Seattle Office of Emergency Management (OEM) Organizational Assessment

Presentation to Public Safety Committee | January 13, 2026

BERK

Project Scope and Methodology

BERK was contracted in 2025 to conduct an organizational assessment of Seattle's Office of Emergency Management in response to a Statement of Legislative Intent and Mayoral interest. Our scope focused on whether the City's emergency management function is structured and resourced for success.

BERK's findings and recommendations are based on a multi-method approach, including:

- A review of relevant literature.

- Interviews with City stakeholders.

- Peer city benchmarking including Denver, Portland, San Francisco, and Vancouver BC.

About BERK

Public policy consulting firm founded in 1988 and based in Seattle.

Our Mission: *Helping communities and organizations create their best futures.*

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Summary of Findings

Seattle Office of Emergency Management

In 2020, Seattle announced OEM would be moved out of the Police Department and structured as a standalone office reporting to the Mayor. This change went into effect with the 2021 adopted budget.

OEM is accredited by the Emergency Management Accreditation Program (EMAP).

Per Seattle City Code, OEM is responsible for:

- Preparing the Seattle community for disaster.

- Studying, understanding, and informing the mitigation of hazards.

- Coordinating the development, testing, validation, and maintenance of emergency plans and procedures.

- Training City employees, volunteers, and community members on their role.

- Managing the City's emergency response system for both in-person and remote operations.

- Collecting and reporting information following a disaster.

- Overseeing the City's Emergency Management organization.

The Changing & Unchanging Role of Emergency Management

Emergency management includes planning and mitigation, disaster response, and recovery.
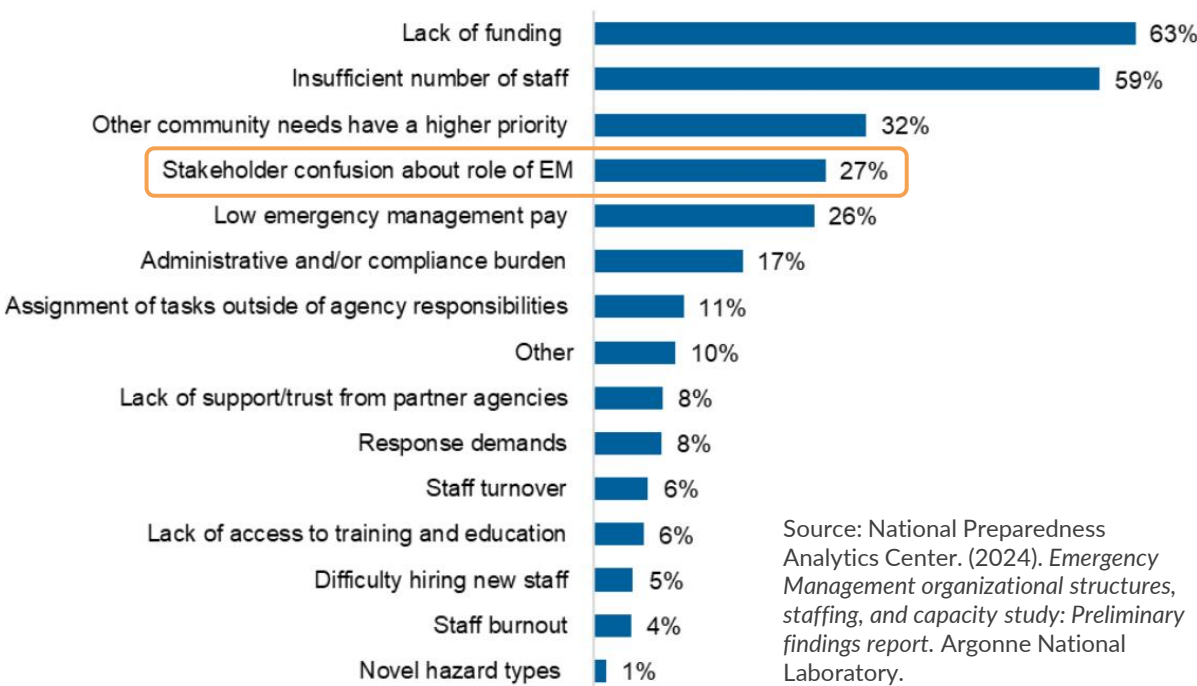
Emergency management is project management, coordination, and facilitation. Effectiveness hinges on coordination across multiple departments and disciplines.

Federal funding is uncertain. Local organizations are expected to play a larger role in disaster response and recovery.

Emergency management is addressing additional challenges. Public health challenges, supply chain breakdowns, cybersecurity, climate adaptation, homelessness, and other multi-disciplinary challenges.

The role of emergency management can be difficult to communicate, staff, and measure outcomes.

Challenge	Percentage
Lack of funding	63%
Insufficient number of staff	59%
Other community needs have a higher priority	32%
Stakeholder confusion about role of EM	27%
Low emergency management pay	26%
Administrative and/or compliance burden	17%
Assignment of tasks outside of agency responsibilities	11%
Other	10%
Lack of support/trust from partner agencies	8%
Response demands	8%
Staff turnover	6%
Lack of access to training and education	6%
Difficulty hiring new staff	5%
Staff burnout	4%
Novel hazard types	1%

Source: National Preparedness Analytics Center. (2024). *Emergency Management organizational structures, staffing, and capacity study: Preliminary findings report*. Argonne National Laboratory.

Peer City Benchmarking

BERK interviewed and performed a comparative analysis of agencies from peer cities, including Denver, Portland, San Francisco, and Vancouver. Key takeaways include:

- Seattle's OEM receives less funding than peer cities.

- Other organizations had significantly more community outreach and education FTEs.

Metric	Seattle	Denver	Portland	San Francisco
Population (2023)	741,440	713,734	642,715	836,321
FY 24 OEM FTE	15	13	20	304
FY 24 OEM Budget	$ 2,922,504	$ 9,262,629	$ 9,566,649	$ 140,829,503
FY 23 Budget per Capita	$ 3.76	$ 10.99	$ 16.08	$ 165.93
FY 24 Total City Expenditures	$ 7,838,541,000	$ 5,445,410,000	$ 8,281,926,518	$ 15,883,345,834
FY 24 Budget as % of Total Exp	0.04%	0.17%	0.12%	0.89%
EMAP Certification	Yes	Seeking Recertification	No	No

Notes:
- *San Francisco's Department of Emergency Management contains the city's 911 Call Center and EMS function. Because of this, their numbers look significantly larger and should not be directly compared to other cities.*
- *Data was not available for Vancouver.*

Key Findings from Peer City Interviews

- **Balancing leadership and facilitation is a major challenge.** Peer cities emphasized that clear lines of communication to appropriate decision makers and situation-appropriate, properly-designated authority are crucial.

- **The placement of the emergency management coordinating function in the Mayor's Office is broadly supported.** Peer cities cited improved cross-department collaboration and peer-level leadership. Interviewees noted that emergency management is broad and cross-functional, and, therefore, not well-suited to placement within a police or fire organization.

- **Dedicated training and communications staff are essential.** Several peer cities staff these roles full-time, often with multiple positions.

- **EMAP certification may be beneficial, but it is not sufficient.** Peer cities noted benefits but agreed it does not guarantee preparedness or effectiveness.

Specific Challenges Faced by Seattle OEM

Structural Challenges

- **Shifting priorities and inconsistent levels of engagement from City leadership** have complicated OEM's operating environment.

- **Inconsistent participation in the Emergency Executive Board** has contributed to the perception that OEM-led functions are not valued.

- As a new, independent department, OEM has to **build organizational capacity**.

- "**OEM has no authority**; it can only ask other City departments to act or share resources"

Resource Challenges

- **Staffing reductions** have impacted capacity for staff training and community engagement in particular.

- **City budget cuts hit OEM harder** than large departments.

- Like other large cities, **OEM is highly reliant on federal grants.**

Stakeholder Input

The following input comes from stakeholder interviews with staff from the Mayor's Office, CBO, SPD, SFD, SCL, SPU, SDOT, and OEM.

- **OEM's role is to facilitate and reduce disaster impacts.**

- **More proactive leadership is desired.** OEM should identify risks and strategic priorities, report on departmental Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP) completion, and offer greater value in information synthesis and active coordination.

- **Encouragement to focus on core functions:**

  - Prioritize planning, training, exercises, and resourcing in line with hazard assessments.

  - Strengthen the operation of the Emergency Operations Center (EOC).

  - Build relationships.

- **Desire for expanded community outreach and communications.**

Stakeholder Input – Desired Improvements

Pre-Disaster: Mitigation and Preparedness

- Take a more proactive role in identifying risks and strategic priorities, ensuring department COOPs are in place, and ensuring EOC staff are prepared.
- Offer more training for staff and community members through robust educational material, exercises, and community engagement.
- Enhance effectiveness of the Strategic Workgroup, Disaster Management Committee, and Emergency Executive Board.

Response

- Offer greater value in information synthesis and active coordination.
- Increase operational focus.

Recovery

- Better describe OEM's role.
- Prepare for neighborhood-level recovery.

Recommendations

The Mayor's Office and OEM should collaborate in setting OEM up for success.

Prioritize the Emergency Management Function

Lead: Mayor's Office

Proactive engagement and investment in emergency management is essential to ensure preparedness and effective response. It functions as an insurance policy with a high return on investment.

- Maintain OEM's position as an independent entity in the City's organizational structure.

- Demonstrate executive support for OEM via the Emergency Executive Board and other City leadership opportunities.

- Establish a staff training requirement with minimum expectations.

- Protect and expand OEM resources. Safeguard OEM from incremental reductions and over time, consider expanding resources and authority dependent on performance.

- Elevate the emergency management function in key City operating departments by having the emergency manager report directly to Department Director level staff.

Enhance Operational Readiness

Lead: Office of Emergency Management

OEM has an opportunity to lead more visibly and proactively, including clarifying roles, strengthening relationships, and showcasing its contributions. OEM should focus on emergency management fundamentals, emphasizing OEM's leadership and coordination.

- Ensure staff can effectively operate EOCs through hiring, training, and exercises.
  - Ensure staff know when to effectively operate through established activation criteria.
  - Clarify activation guidance.
- Review emergency management plans and resources.
  - Ensure the Seattle Hazard Identification and Vulnerability Analysis (SHIVA) is up-to-date with emergent and long-standing threats.
  - Simplify the City's emergency planning structure to make it more accessible and usable.

With additional resources, focus more on community-focused alerts, communication, and education as well as mitigation and recovery planning.

Use the Citywide **Emergency Management Program Strategic Plan**

Lead: Office of Emergency Management

OEM coordinates the development of a Citywide Emergency Management Program Strategic Plan. This recommendation leverages OEM's strengths and addresses its weaknesses.

- Clarify roles and responsibilities for all parties.
  - Establish roles before and during an emergency.
  - Establish a task-level workplan with timeline and roles/responsibilities.
- Clarify current priorities by pairing short-term hazards with a list of strategic priorities.
- Address OEM's organization development by describing the staff capacity and expertise, technology, other resources that OEM needs, and how it will use these resources.

Our Recommendations for Setting OEM up for Success

- **OEM should remain an independent department.** This allows for an independent, citywide perspective and peer-to-peer relationships with other organizations.

- **OEM needs additional resources.** OEM is under-resourced compared to peer city organizations.

- **Focus on core functions: planning, training, exercises, and resourcing.** This includes EOC functionality and both short-term and long-term hazard assessment.

- **The Mayor's Office and OEM leadership should work together.**

  - Clarify roles and expectations.

  - Plan at least twice a year:

Review challenges, successes, and priorities for the coming year + continued organizational development

Validate the updated Citywide Emergency Management Program Strategic Plan

Questions?

Thank you!