

Advocating and Educating for Emergency Management



Why should you educate others on Emergency Management

Consider this: nearly every aspect of your job, from staffing and facilities to equipment and funding, is shaped by an agency head, city manager, county administrator, mayor, trustee, council member, or state and federal elected officials. Simply put, educating others allows you to share your story and advocate for what matters to you, your agency, and your profession. Emergency managers have many ways to communicate their stories and act as reliable sources of information. By doing so, you can ensure that your voice is heard, your needs are met, and your community is better prepared to face the challenges posed by emergencies and disasters.

The difference between advocacy, educating, and lobbying

Many of us understand that we cannot lobby our elected officials, but educating others about your agency or profession is not that. Educating and lobbying are both ways to communicate with elected officials, but they have different focuses. Education involves informing, raising awareness, and building support for your agency. It lets those in power know the importance of your agency and profession, and why it deserves attention. Lobbying, on the other hand, is more specific. It directly asks elected officials to take specific action on a particular issue, such as voting for or against a specific bill. Lobbying often involves providing data and evidence to support your position and demonstrating the potential impact of the legislation on your community.

Setting your first meeting

First, check in with your direct supervisor to ensure you are following your organization's protocols for setting meetings with individuals higher in the organizational structure or external to your organization. Clarify to your supervisor why you would like to have this meeting.

Have a clear goal for the meeting

What do you hope to achieve? Remember, you are there to educate and inform. You may want to build a relationship or explain what your agency does and how it impacts the community. Both are valid reasons to contact your elected official or agency administrator.

Preparing for your meeting

When meeting with your elected official or agency administrator, it is essential to prepare well in advance to make the most of this opportunity to create a positive impact for you and your agency. Here are a few questions to consider as you prepare:

- Does this person understand the role my agency plays in our community?
- What are some examples I can share that clearly illustrate my agency's positive impact in our community?
- Are there specific issues this person should be aware of?
- Why is this issue important?
- What potential solutions might help resolve this issue?
- What questions might they ask me?
- How am I going to answer those questions?

Know your talking points and information

Do research in advance to ensure you have a confident understanding of the topics you wish to discuss. Develop a summary of your agency or the profession of emergency management. Be sure to emphasize the direct community impact you have, including outreach efforts, the number of activation days due to emergencies, or community partners on your ESF team. If there are any challenges, note those as well, but also highlight potential opportunities to address these issues. Be cautious not to let the meeting devolve into a complaining session.

Personalize your request

Personal stories create more compelling narratives. Incorporate personal testimonials and anecdotes into your information and notes to humanize your agency and provide real-world examples of how emergency managers and your agency serve as a key public safety element in your community. Elected officials and their staff look to experts like you to educate them and explain the impacts emergency managers have on the communities they serve. Your summary may be the briefing document that an elected official or agency administrator uses to inform their future decisions, which will affect your community and the profession of emergency management.

During the meeting

Meetings are often very brief, so make the most of your time. You may also meet with staff rather than the elected official. Educating their staff will ensure you have someone within their office who understands your mission.

Summarize briefly who you are, your agency, why you are there, and any issues that are a top priority. Elected officials always want to know about things that will impact their community. Provide information as quickly as possible and draw from your personal experiences as your community's emergency manager. Listen and address their questions or thoughts.

Write down any questions or concerns for follow-up conversations. If you do not know the answer to a question, it is completely fine to respond later via email or phone call. You can simply say, "I am not sure, but I would be happy to find out and get back to you." Being authentic and conducting follow-up research is a great way to build your position as a trusted advisor.

Things to consider after the meeting

Debrief with those who attended the meeting.

- Did you deliver your message?
- What feedback did you receive?
- Are there questions that need a follow-up answer?
- Send a written or email "Thank You" to each person who attended the meeting.

Continuing to build relationships

Continue to engage and build relationships with your elected officials outside of meetings. Don't wait until you have a request to engage. There are several ways to foster relationships with your elected officials and their staff:

- Invite your officials to exercises.
- Invite your officials to visit your emergency operations center.
- Invite your officials to a training or seminar.
- Attend town halls for your officials.