiarity working within a chain of command and hierarchy, similar to the Incident Command System (ICS).

SC: What do you see as the value of membership with the IAEM student chapter at MMA?

ER: I love embracing new opportunities, especially if it's EM-related, and that's exactly what the chapter offers. There are so many benefits to membership, such as meeting people in the field, informational webinars, EM-specific resume and interview support, and attending conferences. The IAEM Annual Conference was



Members of MMA gather near an IAEM banner. From left to right: Amanda Robinson (member), Mitchell Campbell (vice president), Ethan Rego (president), Shane McNamara (secretary), Dr. Mike Gutierrez (faculty advisor)

an opportunity to understand who works in the region and in the field. I think the biggest benefit of our student chapter is that it builds connections and familiarizes you with the field and the way that the classroom can't. The other big thing for me is the AEM certification. I make sure to highlight to all new members that if they start when they join the program, they can complete their AEM certification requirements by the time they graduate. In general, I think the student chapters play a vital role in preparing the next generation of emergency managers to enter the field. I think all EM students should have the opportunity to become a member of an IAEM student chapter, and I hope more schools can have them.

SC: Looking back at your time



Ethan Rego (president), Dr. Mike Gutierrez (faculty advisor), and Shane McNamara (secretary) pose for a photo at the 2022 IAEM Annual Conference in Savannah, Georgia.

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Student Spotlight

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with the MMA student chapter so far, what have been some of the highlights?

ER: Attending the IAEM Annual Conference, hands down. The opportunity to travel to the conference was an amazing privilege, and I was able to meet people from across the world. Aside from the conference, one of my top highlights would be the agency tours we do. We had the chance to tour the City of Providence's Emergency Management Agency Office and talk with the director, deputy director, and staff.

SC: What are the day-to-day responsibilities of the chapter president?

ER: It's a lot of planning and logistics. I see my role in three parts, administration, creating opportunities, and liaising with IAEM. Regarding administration, my role is to plan and facilitate our weekly chapter meetings. The second part of my role is to find and create opportunities for students. For example, we have big career fairs on campus, and our chapter organizes workshops to help students prepare their elevator pitches and resumes for recruiters. One of our goals is to keep our members informed of what is happening in the field and what external opportunities may be available to them to further their learning. Typically, this takes the form of sharing and encouraging attendance at upcoming events on our social media accounts. Lastly, in the role of chapter president, I meet with the IAEM Region 1 board every month to let them know what we have going on and to share information with our chapter members. I love meeting with the regional board, it's a great opportunity to understand what is going on in our region and build connections with working professionals in the field.



Mitchell Campbell (Vice President), Jessica Gray (Member), Steffany Elmore (Member), Ethan Rego (President), and James Lord (Member) pose for a photo following their tour of the City of Providence's Emergency Management Agency Office

SC: If you had unlimited resources available, what are your dream projects for the chapter?

ER: I would love to increase attendance at the IAEM Annual Conference. This past year we were able to have me, one other student member, and our faculty advisor attend. If resources were unlimited, I would want every chapter member to have the opportunity to attend. One of the more attainable dreams I have is to increase the amount of training we can offer our members. The field of EM is so broad, and the more we can expose our members to the different areas the better prepared they will be. If anyone reading this is a certified instructor in EM-related trainings, we would love to connect with you!

SC: Is there anyone who has been instrumental to the success of the MMA IAEM student chapter you would like to give a shoutout to?

ER: There are so many people that have supported our chapter in some way. I want to give a shoutout to my friend, Anna Kane. She was the previous MMA IAEM chapter pres-

ident and is the reason our student chapter was able to recover when returning to in-person after the initial COVID-19 pandemic response. IAEM Region 1 President Taylor Frizzell, and the rest of the Region 1 Board – thank you for the warm welcome when I was elected, and for your continuous support and dedication to the success of our students. Finally, I would like to recognize Dr. Mike Gutierrez, our faculty advisor, who fought for the funding that allowed us to attend the IAEM conference.

You are invited to stay connected with the MMA IAEM student chapter on Instagram [@mmaiaem](#) and LinkedIn [IAEM R1 MMA Undergraduate Student Chapter](#). ♦

IAEM Scholarship Application Period Closes April 24 Full-time Undergrad and Full- and Part-time Grad Students Are Encouraged to Apply

The International Association of Emergency Managers (IAEM) Scholarship Program 2023 application period will close at 11:59:59 p.m. EDT, April 24, 2023. Applications are being accepted in the online application portal. The IAEM Scholarship Program supports the future of emergency management by providing scholarships through a competitive process to full-time undergraduate and full and part-time graduate students working towards degrees in emergency management, disaster management, or a closely related field of study. Since 2001, the program has provided \$163,750 in scholarships to 74 students.

Application Portal

The application portal streamlines the application process for students and reviewers. Applicants must use their login and password to access the system; non-members who have not used the IAEM system will need to register at no cost. Once logged in after registration, all personal data will be transferred to the application. The student must complete a few short additional survey questions and upload the required documentation. The system is flexible and lets the student return to update the application and add additional documentation within their portal until the deadline of 11:59:59 p.m. EDT, April 24.

[Scholarship application instructions](#) are available to help the student through the process. Students are encouraged to review the instructions carefully before beginning the process.

Application Tools

Submitting an incomplete application is the most common mistake noted by the Scholarship Commission. An incomplete application is automatically invalidated. To avoid this mistake, the commission created checklists for each application type. Students are encouraged to completely download and read the [application instructions](#) to determine the appropriate application. Be sure to download and use the [checklist for the application](#) to ensure the application will be eligible to be reviewed. The two required essay questions for each application are found on the application checklist.

The Scholarship Commission held a webinar on March 16 on “How to Successfully Complete the IAEM Scholarship Application.” This webinar provides step-by-step instructions on how to upload documents in the portal and reviews frequent mistakes. [View this webinar on the IAEM website.](#)

Questions

There is an online [Frequently Asked Question](#) page that may solve many issues for applicants. Questions about the program or the application may be directed to Scholarship Program Director Dawn M. Shiley, CAE, at dawn@iaem.com. ♦



IAEM Scholarship Applications

IAEM Scholarship PROGRAM

Application Deadline
11:59:59 pm EDT
April 24, 2023

Apply Today!

IAEM Book Review: *Introduction to Emergency Management in Canada* (Emond, 2022)

By Todd De Voe, IAEM Region 9 President

This review was first published in the October 2022 edition of *Blue Line Magazine*.

- **Book Review:** Introduction to Emergency Management in Canada (Emond, 2022).
- **General Editors:** Chris J. Collins and Darren Blackburn
- **ISBN:** 978-1-77255-678-0
- **Publication date:** October 2022

The profession of emergency management is growing worldwide. One area that needs to be developed is the academic work and written guidelines of the essentials of the profession by emergency management educators and practitioners. A new book, edited by emergency

management professionals Chris J. Collins and Darren Blackburn, *Introduction to Emergency Management in Canada*, does just that. It is a multi-author book, with 12 contributors from across Canada working in the field of emergency management.

This textbook informs readers of the concepts and principles of emergency management in Canada. Readers will appreciate an overview of the broad range of topics that make emergency management a dynamic profession. After reading the book, they will understand what is expected of someone working in the field, specifically in Canada. The book explores the core pillars of emergency management: prevention, mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery. In addition, the contributors discuss the idea of an all-hazards approach and other important concepts such as community resilience, business continuity, and event management.

Overall, the book is solid. The case studies, the use of the “In the News” boxes, and the exercises that are built in make it easy for an instructor to build a class based on this textbook. Students will find it easy to navigate and a seasoned emergency manager will find it to be a great resource to have on

their bookshelf. The only downside to the book is the “In the News” feature. As much as I love the idea of it, I do not think it will age well and that means the book will need to be updated. For instructors, this is not a big deal, but for students, it makes the book harder to sell on the used book market and means that new students will have to buy the latest edition if there is one.

Students and seasoned practitioners alike will gain knowledge and insight with the clever use of case studies and real-world examples. The authors also show how and why these examples are closely interconnected with the American and Canadian systems. However, they explore the unique needs of Canada, the hazards practitioners will likely face, and how each province and territory is unique.

If you want to improve your profession or are an emergency management student, *Introduction to Emergency Management in Canada* is the right book for you. ◆



IAEM Member Discount

The first 100 purchases of *Emergency Management in Canada* at <https://emond.ca/iemc> using the code "15IAEM23" will receive a 15% discount.

- Valid on all formats of the book
- Offer expires June 30, 2023.

Disaster Zone

Is Mandatory ICS Training Working?

By Eric E. Holdeman, Senior Fellow, Emergency Management Magazine
 blog: www.disaster-zone.com | podcast: [Disaster Zone](#)

Lately, I feel a bit like a negative Nelly. It seems I keep coming up with things to write about that challenge what we are doing as a profession. Sometimes we do things because “That is the way we always did them.” At other times, we are slow to adopt new technologies and techniques. I would toss social media into that pot for something that is underutilized by emergency managers.

Today I’ll focus on a topic that was shall I say, “forced upon us by higher authorities.” That being the who, what, and how of conducting Incident Command System (ICS) training.

First let me say that with the adoption of ICS people came to believe that it was the solution to world peace, solving hunger in the United States, and the absolute best way to plan and execute a wedding. As Dr. Phil would say, “How’s that working for you?”

I agree that ICS is a way to manage a field response by first responder organizations. Wildfire Type 1 teams live and die by ICS and all the forms used in executing the system—good for them!

Go to any structure fire and ask the person in charge if they are using ICS and they may well say, “Why yes! I am the Incident Commander!” After that statement, it might be difficult to find any other evidence of the ICS system being used.

I’ll summarize emergency management’s use of ICS by saying, generally, not always, but more than likely—we bastardize ICS to fit how we want to operate as emergency managers in our Emergency Operations Centers (EOC). Actually, the

term used instead of “bastardize” is that we have “a hybrid system for operating” which means they use some ICS terms and mix and match with other systems, such as the Emergency Support Functions (ESF) used in the Federal Response Plan (FRP). And we call it good!

However, this article is not about how we utilize ICS, but the terrible waste of people hours that we have foisted on this nation and our emergency management partners by requiring anyone who might be involved in emergency response to take the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Independent Study courses. The basic ones being ICS-100: Introduction to the Incident Command System; ICS-200: ICS for Single Resources and Initial Action Incidents; and IS-700: National

Incident Management System, An Introduction.

I can pretty much categorically state that you can take any “average Joe or Sally” who does not work in emergency management, have them take the courses and they will successfully pass the post-test—and we call it good. Come back to them in six months and they will not be able to pass that test again. The half-life of the learning and retention of that information is a nanosecond! The best we can say is that maybe they have been “familiarized” with what ICS is all about.

In the beginning, emergency management agencies were assiduously collecting information on

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The graphic features the IAEM logo (International Association of Emergency Managers) in the top left corner. The main text reads "EMERGENCY & DISASTER MANAGEMENT STUDENT RESOURCE CENTER" in large, bold, white letters on a dark green background. Below the text is the website address "www.iaem.org/students". On the right side, there is a circular inset image of a young woman with long dark hair, wearing a grey top, sitting at a desk with a laptop and holding a pen, looking thoughtful.

Mandatory ICS Training

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who had taken the above courses and documented that, since it was required by FEMA to have such records on hand to justify continuing to receive Homeland Security (HLS) grant funding.

A number of months ago I spoke with someone who does in-person and remote training on ICS-300: Intermediate ICS for Expanding Incidents, and ICS-400: Advanced ICS for Command and General Staff. He stated that the only people who could take a pre-test on their knowledge of the basics from the 100, 200, and 700 courses were those who had “just taken the course” before attending his training. These people coming to his classes were emergency responders from the fire, law enforcement, and other disciplines.

Even if we take those people who finish the training and then toss them into our EOCs and we are “not following the entire system” ourselves, what does that say about us, and the national requirement for online training and the waste of resources? Remember, time is the only non-renewable resource we have. Once wasted, there is no way to get it back.

If I were King, which I’m not, the only course I’d require is ICS 700 National Incident Management System which gives them the general information they need to understand how they fit into the big picture. Save the other courses for the people who are in the field and actually using ICS, or at least saying they do. ◆



71ST IAEM ANNUAL CONFERENCE & EMEX

2023
IAEM Annual Conference & EMEX
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IAEM is pleased to announce that #IAEMstrongerstories articles will be accepted on a rolling basis during 2023

Please refer to the Author Guidelines and submit article to editor John Osborne.

Thank you to the IAEM Editorial Committee

IAEM extends a warm thank you to the IAEM Editorial Committee for their assistance in compiling, editing, and publishing the monthly *IAEM Bulletin*. Current Editorial Committee leadership includes:
 ■ Committee Chair, Daryl Lee Spiewak, CEM, TEM

Interesting in joining the IAEM Editorial Committee? Contact IAEM Bulletin Editor [John Osborne](#) and tell him how you can contribute to or learn from this committee's important work.

IAEM is pleased to announce that the #IAEMstrongerstores community is now live and available to all members on IAEMconnect. Please use this space to connect with others who have stories to share, tell your story of mental health as an emergency manager, and connect with resources to help you on your mental health journey. Visit [#IAEM-strongerstores](#) on [IAEMconnect](#) to get started today.

BE A WRITER!
Submit Articles to the IAEM Bulletin



IAEM Bulletin

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"Honor the Past, The People We Remember"
A Letter to Doc
 By Carrie Speranza, CEM, IAEM-USA Secretary, and IAEM-Global Communications Director

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My #IAEMstrongerstory

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how our life was going to be different moving forward.

Sitting in the EOC, it became increasingly difficult to hide my concern when social media, radio traffic, and national television confirmed the events had turned deadly. At the advice of a colleague, I left the EOC, closed my office door, and gave myself precisely 30 seconds to breathe (yes, I monitored the clock). I then consciously boxed up my emotions and shoved them down to deal with another day.

Why only 30 seconds? Quite simply—I had a job to do. As the deputy director, I had to work with our EOC manager to execute our mission and I was in constant communication with our director and chief of operations to ensure they had what they needed in the field. I drafted the emergency declaration and curfews, helped the team process EMAC requests, and did my best to make sure they were okay and had what they needed to be effective. The shining light of "January 6" was that HSEMA was successful that day, and I am proud to have worked alongside the team during one of the country's most tumultuous days in recent history.

Thankfully, my husband made it home unharmed, but anyone who was there knows the lingering effects it had on those present and supporting the event. Even when "January 6" turned into "January 7," everyone in and around the District had to re-live the events for weeks and months afterward. And again, when the investigations and trials began in 2022. It was impossible to escape, and you could see the stress, anger, disbelief, and exhaustion on everyone's faces.

In hindsight, the intentional act of shoving my personal stressors down was likely more damaging than good in the long run. And unfortu-

nately, I see that my decisions and experiences are echoed by so many of my colleagues in emergency management when working an incident. We choose to put on a brave face and keep going, despite how the events are impacting us personally. Ultimately, it's one of the primary reasons I had to leave my time at the agency. I've learned that sometimes you have to leave something you love in order to focus on yourself.

The first 180 days after "January 6" were the darkest. It was during this time when I sat in the sadness of my own thoughts the most, trying to disassociate myself from my new normal. I fell quiet. And I was angry. It was also during this time when the signs and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder showed up the loudest in my house. In fact, I purposefully chose not to talk about "January 6" unless I had to, and I limited those conversations to when I was at work.

It took me six months to get to a point where I could tell my story out loud. Looking back, it was my desire to remain quiet that kept me from healing, because telling my story was when my journey toward mental health wellness began.

The process of being able to tell my story is where I learned the most important lesson in my mental health journey. To tell the story, I had to explore every thought and feeling so I could identify them. It forced me to name the anger. The frustration. The disappointment and deception. The fear. The sadness. The unrelenting anxiety. And the hopelessness I felt that day, just so I could tame them. And the more feelings I named, the more comfortable I felt being able to talk about them. While I still don't like to talk about it much, the more I do, the easier it becomes to identify my feelings, thoughts, and emotions. And I now realize the power that "naming it" has in the process of taming emotional trauma.

My hope for my emergency management friends and colleagues is that you find time to intentionally reflect upon your own stories, and maybe someday, tell the story to people who will support you. The act of reflection is to give yourself permission to breathe again, and it gives you the space to process your feelings.

Most importantly, my hope is that through #IAEMstrongerstories, you can learn to regain a piece of yourself you've lost along the way. Because we all deserve mental health wellness. ♦



My Two Cents

By Michael Genuine, Emergency Preparedness and Safety Manager, Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization

Attempting to capture the intent of this month's topic, I would like to share one of the ways that stress and trauma, incurred from being an emergency manager, manifests in me. In addition to contributing to the conversation with another perspective, I am also writing to help me identify and process the different effects that stress and trauma have had on my mind. I hope by writing this article I can give validity to someone else's experiences and show that they are not alone in these thoughts. As I imagine, many emergency managers, responders, and support personnel might know, it is often the times in an incident of intense emotion, that tend to stick in your mind the longest. We don't usually get to pick what they will be, or when they will happen. In my mind when these moments do happen, they become a marker in time, capturing details and feelings of an incident or event.

The markers in my memory can be arbitrary in nature, such as the charged smell of rain after a hurricane, the color of sunset on a wildfire, or the result of a positive outcome like a promotion. I think similar memories like these happen to everyone from their experiences, no matter their job, stress, or trauma levels. As such, I believe this gives a sufficient starting point to this conversation and a way to understand some of what happens in a traumatic manifestation. Ties to low-impact memories like these lead to the lowest end of what I think of as a manifestation spectrum in what I would refer to as flash feelings. This is like a déjà vu experience, where a campfire smell, for instance, can transport me back to a random time when I was

a wildland firefighter. These experiences are pleasurable but vague, and over as fast as they come into my mind. They aren't very descriptive and have more of a fuzzy feeling of being there for a split second than a full-fledged memory.

The next layer of this phenomenon from my experience is a little more tangible, again triggered by a smell or noise usually and transports me to an incident I was on with a more vivid feel, but still nothing more than a memory of the event. I would call this more of a flashback experience because I can remember details like what I was wearing, who I was talking to, or what trail I was on. To me these memories are just that, memories, they don't take over all my senses and I go about my day. These events feel very real, but are usually not associated with fear, worry, or confusion, so they seem harmless enough. I bring these low-impact and flashback episodes up because they are something we are all familiar with and are the precursors to the events that have similar attributes but take them to an extreme level.

It's the markers born in my memory from traumatic instances, that tend to evolve and seem to reflect undealt-with incurred psychological damage. Sometimes their intensity fades with distance from the incident and other times the traumatic event gets more intense each time they are recalled. From my perspective, these markers become an outlet for my stress and trauma to be released through. This phenomenon exposes strange places in my mind that I didn't realize were there. Places that amplify the sound, smell, feeling, and fear of the memories and produce such vivid imagery, that they become

very real. For me, the most intense memories as an emergency manager stem from instances of feeling helpless to change an inevitable outcome or of making big decisions that affect many individuals' well-being.

On the upper end of this stress and trauma manifestation spectrum is what I can only assume is part of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. These episodes of extreme terror can happen to me at any time, day or night, usually triggered by a catalyst, for instance, seeing my friend who had responded to a traumatic incident with me, or sometimes hotel rooms, as they served as my lodging on many assignments. As soon as I'm triggered, I'm instantly sweating and even if I am awake when it starts, I get a tunnel vision that locks me into the sights, sounds, and smells of the incident. The effect is a bit like a memory combined with the "Holodeck from Star Trek" feeling. These episodes are as real as being back on the scene, coupled with an exaggerated amount of chaos, which is where I believe my mind adds the compiled trauma and stress. I can literally see the surroundings and hear the noises that were there except they have been exacerbated by time and distance from the event to become the nightmare that my brain has morphed the memory into. The process is kind of like a flashback, in that I can remember what I am wearing and see who I am talking to, except it lasts for what seems like a very long time. It also resembles the low impact of déjà vu memories, in that there are vague and fuzzy feelings encompassing the experience, however, they are more robust and resemble panic, fear, and confusion.

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Medice, Cura Te Ipsum - Physician, Heal Thyself

By Daryl Schaffer, Captain, USCG (ret); MHRM; MSDM; LSC-Type-1; Ph.D. student University of Alaska, Fairbanks

Which buzz phrase to begin with: Who rescues the rescuers? You're okay, just suck it up like the rest of us. If you cannot handle the stress, why are you in this line of business? Medics make the worst patients because they think they already know the answer. Did I make the right decision? If you are debating whether to call or not, you should have already called. When do you know you need help? Doctor heal thyself.

During my 40-plus years of emergency management work, I have heard these and other phrases to question or describe mental health, anxiety, shell shock, critical incident stress, self-assessment, post-traumatic stress, or whatever the next iteration of the term is deemed the appropriate diagnosis. Every person has a different background and every situation is different, therefore everyone will likely react to the same or different instance in their own way. No two are the same.

As a young boy growing up in a rural midwest community, a general intrigue with injuries evolved. Not the whole blood and gore, but a thought of, "what might happen in a situation and how could I help out" - which might mean an encounter with some blood and gore, so you deal with that. We would read or hear about motor vehicle accidents or a plane crash or someone getting their arm ripped off in a combine (which is an unfortunately common problem in farming). Typical growing-up stuff.

Beginning my emergency service career as a lifeguard, I would spend hours watching swimmers in the lakes and, while keeping an

eye on everyone, would run "what if" scenarios through my head. By the way, back in those days we only had one lifeguard on duty and the emergency phone was across the street at the bait shop. Imagine this: There are 40 people in the water and 50 people on shore, a speedboat came through the swim area and hits three people knocking them unconscious in the water, the propeller blade cuts the leg off another person, slices through the back of another, crashes onto shore causing multiple injuries to people on the beach as well as throwing the five people from the boat. And a thunderstorm is coming through with lightning, hail, and possible tornado. What do you do?

While this scenario never actually occurred, each part was based on bits and pieces of training or experiences I had. Yes, boats would zigzag through the no-boating swim area buoys. I saw the photos of the three gashes of flesh from what a propeller does to the back of a person. I had a person whose face smashed into their windshield then did the spinal precautions and extrication. I encountered many thunderstorms, hail, and tornados. These real and simulated events developed the preparedness and scenario planning skills I used later in my career. But I never knew the dark side of those experiences and thinking.

A few years later with more experience, I was now on a dive recovery team picking up a dead body from the depths of a lake. This is where I "looked death in the eyes" seeing the eyes of a dead person just floating off the bottom of the lake. During one winter, I was called to a hydroelectric dam for another body recovery where we located an

embalmed severed foot of a child and also, not that we were looking for it, found skeletal remains lodged underneath a dock. We later learned she was a suicide jumper off an upriver bridge three months earlier, likely died on impact, and once caught under the dock the river water motion removed all the flesh and organs but left the bones intact, their dress in one piece, and still with one fashionable boot on.

A few years later, I was part of an ice rescue training team; our running line was we would charge a few hundred dollars to recover a vehicle which had gone through the ice, but body recoveries were free. Dark humor to deal with the reality. In a four-week span, we picked up five vehicles and one body. It is now the late 1980s, I am in my mid-20s at this time, went to a SAR conference, and heard about this thing called Critical Incident Stress Management from some guy named Jeff Mitchell, and thought "hmm, that sounds interesting." I learned there was a difference in impact between actually touching a dead body versus coordinating the efforts to deal with the recovery of said body. Cool. So now I can consider my past issues dealt with and done. Or so I thought.

I joined the United States Coast Guard, learned a little more about that CISM stuff, did CPR on a child who had drowned, and settled into becoming more of a manager of rescues rather than a hands-on person. I coordinated hundreds of rescues from a command center but never personally saw any victims. I helped coordinate the search for a lost plane in the Aleutian Islands of Alaska (nothing was ever found) and days later even attended a wake for

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Physician, Heal Thyself

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one of the pilots. I was stationed in Washington, D.C., when 9/11 occurred and I had to bike past a smoldering Pentagon on my way into the office that morning. I helped with some peer-CISM sessions where someone was so distraught over the situation but personally knew no one in the buildings. While I helped them, I kept wondering why they were so upset when it did not directly affect them?

I moved onto a new assignment where, collaterally, I was responsible for tracking hurricanes and our unit's supporting response role. Little did we know upon evacuation that Hurricane Katrina would wipe out our unit with 15 feet of water and our team of support personnel (a cook, admin, finance, medic, maintenance, and electrical specialists) was suddenly full-fledged responders pulling people off roofs while passing "floaters" in toxic wastewater. I became a unified commander directing all surface assets to do rescues in my own neighborhood yet could not go back to my house for nearly nine months. I, at least had a place, but five of the nine people who worked directly for me lost everything. I had one CISM debriefing after this—only one session. Looking back now, I can say one session did not completely help. Katrina was way too much to deal with in so many different ways and at so many different levels. It still haunts me.

Twelve years later, after my career had moved me to new assignments around the country, I had a personal medical emergency. I cannot say it "instantly and profoundly" changed my life, but soon after I saw how it really did change me. During my medical treatment, along with doctor-recommended research on this incident, I found I was extremely

lucky to even be alive—like, only 5% of people survive these incidents. So, okay...this IS actually life-changing. Maybe I should get a second opinion on how my brain is doing since the first opinion was my own assessment which was now damaged from this cerebellar stroke.

I did (and still do) see a behavioral health provider and had very profound discussions going all the way back to cover everything relayed here along with lots of other details and incidents not expressed in this piece. I met other military wounded warriors with similar and different issues or backgrounds. I realized we are all broken in some way, each to a different extent, and have individual ways to help fix ourselves. We all move forward, just at a different pace.

During one wounded warrior event, we were asked how we feel about our new life. I dwelled on a poem by Linda Ellis titled, *The Dash* which reflects on how one lived their life—the dash between the dates on a tombstone. So as a theme, I took it one step further to say, "Live your dash to the fullest." It is okay to say "I need help" and continue in your career. This is where I am now, living my dash to its fullest...with lots of help from others. ◆

My Two Cents

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When I am in one of these episodes, I am along for the ride. I don't get to pick where or when it happens. My mind isn't making rational decisions, even if it is my mind controlling the event. I try to feel it coming and duck into a bathroom or a private space. At the very least I try to sit or crouch down, so as not to fall. Sometimes it happens too fast. I can taste the dust in the air, I can hear the call for help, and I can feel

the heat on my skin. I no longer have the notion that I was anywhere else seconds before or that I should snap out of it and back to regular life, I am instantly in a new reality. Maybe if I had just been on one traumatic incident as an emergency manager this effect would have faded away by now but having been deployed on many emergencies over the last two decades, I think they have all combined into an undiscernible mega trauma. The uncertainty feeling, associated with making heavy decisions during hurricane base camp operations, mixes with the extreme terror experienced in wildfire incidents involving fatalities. Over time they have become less frequent, but when they do come on, they are no less traumatic.

To me, these events feel more like thirty or forty minutes, when in reality, they are over in three or four, start to finish. One way I have found to bring myself out of these events before I am released by my subconscious is to concentrate on my breathing. If I can focus on the fact that I am breathing hard, then it starts a cascade of realism that allows me to calm my breath and regain control of my functions again. Then it's a matter of breathing and drinking water that helps my body relax and if I'm being honest, after the bad ones, there's usually a bit of crying before I can get some water.

I know that I could probably get professional help to lessen the severity or stop these episodes from happening altogether. To me though, these are the ties I have to the help I gave and to the people that didn't make it back to base. These are the memories of my contributions to emergency management, and I was fully aware of the potential price of saving lives and property. To me, bravery and courage are truly knowing what the consequences of your actions could be and doing what needs to be done anyway. ◆

My Experience as a Disabled Emergency Manager

By Eric Olah, MSEM, Emergency Management Planner, ZeniMax Media

I am not one to normally share my story, as I do not feel as though it would be interesting to anyone to read, but I thought that if there was any time to share, it would be for #IAEMstrongerstories. My path to emergency management has been rather unique. I am the son of a volunteer firefighter who has served the community for over 40 years. I grew up in the firehouse, so as many of you can surely relate, volunteering was in my blood from a young age. At the age of eight, I was diagnosed with a genetic neurological disease called Charcot-Marie-Tooth. It is the most common inherited neuropathy, but it only affects around one hundred thousand people in the United States. At the time of diagnosis, the doctor told my mother that there was nothing that could be done, and that I would just have to live with it.

When I turned 16, I jumped at the chance to finally join the membership of the volunteer station where I grew up. Upon signing up for my first class, I had to submit a doctor's note to take part, and there were only minimal changes made for me to complete the class. After I officially became a trained firefighter and was able to staff the engine, I was thrilled with myself that I was able to overcome my disability and accomplish a life-long dream. Unfortunately, others saw my disability as a weakness, and used any opportunity they could to put me down, second guess my abilities, demote me to reevaluate my skills, and once even verbally berate me in front of not only members of my station, but members from other stations as well. I believe that these experiences have helped to shape my issues with self-confidence still today.

As I got older, I realized that any sort of job that required any sort of physical ability was off the table for me. In 2009, I was hired by the local 911 center as a dispatcher, which allowed me to do what I loved without the need to be physically able—or so I thought. After two years as a 911 operator, I began to struggle with being able to mentally complete the tasks necessary to handle a 911 call. I was making simple errors, ignoring questions, and getting sucked into the calls. I was retrained, reprimanded, and eventually cut from the 911 call-taker roster. It wasn't until later that I discovered that I was struggling with something called vicarious trauma. I was unable to mentally separate myself from what the person was going through. Unfortunately, this was before the 911 profession realized that providing mental health resources for their employees was beneficial.

After being cut from the call-taker roster, I was transferred to the fire dispatch section of the center, where I thrived. Unfortunately, the other dispatchers engaged in bullying, where I was often the scapegoat due to my difficulties in my former position. After a few years, I realized that this was not the sort of environment I wanted to stay in, especially since the retirement had been moved to 35 years the year before I started. Going back to school, I realized that my original degree choice of environmental science was not going to work since math was not a strong suit of mine. I looked into other majors and discovered that the school also offered a degree path in emergency management. A lightbulb went off in my head, and I figured that with my background, it would be an easy transition into this field since I had been in emergency

services for over 10 years at this point.

Upon finishing my bachelor's degree, I reconnected with an old high school classmate that suggested I apply for a position in the state watch center. Upon seeing an opening, I immediately applied and was contacted by the supervisor of the center who made it clear he wanted me to join his team as soon as possible. This was the only leap I needed to take to begin my career in emergency management! At the time of writing this article, I have been in the field for seven years. While this field is certainly much more disability-friendly than emergency services, it has not been without its hardships. We as emergency managers have a duty to be empathetic not only to the people who are impacted by disasters but also to our colleagues. Mental and physical health often go hand in hand, and leaders should take the time to understand their employee's needs, circumstances, and career goals and do what they can to ensure that they work in an environment that cultivates their strengths, while making their weaknesses less of an impact.

Overall, the emergency management field has essentially kept me from having to seek other resources to support myself due to my disability, and I have met some fantastic people who have seen my value and have gone above and beyond to lift me up as no one else had previously. For that, I will be eternally grateful.



A Slice of My Mental Health Journey

By Joel Thomas, CEO, SPIN Global

This is a slice of my mental health journey, and I hope my peers and friends in emergency management will join me on the quest to ruthlessly eliminate the hurry within us, so that we can better navigate the crazy all around us.

Being a small business owner is not for the faint of heart. Because I am a glutton for punishment, I was compelled to start a disaster consulting business with a public benefit mission only six months after my wife and I just had our fourth child and into an industry that is bombarded by the tyranny of the urgent, and where the only constant is change. That was 2015.

Fast forward, after a few years of operations, I joined a CEO peer group, driven by a desire for mutual support because one of the keys to resilience is having healthy relationships and sharing life with others. Over the course of a few years, this peer group of non-emergency management business owners helped me to objectively consider various aspects of leadership and management. Peers taught me the importance of taking time for yourself to intentionally step away from work, recharge, and reset. I had observed others do this on occasion for weeks and even months at a time. This was such a foreign concept to me, and I thought, “how is that even possible?”, and “what would I do for a month?”

But then life happened, and my mind started to change. A personal health event landed me in the hospital. Business got insanely busy. A global pandemic occurred. During that time a few books shaped me including *Start With Why*, *Necessary Endings*, and best of all, *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*. After some re-

flection during a season of intensity, I began to move from one end of the spectrum thinking “there is no way I could ever do that!” to “I have to make this happen.”

I pondered my personal “why” and determined what was essential. Then I identified what no longer served a purpose and needed to end and allowed myself the freedom to reduce hurry in my life. In the quiet, I found myself reflecting on “what does it matter if I gain the whole world, but lose my life in the process?” Inspired by others, I examined my life and planned to ruthlessly eliminate hurry and take a one-month sabbatical with my family. One whole month.

So, I did it. I booked tickets a year in advance. The preparation process forced me to evaluate how we were running the business and to make the necessary changes over the course of months to empower employees and delegate authorities and responsibilities previously held by me. To build the resiliency required to grow the company and meet our public benefit goals, I would have to learn how to walk away. Beyond changing the dynamic within the company, it also impacted family life, as many plans and adjustments had to be made to accommodate this moment.

For several reasons, the sabbatical almost didn’t happen. But in April 2022, we made it happen. I took a one-month sabbatical from work. I had asked colleagues not to contact me except for three reasons during that month. I told them I would not contact them. They did not believe me. On the day I arrived, reason number one occurred. I thought the sabbatical was going to go sideways. But fortunately, we managed. It took a few days just to unwind, but then I was able to fully engage in “not

working.” And I managed not to initiate contact with my colleagues for an entire month, and to work only a total of four hours in 31 days with weeks of uninterrupted time. What I thought was impossible was possible. All of my anxieties about stepping away were silenced. My fears and worries were swallowed up by restorative rest and retreat.

Alone I could not have made this a reality. The plan to delegate left my colleagues prepared and empowered to meet all the challenges they faced in my absence and gave the company the chance to develop and test the required resiliency to carry on without me. It was the best move ever that is still paying dividends to my personal and vocational health and wellness, and our company’s health and culture of compassion.

This summarized story documents a process that has been unfolding in me for a couple of years. I am grateful for the encouragement of others to take care and focus on what really matters. For me, that includes my relationship with God, self, family, and friends. From a place of being centered on what really matters, I have found that re-emergence post-sabbatical is less hurried, albeit lots of things are going on at a rapid pace, I am able to better interact with circumstances and challenges from a place of rest and quiet confidence. ◆

The Easter Bunny EOC

By Nathan Ray, Site Director, Rays of Hope Academy of Traumatology

Saturday, April 19, 2014. My wife, Peggy, and I were exhausted after four weeks of immersion in the Oso Landslide response and recovery efforts. Weeks of 12- to 18-hour days providing intense individual and group interventions for a multitude of agencies and individuals involved in the response, in addition to coordinating our own agency's logistics, had taken a toll on our ability to function. Yes, we had taken a day off here, a few hours away there, but we were beyond exhausted because we hadn't truly stepped out of our roles in almost a month. Even when we weren't actively working, our thoughts and conversations with friends and family were still focused on the disaster and how the response efforts were progressing. Our energy levels were at an all-time low that night and both of us were starting to wonder how we could keep providing support for others when we were so drained ourselves.

As the Incident Commander (Peggy) and Field Supervisor (Nathan) for the Green Cross Academy of Traumatology (GCAT) teams being deployed, our primary goal was to facilitate psychological support from the macro level down to the micro level for agencies and individuals. We positioned ourselves and the GCAT teams in the multiple Emergency Operations Centers (EOC) that had been set up for this unique disaster, went into the affected disaster zone to work on the front lines, and helped facilitate hundreds of hours for emergency workers to have a safe place to share the pain, the exhaustion, and the grief that so often accompany disaster response work. Our teams let these workers know that they were not alone in their feelings, that their work was valuable, and that it

was important to take care of their emotional well-being so that they could continue their tasks. And in those hundreds of hours of taking care of others, we pushed ourselves to the point of breaking.

As we sat together that evening talking about what our plan was for the next day, Easter Sunday, Peggy suddenly got a gleam in her eye and suggested that I dress up as the Easter Bunny during the morning briefing at the primary EOC. I pulled out my pink bunny suit costume from the movie *A Christmas Story* and we filled plastic eggs with candy to pass out. We hoped to bring some smiles and remind everyone on duty that there was an outside world still there for them once this response ended. Easter morning went as planned – when the briefing reached the space for GCAT to provide a reminder and tip regarding resiliency building, Peggy stepped up and began talking. I waited in costume with a door cracked and entered the room at her cue. The EOC staff were delighted! Energy and laughter filled the room as I went around passing out candy to everyone there.

Then the day took an unexpected turn. The Operations lead showed us that, while the morning briefing was happening, staff from the secondary EOC on the far side of the response zone had sent a requisition form that included a request for candy and an Easter Bunny. They had no knowledge of what we had planned at the



A photograph of the author in his Easter Bunny costume visiting responders. The photo hangs above his desk as a constant reminder to step away and fill your reserves.

primary EOC, it was just their way of acknowledging the significance of the day and trying to lighten the mood. We asked Operations to acknowledge the request and respond that they would work on filling it, if possible.

I headed off to the closest store and bought more plastic eggs and candy. After sitting in the parking lot filling dozens of eggs, I started the 45-minute drive to the secondary EOC. I was still in full costume, but had donned boots because of the mud and other hazards still present. As I went through the several-mile long response zone, an amazing thing began happening – workers who saw me broke into smiles and came over to see what was happening. Eventually, I reached the EOC and advised them that I was there to fulfill their requisition request, then I spent a few more hours tracking down crews throughout the response zone. I handed out hundreds of plastic eggs and took pictures with dozens

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The Beginning of an Unexpected Journey

By Jillian Rodrigue, Deputy Director, Douglas County Emergency Management

An unknown author wrote, “You can’t go back and change the beginning, but you can start where you are and change the ending.” I’ve experienced several emergencies and disasters throughout my personal and professional life. Despite the chaos, I was the strong one holding it all together to take care of everyone else. I was “good” until I wasn’t. I’ve embarked on an unexpected journey. As I tell my story, I acknowledge I’m not a specialist and don’t promise any or all the answers or even the entire story in this short article though I feel a light should be shined on mental health in emergency management. To make progress, we must talk about it.

The bottom line is stress, depression, trauma, and anxiety are real and can impact anyone. If you are struggling, you are not alone and it’s not too late for help. If your mental health is strong, check on and be an advocate for others, while you keep building your coping skills.

How It Started

On May 28, 2019, a large tornado left a path that cut my county in half. I buried my emotions and went all in for months because that is what I always do. Everything went to the back burner. In December, we presented our final report to the County Commission while our department worked through staff transition. The response to COVID-19 started just a couple of months later. As many of us have experienced, there was little time to personally recover. These events layered on their stress, compounding what was lying underneath already.

My resilience was minimal due

to personal and professional events (family deaths, relationships, work stressors) that created emotions I just buried. I was standing on the edge of a theoretical cliff without recognizing just how close I was. Don’t get me wrong, I knew I was stressed. I had trusted individuals remark about my stress levels, but I either didn’t want to or wasn’t able to see how bad it was. I had it handled. Whether through repeated exposure or training, I presented outwardly to everyone that I had everything all together. We can choose to prioritize our wellness or be forced to deal with illness. I chose poorly. On Oct. 16, I was transported by ambulance to the emergency room. My body was screaming “stop ignoring me!” We know stress negatively impacts our physical body, and the cumulative stress finally overcame my coping attempts.

I didn’t want to admit the physical symptoms (exhaustion, migraines, stomach issues, panic, anxiety attacks, lack of focus, etc.) were a result of ignoring my mental health. I desperately wanted this to have a technical fix. Technical work, as defined by the Kansas Leadership Center based upon the work of Adaptive Leadership founders Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky, is work that can be done by gathering facts and applying authority or expertise. Bloodwork, specialists, an MRI, and several tests all indicated the same thing I already knew... I needed help and this wasn’t going to be technical work but adaptive. Heifetz and Linsky describe adaptive challenges as those that live in people’s hearts and stomachs. They are about values, loyalties, and beliefs. It’s work that involves progress, not a quick fix. This would require a different and vulnerable approach to better understand

the roots of what was happening. Showing vulnerability has not always been viewed with high praise.

Even after all the negative tests, I struggled to take the next step – actually saying to someone and acknowledging out loud that I needed help. That I wasn’t ok. That I didn’t have it all together. I felt like a fraud and imposter. I worried about how others would view me if they knew. Would they still trust and respect me? I had worked hard to get where I was and was helped by many along the way. I thought I let them all down. I’m not a first responder. I don’t have their trauma. I should be able to handle this. I felt discouragingly alone. The immense shame was overwhelming.

Slowly I began to open up and answer more honestly about how I was doing. The more honest I was, the more I found others were dealing with similar things. Their experiences were like mine and many had been to counseling. Hold the phone. What?!? I wasn’t alone?

But did I immediately make the call to get into counseling? Nope. It took weeks to ask for a recommendation and months to finally make two calls only to find there was no room for me. As it turns out, our sheriff pays a culturally competent therapist to hold sessions for folks in crisis. I kept telling myself that I don’t deal with what first responders deal with. Someone else must need this more than me. He disagreed and gave me one of the spots without thinking twice.

Those who knew my status checked in and encouraged me. Finally and thankfully, after much debate, I sent the text and scheduled the first appointment.

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Unexpected Journey

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How It's Going

Personally: Therapy requires vulnerability, curiosity, learning, and trust. That, for me, has been difficult given the extreme efforts to which I have gone to bury my emotions. This journey has been hard because change is hard. Change involves loss, and progress is not a straight line. It's been full of ups and downs; successes and what sometimes feels like failure. Progress sometimes looks like resting to allow my mind to navigate the current crisis state. Many days the voice in my head and preconceived notions work against me making me want to quit. I can't change the past, but I can press on to be the best person I can and do the work I believe I was created to do—help others. Progress happens in baby steps when I prioritize my health and those should be celebrated, no matter how seemingly small. Therapy has stretched me in ways I didn't imagine, and it's worth it. Every step makes me stronger. Every step changes the ending. Stay tuned.

Professionally: 2019 disasters coupled with COVID-19 highlighted the need to be intentional with the mental health support of our EOC personnel.

In early 2022, I was accepted into a Command Peer Support program. Imposter syndrome returned as I sat in a classroom surrounded by first responders with experiences I could not imagine. But I honestly believe emergency managers need to be included in those mental health conversations. Our profession deals with circumstances and stressful events in the long term. The individuals in that class as well as the instructing clinician set the foundation that trauma is trauma. It isn't about comparing

the level of trauma but understanding that each of us can experience negative consequences related to an event or culmination of events. We belong in that room. We deserve to and must focus on our mental health needs as well as providing that support for others.

Here's where we are:

- We've signed an MOA with the First Responders Chaplain Association to support our staff and volunteers before, during, and after emergencies. These are culturally competent chaplains who have connections to therapists who work with first responders. They understand our world.

- Since EOC operations can be months long, we're in the early stages of defining and integrating "diffusing" into our operations and exercises, so we can check on personnel and ensure they have the tools necessary to support their mental health.

- We're developing a peer support team among our volunteers.

Final Thoughts

Every character in this article was hard to type, but that's not the point. When I started this journey, I felt shame, alone, confused, discouraged, and so many more emotions. I thought I had failed. I wasn't ready for how unmanaged emotions would upend my controlled and logical world. It did and I tell my story so that others may find some encouragement, perspective, or comfort for their journey – wherever you are.

Here are some takeaways from my journey:

- It's ok not to be ok and emotions are normal.

- If you are struggling, you are not alone and it's not too late to ask for help.

- Check on your colleagues and friends who look like they have it all together or who are always helping everyone else.

- Start planning for the mental health needs of yourself, your employees, and your volunteers before the next disaster.

- Participate in training to help you identify the signs of stress and anxiety and prioritize your well-being.

The work we do is hard and can take its toll. We consider all the possibilities and contingencies. We show up on the worst days and stick around for the long haul. We do this work because we care and have a heart for helping others. In that thread, we all run the risk of being exposed to traumatic incidents. So, stay alert and be mindful of your mental health. It matters. You matter and can change the ending. ♦

Easter Bunny EOC

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of response workers – road crews, state troopers, firefighters, excavator crews, and more – so they could send the pictures to their families and show that they were okay. And as I updated Peggy throughout the day on what was happening, we both found our own spirits and energy returning.

Over the course of that Easter Sunday in 2014, Peggy and I were reminded time and again of the importance of stepping away and refilling our own reserves to keep helping those around us. Finding ways to build and maintain our resilience, even while dealing with overwhelming circumstances, is critical to success and longevity – and especially in emergency management and disaster response. ♦



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Visit www.iaem.org/calendar for details on these and other events.

March 30	Promoting Inclusive Personal Preparedness Strategies Before a Disaster Webinar
April 12	ChemLock: Introduction to Chemical Security
April 17-21	New Jersey Emergency Preparedness Association (NJEPA) 2023 Conference Atlantic City, New Jersey
April 20-21	IAEM Plugged In
April 24-27	2023 Preparedness Summit Atlanta, Georgia
May 28-30	20th Annual Global Conference on Information Systems for Crisis Response and Management (ISCRAM 2023) Omaha, NE
May 30-June 2	Texas Emergency Management Conference Fort Worth, Texas
June 29-30	IAEM-USA Region 2 Conference Stony Brook University, Long Island New York
July 19-20	IAEM-USA Region 7 Conference
Aug. 23-24	2023 Australian Disaster Resilience Conference Brisbane Convention & Exhibition Centre
Oct. 10-12	2023 Cap Implementation Workshop IFRC Headquarters, Geneva, Switzerland
Nov. 3-9	IAEM Annual Conference Long Beach, California



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