SEATTLE CITY COUNCIL

Public Safety Committee

Agenda

Tuesday, January 13, 2026

9:30 AM

Council Chamber, City Hall
600 4th Avenue
Seattle, WA 98104

Robert Kettle, Chair
Rob Saka, Vice-Chair
Debora Juarez, Member
Eddie Lin, Member
Maritza Rivera, Member

Chair Info: 206-684-8807; Robert.Kettle@seattle.gov

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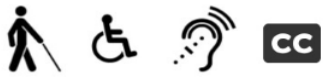

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Meeting Location:
Council Chamber, City Hall, 600 4th Avenue, Seattle, WA 98104

Committee Website:
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Please Note: Times listed are estimated

A. Call To Order

B. Approval of the Agenda

C. Public Comment

D. Items of Business

1. BERK Consulting 2025 Office of Emergency Management (OEM) Organizational Assessment and Presentation

Supporting Documents: BERK Consulting 2025 OEM Organizational Assessment Presentation

Briefing and Discussion (45 minutes)

Presenters: Brian Murphy and Oliver Hirn, BERK Consulting

2. Public Safety Legislative Work Planning

Supporting Documents: Presentation

Briefing and Discussion (40 minutes)

Presenter: Chair Kettle

E. Adjournment

Legislation Text

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BERK Consulting 2025 Office of Emergency Management (OEM) Organizational Assessment and Presentation

City of Seattle

Office of Emergency Management Organizational Assessment

June 2025

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Introduction

The City of Seattle initiated this organizational assessment of its Office of Emergency Management (OEM) in response to a Statement of Legislative Intent (SLI) and Mayoral interest in ensuring the City is well-prepared to meet ongoing and emerging threats. As the landscape of risk becomes more complex, dynamic, and interconnected, there is a desire to assess whether the City's emergency management function is structured and resourced for success. BERK Consulting was engaged by the Mayor's Office to support this review.

BERK's findings and recommendations are based on a multi-method approach, including a review of relevant literature, recent After Action Reports (AARs), benchmarking with peer cities (Denver, Portland, San Francisco, and Vancouver BC), and interviews with City stakeholders.

Statement of Legislative Intent

The Statement of Legislative Intent directing this work is as follows:

> *The Council supports the proposed add of $30,000 to the City Budget Office (CBO) to conduct an Emergency Management Assessment, including the review of OEM's funding, multijurisdictional framework, and organizational structure in comparison to peer cities. The Council recognizes OEM as a critical facilitator with City departments and other organizations, developing cross jurisdiction emergency preparedness plans, disaster mitigation measures, and response protocols, as well as operating the Emergency Operations Center during planned and unplanned events and incidents. The Council requests that the Executive consider these factors, and that the CBO study contemplates changes that would ensure that OEM is provided with adequate budget resources, sufficient independence and appropriate Mayoral oversight needed to complete its mission.*
>
> *OEM should submit the report to the Chair of the Public Safety Committee and the Central Staff Director.*

About OEM

In 2020, Seattle announced OEM would be moved out of the police department and turned into a standalone office reporting to the Mayor, This change went into effect with the 2021 adopted budget. . Per ordinance 126232, § 2, 2020 of the Seattle City Code, the Office of Emergency Management is:

> *responsible for partnering with the community to prepare for, respond to, mitigate the impacts of, and recover from disasters and to be the coordinating agency to ensure Citywide compliance with local, state and federal laws, regulations and guidelines relating to emergency preparedness. The objectives and functions of the Office of Emergency Management include the following tasks and activities:*
>
> A. *Preparing the community for disaster through the management of volunteers, public education, and capability-building with community organizations, vulnerable population outreach, limited English proficiency, low income, and immigrant and refugee communities*
>
> B. *Studying and understanding the consequences of the numerous hazards facing the city of Seattle, and using hazard knowledge to inform mitigation of known hazards through planning and investments to lessen disaster impacts and/or harden critical facilities and systems;*

C. *Coordinating the development, testing, validation, and maintenance of all plans and procedures to guide all aspects of the City's emergency management program such as the all-hazard Seattle Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan (CEMP).;*

D. *Training City responders, manage volunteers, and the community to emergency plans and to their roles and responsibilities in an emergency, as well as conducting routine exercises to ensure personnel and systems are routinely practicing such roles;*

E. *Managing and maintaining the City's emergency response system to ensure coordination for both in-person and remote operations. This includes ensuring that: the City's Emergency Operations Center (EOC) and the Joint Information Center are operationally ready at all times; EOC responders are identified and trained; and all supporting infrastructure and equipment are maintained;*

F. *Following a federal declaration of disaster, coordinating the collection of information including damage, impacts, and costs incurred by City departments to obtain reimbursement or grant money under the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act or other Federal laws on behalf of City departments; and*

G. *Overseeing the City's Emergency Management organization, including performing the duties as described in Section 10.02.060 and other functions as may be prescribed by ordinance.*

Structure of this Report

The following sections of this report summarize our key findings and recommendations. Individual appendices provide more detailed findings from the literature review, peer city benchmarking, review of recent After Action Reports, and Stakeholder Interviews.

Summary of Key Findings

The key findings in this section are taken from BERK's literature review, peer city benchmarking, review of after-action reports, and stakeholder interviews, each of which are presented in an Appendix to this report. Our recommendations are presented immediately following this summary of findings.

The Role of Emergency Management

Emergency management has evolved significantly since the 1970s, when the field began to take on a more comprehensive, strategic approach inclusive of pre-disaster mitigation and preparedness, disaster response, and recovery. Today, emergency management is typically seen as an enterprise-wide function, with emergency managers facilitating a coordinated approach to preparing for, responding to, and recovering from an increasingly wide range of challenges. The emergency manager's role is often that of a program leader or project manager overseeing implementation throughout the entire jurisdiction, rather than a lead or principal executor. Effective emergency managers facilitate implementation across departments, coordinate efforts, align stakeholders, and guide strategy.

Following COVID-19, the scope of emergency management is rapidly expanding as disasters grow more complex, severe, and frequent. Issues such as public health coordination, supply chain disruptions, and cybersecurity threats now sit alongside traditional concerns such as evacuation and sheltering. These evolving demands are reshaping the field. Emergency management leaders must coordinate across multiple levels of government, partner with the private sector, and engage community-based organizations to effectively address overlapping risks.

Peer cities are adapting to evolving risks. Portland's OEM is expanding into non-traditional areas, such as supporting responses to the fentanyl crisis, homelessness, and gun violence. Denver's OEM reports that it is now more frequently activated for humanitarian and social emergencies than for weather-related events. San Francisco's Department of Emergency Management manages the San Francisco 911 Call Center as well as some other emergency communication and emergency medical services. Denver's OEM Executive Director serves as lead facilitator for the City's programmatic response to homelessness.

The broad, interdisciplinary nature of emergency management can make it difficult to describe and for agencies to articulate their value. More than 25% of respondents to a 2024 survey of local emergency management organizations by the Argonne National Laboratory indicated that "stakeholder confusion about the role of emergency management" is a top challenge (See Exhibit 4 in Appendix A).

> "We don't put on sirens and race to the scene. We are in a coordinating, collaborative role, and often not the lead, even when the EOC is activated."
>
> Peer City Interviewee

City of Seattle stakeholders encouraged OEM to more clearly articulate its vision, role, and value. A common theme in interviews was a desire for OEM to add more value. During the preparedness phase, this could include identifying risks or gaps and establishing strategic direction for City departments in planning and mitigation efforts. During a response phase, this could include more proactively facilitating group processes, synthesizing and adding value in OEM's information gathering and dissemination role, and taking a leadership role in providing specialized support such as language access, shelter capacity, or portable toilets in support of operating departments focused on service resumption. This could be true even when OEM is operating in a facilitative, supportive role and another department is leading the City's response.

Organizational Context and Resources

Seattle's OEM operates in a challenging organizational context. In recent years, OEM was established as an independent department and is maturing in this capacity. It has also experienced shifting reporting structures, and inconsistent levels of executive attention and support. Stakeholders noted that executive and policy maker participation in the Emergency Executive Board is inconsistent[1]. This is seen both as a symptom of and contributor to the perception that OEM-led functions are not appropriately valued. These dynamics have impacted OEM's ability to perform its role.

The location of the emergency management function within the city organization is important. The Argonne study shows that most (63%) of emergency management offices are independent or free-standing (Exhibit 2). Placing the emergency management function in a standalone department within or with a direct reporting line to the Mayor's Office is the dominant practice and was stated to be a best practice in peer city interviews. This positions the agency as a peer of public safety and operating entities and helps it act as a strategic convener and interdepartmental bridge. When emergency management is housed within a public safety department, it creates the idea that the work is more tactical than strategic and diminishes the benefits associated with interdisciplinary, cross-departmental perspective.

Peer cities generally dedicate more funding and staff to emergency management and resource reductions limit OEM's capabilities. While comparisons across cities can be challenging given the different scopes of responsibility assigned to emergency management agencies, it appears that Seattle OEM has a lower budget per capita and a smaller budget as a percentage of total city expenditures than Denver, Portland, or San Francisco (Exhibits 6-14 in Appendix B). Additional staff, particularly in training, communications, community engagement, would enhance Seattle's OEM's ability to support internal readiness and community preparedness.

The future role of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the level of support it provides to local jurisdictions is uncertain. Changes at the federal level may scale back FEMA's responsibilities and shift the burden of disaster management more heavily onto state and local governments. Many Seattle OEM programs, including community resilience efforts and planning efforts, have received federal grants to support local and regional emergency preparedness.

Functions of Emergency Management

Planning and Mitigation

Support for pre-disaster preparedness and mitigation is difficult to sustain. Emergency managers typically struggle to gain sustained attention and resources for long-term planning efforts. While the return on investment for mitigation is commonly accepted to be $6 for every $1 spent[2], short-term priorities often override longer-term planning. Similarly, while training and exercises for executives, policy makers, and staff are said to be valued, they are frequently deprioritized due to more immediate priorities. In some peer cities, executive direction or legislative policy establishes specific training and exercise requirements.

[1] See a description of the Disaster Management Committee, Strategic Workgroup, and Emergency Executive Board here: www.seattle.gov/emergency-management/about-us.

[2] https://disasterphilanthropy.org/blog/1-invested-mitigation-saves-6-future-disaster-costs

Some stakeholders note that some Seattle OEM has increased its production of training and exercises, and that some are very well done. Several staff members were recognized as effective facilitators, particularly during large-scale event planning and exercises. Some recent trainings—both internal and community-facing—were described as high quality and well-delivered.

> "OEM is taking a very appropriate role [preparing for the World Cup] and their staff lead is doing a great job quarterbacking and consolidating departmental plans. We see people falling back into old habits, wanting PD to lead. OEM has been good at nudging other departments to contribute, including Curry going to other department directors."
>
> Stakeholder Interviewee

Stakeholders also expressed specific desires for Seattle OEM's planning, training, and exercise functions:

- A more robust and visible training and exercise program, with a calendar of events that can be easily integrated with other departments' offering.
- Concise reporting of offerings and participation levels.
- Expanded outreach to residents and partnerships with community-based organizations to strengthen community preparedness and resilience.
- More strategic and assertively proactive facilitation of citywide planning and mitigation, building on the collaboratively developed Citywide Emergency Management Program Strategic Plan. This could be enhanced through refinement of OEM's work with the Strategic Workgroup, Disaster Management Committee, and Emergency Executive Board, which are seen as appropriately structured.

Disaster Response

Depending on the nature of an emergency, an emergency management organization may play a background convening and facilitating role or a more forward leadership role. In some peer cities, the emergency management director has authority to act in a direct decision-making capacity:

- When formally activated, Denver OEM gains authority to actively coordinate city resources per the Revised Municipal Code of the City and County of Denver[3]. This codified authority is accompanied by authority and trust extended by the Mayor's Office.
- Similarly, during a declared emergency, the newly restructured Portland Bureau of Emergency Management can act as the designee of the Mayor, with the ability to set policy, direct department resources, and make decisions on behalf of the City.

> "OEM has no authority; it can only ask other City departments to act or share resources."
>
> Stakeholder Interviewee

For some emergencies, Seattle OEM plays a central role in facilitating coordinated response across the City. When effectively activated, the City's Emergency Operations Center (EOC) and Joint Information Center (JIC) provide structure, clarity, and shared decision-making for complex incidents. The effectiveness of these tools depends not just on activation, but on how well they are staffed and coordinated with department-level operations, which can be inconsistent.

Seattle stakeholders uniformly emphasized the need for OEM to have a greater operational focus.

- Several noted that OEM has few staff with extensive experience responding to larger events. They also noted that organizational culture may prioritize planning and preparedness over activations.

[3] https://library.municode.com/co/denver/codes/code_of_ordinances?nodeId=TITIIREMUCO_CH16EMPR_ARTIINGE

- Stakeholders emphasized the need to establish:
  - A more formal activation policy with triggers and tiers to describe the level of activation.
  - Clearer protocols for how the EOC and departmental structures interact during emergencies.
  - More frequent and intentional activations, especially for large public events or high-risk situations. This ensures the City is poised and ready to act if a planned event becomes a crisis and provides more opportunities for real-time practice of EOC roles.
  - The use of more robust technology to provide citywide situational awareness and key data.
- Operating departments desire more support from OEM in functions not central to their day-to-day operations. This would allow operating departments to focus on service resumption, while OEM provides language access, shelters, temporary toilets, and other emergency response resources.

Stakeholders expressed a desire for OEM to play a more proactive and value-added role during activations. Staff from Seattle OEM and peer cities describe the emergency management function in a similar way, emphasizing that it is often not a leadership role, but a facilitating, coordinating role, ensuring that the EOC functions well and that information flows across city departments. Seattle stakeholders would like to see OEM fulfill these responsibilities with greater agency, taking a more hands-on approach to facilitating a coordinated response and adding synthesis and insight to information that is collected from multiple departments, packaged, and disseminated by OEM.

Recovery

The literature and peer city interviews show that disaster recovery is often the most complex and under-resourced phase. It requires long-term, cross-functional coordination and sustained funding. Several stakeholders expressed a desire for OEM to describe its role in recovery and to clarify the function of the Seattle Disaster Recovery Framework which may not be well-suited for smaller, localized events such as the South Park flooding. Planning for neighborhood-scale recovery is desired.

Measuring Emergency Management Success

Evaluating the effectiveness of emergency management is seen as challenging as emergencies are rare and unique, making it difficult to compare a response to what would have happened without pre-disaster planning, response coordination, and recovery efforts. After Action Reports identify successes and lessons learned.

Peer cities track and report on metrics such as the number of trainings held for city staff, members of the public, and key stakeholder groups; participation numbers; plan updates; and activation particulars such as number of days, number of departments, and other details. These quantitative measures are supplemented with partner feedback and After Action Reports.

> "It's possible to measure progress by tracking movement toward stated goals, but evaluating effectiveness is much more difficult. It is possible to count the number of trainings or exercises facilitated, but such enumerations do not necessarily equate to preparedness."
>
> Peer City Interviewee

Recognizing these challenges, stakeholders expressed several desires for Seattle OEM:

- A performance framework that includes both operational outputs (e.g., trainings delivered, exercises performed, plans updated) and qualitative feedback (e.g., stakeholder confidence).
- Consideration of OEM's organizational development in its strategic plan, including a more specific articulation of the desired future of the department and a plan for organizational maturation.

Recommendations

BERK's recommendations are grounded in the full scope of research, analysis, and interviews conducted for this study. They are organized into two primary categories: those to be advanced by the Mayor's Office and those to be developed by the Office of Emergency Management (OEM). Seattle will be best served by a shared effort to elevate OEM to a trusted and integrated citywide role.

Prioritize the Emergency Management Function

Led by the Mayor's Office.

The emergency management function is often overshadowed by the urgent demands of day-to-day operations, and can be particularly true in locations such as Seattle where large-scale emergencies are relatively rare. However, 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. The following recommendations are intended to strengthen the role and visibility of emergency management, with leadership from the Mayor's Office.

- **Maintain OEM's position in the City's organizational structure.** As an interdepartmental coordinator, it is important that OEM retain its independence and peer status with other departments. It is appropriate that OEM reports directly to the Mayor's Office.
- **Demonstrate executive support for emergency management.** Consistent participation by City leadership, especially in the Emergency Executive Board, will encourage broader engagement.
- **Establish a requirement for staff training.** Given OEM's size, it must rely on well-prepared staff embedded in other departments. Currently, there are no state-level mandates for training and OEM lacks authority to require participation. We recommend that the executive establish minimum expectations for appropriate staff, including executive leadership.
- **Protect and Expand OEM resources.** OEM's small and independent structure leaves it particularly sensitive to budget cuts. The City should safeguard OEM from incremental reductions and pursue increased investment over time in the face of needs, peer city benchmarking, and anticipated reductions in federal support.
- **Elevate the emergency management function in key City operating departments.** The location, reporting relationship, and resources of departmental emergency management functions should not be left to individual departments but guided by executive requirements. Emergency Managers should report directly to Department Director level staff and be appropriately resourced.
- **Over time and with evidence of performance, seek to increase OEM resources and authority.** Seattle OEM is leanly staffed and funded given its responsibilities and the population size it serves. Over time, and based on demonstrated performance, the City should seek to increase OEM's resources and responsibilities. This should be guided by a clear plan developed by OEM, with measurable performance goals.
    - While specific needs should be determined by OEM, likely staffing priorities include: additional staff to support training and exercises, community engagement and communications, and grant management.
    - Additional investment in technology and associated staffing to improve citywide situational awareness and information sharing.

- As OEM builds trust and demonstrates effectiveness, its authority during an emergency should also be reviewed. Peer cities offer models for expanded authority. The Director of the newly restructured Portland Bureau of Emergency Management has the statutory authority to become the Mayor's designee in an emergency, able to set policy, allocate department resources, and make decisions on behalf of the city.

Enhance Proactive Leadership and Operational Readiness

Led by the Office of Emergency Management.

OEM has an opportunity to lead more visibly and proactively- clarifying roles, strengthening relationships, and showcasing its contributions. The following short-term recommendations focus on emergency management fundamentals, emphasizing OEM's leadership and coordination role.

- **Ensure Staff are Fully Prepared to Operate the EOC Effectively.**
  - Prioritize operational experience in future OEM hiring and foster a culture where staff understand and embrace their activation responsibilities for the duration of any emergency.
  - Ensure that OEM and non-OEM/departmental staff are trained and exercised to function effectively in the EOC. This should include policy level staff and the concurrent activation of departmental level incident command centers in full-scale functional exercises.
  - Clarify when the EOC will be activated for planned and non-planned events and set a target for a minimum number of activations per year, using planned events to ensure that minimum number is met.
  - Consider establishing formal tiers of activation.
  - Potential reporting metrics:
    - Self-reported confidence levels of non-OEM staff assigned to the EOC.
    - Number and complexity of activations (e.g., duration, number of affected people, scope of vulnerabilities, interdepartmental coordination).
- **Review Emergency Management Plans and Resources.**
  - Ensure the Seattle Hazard Identification and Vulnerability Analysis (SHIVA) is up to date with emergent as well as long-standing threats. Ensure it can be used by OEM and others to focus plans, mitigation efforts, and resources.
  - Simplify the City's emergency planning structure and format to make information as accessible and readily usable as possible.
  - Potential reporting considerations:
    - Brief the Mayor's Office on hazard-based priorities and particularly concerning vulnerabilities in the City and partner resources and preparedness levels. Include a status update on departmental COOPs.

As EOC operations, plans, and resources are strengthened and OEM's resources increased, additional emphasis should be placed on community-focused alerts, communication, and education. More focus should be given to mitigation efforts and recovery planning.

Use the Citywide Strategic Plan to Clarify Roles, Priorities, and OEM's Organizational Development Needs

Led by the Office of Emergency Management.

OEM coordinates the development of a Citywide Emergency Management Program Strategic Plan that incorporates activities advanced by OEM and its partners across the City. The Plan is developed collaboratively with the Strategic Workgroup, with review, input, and approval from the Disaster Management Committee, and adopted by the Emergency Executive Board. Our recommendations here are structured to build on this foundational document, leveraging its strengths and addressing what we see as current weaknesses. The following recommendations would be led primarily by OEM.

The Plan opens with the following overarching statements and five Guiding Principles:

- **Our Citywide Vision.** Disaster ready, prepared people, resilient communities.
- **Our Citywide Mission.** Bringing people together to reduce the impacts of disaster.

The plan is structured around 5 standing Goals that rely on a traditional emergency management organizing structure: Foundational, Mitigation, Preparedness, Response, and Recovery. The plan is informed by the Seattle Hazard Identification and Vulnerability Analysis (SHIVA) and a short list of current Strategic Priorities that include FIFA World Cup 2026, Tsunami Planning, Cybersecurity, and Climate Change in the 2025-2027 iteration of the plan.

This structure is helpful in that it provides a simple, logical, and consistent way to organize the core of the plan which is a more detailed workplan for each of the five Goals. The workplan includes Objectives, Strategies, and Tasks, with high level details for timeline and Key Departments.

Our recommendation is to retain this overall structure and strengthen it by:

- **Clarifying roles and responsibilities for all parties.** The role of an emergency management office is by definition somewhat difficult to define as it is cross-departmental and often in a coordinating capacity. For these reasons, it is extremely important to establish clarity in roles and responsibilities, both at the Goal level (the ongoing work of preparing for, responding to, and recovering from emergencies) and at the workplan level (specific tasks that have been determined important to advance).
    - **At the Goal level**, additional clarity could be given to the roles of the Strategic Workgroup, Disaster Management Committee, and Emergency Executive Board, but these seem largely understood. Greater clarity should be given to the role of OEM and other city departments.
        - **What is OEM's role and responsibility (and authority) in preparing for emergencies? What are departmental responsibilities?** Currently OEM has no authority to require department plans and preparations, including Continuity of Operations Plans (COOPs).
        - **What is OEM's role and responsibility in responding to emergencies? What are departmental responsibilities?**
            - Stakeholder interviews noted a lack of clarity particularly around when the EOC will be activated, including at a department's request, and who is responsible for disaster response and recovery functions such as obtaining language services; emergency toilets, water, and food; and sheltering. Operating departments view this as an OEM

responsibility, while they are responsible for maintaining public safety or resuming utilities and transportation.

- OEM's response role can also be clarified in its core function of cross-departmental or citywide information sharing and coordination during a disaster. Several stakeholders expressed a desire for greater added value in these functions (consolidate and synthesize information; proactively facilitate and improve multi-departmental coordination). Some peer cities describe a relatively more passive role, however (our job is not to run the EOC but to make sure the facility and staff from other departments are trained and ready to perform.)

- **At the workplan (task) level,** we would encourage greater specificity on timeline and roles/responsibilities than is currently shown. Use of a RACI (Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, Informed) Matrix or another similar tool would be beneficial in more fully clarifying the role of OEM and others.

Sample excerpt showing current workplan structure

2024	2025	2026	Key Departments
	X		OEM, SPU, SCL, SDCI
X	X		OEM, SPD, SFD, SDOT
X			OEM

- **Clarifying current priorities.** The current Citywide Emergency Management Program Strategic Plan helpfully identifies a short-list of three or four current threat-based Strategic Priorities. This should help OEM and its partners focus on a subset of hazards identified in the SHIVA. **We recommend that these short-term hazard-based priorities should be paired with an equally short list of Strategic Priorities designed to advance the City's emergency management capacity.** The rationale could be articulated in a brief write-up similar to what is done now for the hazard-based priorities.
  - These top priorities should be separated from the more tactical work covered in the current workplan. We recommend that OEM brief the Mayor's Office each year on its proposed Strategic Priorities for the coming year, including hazard-based priorities and priorities intended to advance the state of the City's emergency management function. An end-of-year report to the Mayor's Office would focus on results and outcomes. Reporting on tactical workplan items would include quantitative measures of effort (number of trainings and exercises; number of community-focused trainings; number of Alert Seattle subscribers, number of activations, etc.).
- **Addressing OEM's organizational development.** The current Citywide Emergency Management Program Strategic Plan lacks a focus on OEM's organizational development, including the staff capacity and expertise, technology, and other resources OEM needs and will need in the near term to appropriately fulfill its roles and responsibilities.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Literature Review

This literature review explores best practices, organizational structures, and key challenges in emergency management. We start with an overview of the history of emergency management, emphasizing four commonly described primary functions of emergency management:

- **Mitigation.** Efforts to prevent disasters or reduce their impact. This includes long-term strategies such as building codes, flood control measures, and public education to minimize risk.
- **Preparedness.** Planning, training, and exercising to ensure an effective response.
- **Response.** Actions taken during or right after a disaster to save lives and prevent further damage.
- **Recovery.** Long-term efforts to restore communities and infrastructure following a disaster.

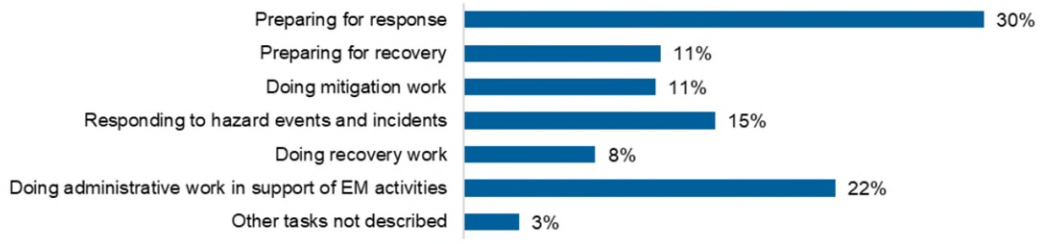
Emergency Management Historically Focused on Tactics

Emergency management has historically been shaped by a tactical, response-focused approach rooted in civil defense and military planning. Early emergency managers often came from military backgrounds, which led to emphasizing logistics and contingency planning over broader, more strategic approaches.

The shift toward comprehensive emergency management in the 1970s marked an effort to expand the field's scope to cover all hazards and a more robust consideration of pre-disaster mitigation and post-disaster recovery. However, many local emergency managers lacked the authority, capacity, or training to fully realize that broader vision. Even today, response planning continues to dominate the field. It demands constant attention, often consumes significant staff time, and relies on detailed, tactical planning—an area where many emergency managers are most experienced and comfortable.[4]

The Argonne National Laboratory released initial results in December 2024 of a study of local emergency management organizations. The full results are expected July 2025. The research team conducted a survey with 1,418 responses from across the United States, including 656 municipalities, 124 of whom have a population over 500,000 people. Exhibit 1 shows that survey respondents report 30% of staff time is spent on preparedness, with another 22% spent on administrative work.

Exhibit 1. Average Percent of Time that Permanent Staff Time is Spend on Various Activities



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

Mitigation and recovery efforts are critical to emergency management. Past studies have shown that every $1 spent on mitigation saves approximately $4 in disaster recovery costs, but more recent

[4] Canton, L. G. (n.d.). *Emergency Management, 2nd Edition*. O'Reilly Online Learning. https://learning.oreilly.com/library/view/emergency-management-2nd/9781119066859/

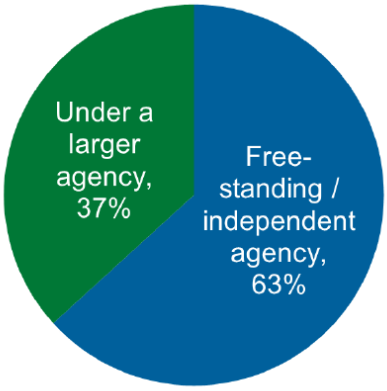
research suggests that figure may now be closer to $6.[5] Investing in proactive disaster reduction measures remains one of the most cost-effective strategies for emergency management, but is often not given the focus it deserves.

Location of the EM Office

Efforts related to mitigation and long-term recovery often demand political will; specialized knowledge in areas such as land use planning, environmental science, and risk assessment; and sustained community engagement. These efforts are frequently hampered by a limited understanding among public officials of the broader scope of emergency management. When the field is perceived primarily through a response-oriented lens and often associated with the responsibilities of first responders, its strategic functions are undervalued. When emergency management is housed within a fire or police department, it can reinforce the idea that the work is purely tactical rather than strategic and lose the benefits of maintaining an interdisciplinary, cross-departmental perspective.

Most (63%) of the organizations that participated in the organizational development study reported that they are independent or free-standing agencies (Exhibit 2). A smaller share are under fire, police, or other larger agencies.

Exhibit 2. Organizational Structure of Emergency Management Offices



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

Where an emergency management office is located within local government can influence both its effectiveness and how it's perceived. Situating it in the chief executive's office can raise its profile and signal its cross-cutting role, but this placement may come with limited administrative and operational resources. Alternatively, placing it within a larger department like the sheriff's office or an administrative division may offer more infrastructure and funding, but can also tie the program too closely to that department's identity and politics, potentially undermining its independence or broader relevance.

[5] https://disasterphilanthropy.org/blog/1-invested-mitigation-saves-6-future-disaster-costs

Rise of the Chief Resilience Officer

In recent years, some cities have established Chief Resilience Officer (CRO) roles to elevate and coordinate strategic efforts around resilience. This trend was originally spurred by the Rockefeller Foundation's 100 Resilient Cities initiative, which launched in 2013 and funded CRO positions in cities around the world. These officers were tasked with addressing complex, cross-cutting challenges—such as climate adaptation, infrastructure vulnerability, and social equity—through long-term, systems-level planning. CROs focus primarily on pre-disaster planning and long-term resilience building rather than on the immediate response after a disaster occurs.

Although Rockefeller ended its direct funding abruptly in 2019, some cities, including Atlanta, Boston, and Houston have chosen to retain or adapt the CRO role; others, including Seattle, chose to eliminate the position. Other cities who never received support from Rockefeller began funding such positions. There is no comprehensive list of CRO positions in the United States, but the growth in the role reflects a growing recognition that building community resilience requires sustained attention beyond immediate response and recovery efforts. With limited funding plaguing cities across the country, it's not expected that Chief Resilience Officers will become standard positions. It does, however, speak to the importance of *comprehensive* emergency management, with a focus on prevention and mitigation.[6]

The Emergency Manager as a Project Manager

A definition of emergency management wasn't agreed upon until 2007. Emergency management is defined as "the managerial function charged with creating the framework within which communities reduce vulnerability to hazards and cope with disasters." This definition was subsequently adopted by all major emergency management organizations in the United States.[7] With a central definition of emergency management, it clarifies that the role of the emergency manager is one of a project manager. In his benchmark 1987 study, *The Professional Emergency Manager*, Dr. Thomas Drabek studied the characteristics of 12 successful emergency managers compared to a random sample of 50 other directors from across the country. He identified three major characteristics as critical to the success of an emergency manager:

- **Professionalism:** Effective emergency managers build credibility by contributing to broader jurisdictional goals and being recognized for their expertise.
- **Individual qualities:** Strong communication, organization, interpersonal skills, and composure under pressure are common traits, though each manager brings their own strengths based on experience.
- **Comprehensive approach:** Successful managers take a wide view of their role, engaging in all phases of emergency management, not just preparedness.

A key takeaway from the study was that what matters most is the perceived competence of the emergency manager as a project manager, able to share information and coordinate the activities of multiple actors.[8]

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[6] Jensen, J., & Kirkpatrick, S. (2022). Local emergency management and comprehensive emergency management (CEM): A discussion prompted by interviews with Chief Resilience Officers. *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, *79*, 103136. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdrr.2022.103136

[7] Canton, L. G. (n.d.). *Emergency Management, 2nd Edition*. O'Reilly Online Learning. https://learning.oreilly.com/library/view/emergency-management-2nd/9781119066859/

[8] Ibid.

Characteristics of a Successful Emergency Management Organization

If the emergency manager acts a project manager, it suggests that an emergency management program should not be viewed as the responsibility of a single individual or office, but as an enterprise-wide program. Exhibit 4 shows characteristics of a successful emergency management program as identified the Public Entity Risk Institute. These align closely with other key emergency management standards, including those from FEMA and EMAP (Emergency Management Accreditation Program) Emergency Management Standard. It reflects core principles of comprehensive emergency management, such as an all-hazards focus, collaboration across sectors, and integrated response systems. **Building a coordinated, jurisdiction-wide program is a central idea in the Emergency Management Standard, which emphasizes the emergency manager's role as a program leader overseeing implementation throughout the entire jurisdiction, rather than a principal executor**.

Exhibit 3. Characteristics of Successful Emergency Management Organizations

Characteristics of successful organizations
Roles of elected officials defined
Strong and definitive lines of communications
Similar routine/disaster organizational Structures
Emergency management procedures are as close to routine operational procedures as possible
Good interpersonal relationships
Emergency management planning is an ongoing activity
All hazard approach
Disaster prevention and mitigation
Motivation provided for involvement in the emergency management program
Citizen involvement
Strong coordination among participating agencies
Public/private cooperation
Multiple use of resources
Public information function clearly defined
Ongoing monitoring for potential disasters
Internal alerting procedures
Ability to alert the public maximized
Active intergovernmental coordination
Ability to maintain comprehensive records during a disaster
Eligibility for state and federal subsidies considered

Source: Characteristics of Effective Emergency Management Organizational Structures, Public Entity Risk institute (2001).

Scholarship after the COVID-19 pandemic recognizes the critical role of non-emergency managers play in emergency response. The COVID-19 pandemic required crisis management from a much larger population than professional emergency managers and over a much longer time period than a typical event. **Beyond the emergency manager and emergency management organization itself, local**

governments need to foster the competencies and capacities required to adequately handle crises. Local governments need a collaborative approach with multi-level and cross-sector relationships, strong relationships with stakeholders, a culture focused on cooperation rather than competition, and characteristics of flexibility, transparency, participation, and accountability within relationships.[9] For emergency managers, cultivating trust and strong working relationships across departments and agencies is essential. These relationships support effective information flow and coordination during crises and help ensure that the emergency manager's role is understood, respected, and supported during non-emergency times.

Emergency Management is Growing in Complexity

Following COVID-19, the scope of emergency management is rapidly expanding as disasters grow more complex, severe, and frequent.[10] Issues such as public health coordination, supply chain disruptions, and cybersecurity threats now sit alongside traditional concerns such as evacuation and sheltering. Emergency managers in some jurisdictions are being called on to climate adaptation, homelessness, the opioid epidemic, and other crises, not just the immediate response to natural or human-caused disasters. These evolving demands are reshaping the field. Emergency management leaders must coordinate across multiple levels of government, partner with the private sector, and engage community-based organizations to effectively address overlapping risks. As a result, **integrated planning and cross-sector collaboration are more essential than ever**.

Challenges for Emergency Management

To support this shift, agencies will require a broader range of competencies and capabilities, as well as ongoing professional development. FEMA also recognizes the importance of investing in digital infrastructure to address community needs without challenging demands on staff capacity. Unmanned aerial vehicles and artificial intelligence both hold opportunities in emergency response. Technological advances may also allow for quick and accessible communication to the public, which is critical in any event.[11]

Exhibit 4 demonstrates the top challenges of emergency management organizations, including resource inadequacy competing priorities, and administrative issues. **It is noteworthy that 27% of respondents indicated that "stakeholder confusion about the role of emergency management" is a top challenge, indicating the difficulties inherent in defining and appreciating the role emergency management plays.** This may be because the role is not the delivery of direct response support, but interdisciplinary, cross-departmental preparedness and coordination.

[9] Bishu, S. G., Camarena, L., & Feeney, M. K. (2023). Managing through COVID-19: Reflections from city managers and lessons learned. *Public Administration Review*, *83*(5), 1367–1386. https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.13707

[10] https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/access/billions/time-series

[11] https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema_strategic-foresight-2050_current-trend-paper-transforming-field.pdf

Exhibit 4. Most Significant Challenges for Emergency Management Organizations

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

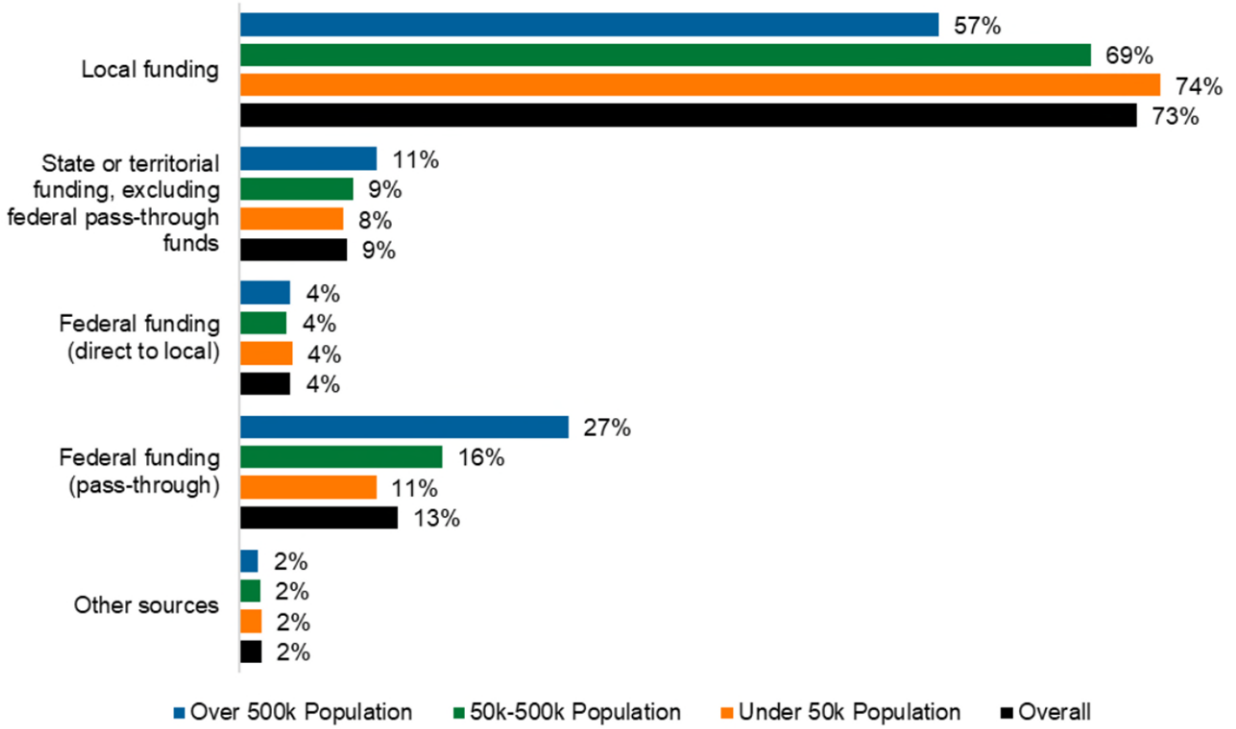
Uncertainty at the Federal Level

The future role of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and the level of support it provides to local jurisdictions, is currently very uncertain. Changes at the federal level may scale back FEMA's responsibilities or even eliminate the agency altogether. **Such changes would likely shift the burden of disaster management more heavily onto states and local governments, many of which already face resource constraints.** This could significantly weaken the national emergency management system, especially in smaller or under-resourced jurisdictions that depend on federal coordination and funding to prepare for and respond to disasters.

Federal funding, particularly through FEMA, plays a critical role in supporting mitigation efforts. Programs such as the Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) grant have enabled jurisdictions to invest in long-term risk reduction projects that would otherwise be financially out of reach.[12] If federal funding declines, many communities may be unable to maintain or expand these efforts, leaving them more vulnerable to future disasters and increasing overall recovery costs. Exhibit 5 shows that the average funding from the federal government for emergency management organizations with a population over 500,000 is 31%. Uncertainty around FEMA's future not only complicates long-term planning but also threatens to widen disparities in resilience and disaster outcomes across regions.

[12] https://apnews.com/article/fema-grants-cuts-trump-emergency-management-disaster-bc36ea4ca328e1eb4a07641ba1fb770e

Exhibit 5. Average Percent of Current Operational Funding from Various Sources



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

Appendix B: Peer City Benchmarking

Methodology

BERK connected with four peer cities, including Denver, Portland, San Francisco, and Vancouver, BC, to gain a better understanding of how analogous are operating. As a part of these interviews, we asked both qualitative and quantitative questions that help us to better compare the functions and operating structures across agencies. This section begins with several benchmarking tables and continues into a more detailed analysis of each peer city interview.

Peer City Comparison

Exhibit 6. Peer City Comparison - City Population

	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Seattle	726,054	734,603	741,440	N/A	N/A
Denver	706,799	710,800	713,734	N/A	N/A
Portland	647,176	646,101	642,715	N/A	N/A
San Francisco	865,933	851,036	836,321	N/A	N/A
Vancouver	662,250	706,012	N/A	N/A	N/A

Source: United States Census Bureau Table B101003; United Nations Data

Exhibit 7. Peer City Comparison – Emergency Management Budget

	FY21	FY22	FY23	FY24	FY25
Seattle	$ 2,483,750	$ 3,181,159	$ 2,786,045	$ 2,922,504	$ 3,072,157
Denver	$ 3,361,522	$ 6,399,954	$ 7,847,369	$ 9,262,629	$ 7,787,659
Portland	$ 8,150,774	$ 9,935,722	$ 10,334,699	$ 9,566,649	N/A
San Francisco	$ 122,439,115	$ 126,117,005	$ 138,773,276	$ 140,829,503	N/A

Source: Seattle Office of Emergency Management 2025 Adopted & 2026 Endorsed Budget; City and County of Denver 2025 Mayors Budget; Adopted Budget City of Portland, Oregon Fiscal Year 2024-25; City and County of San Francisco, California Proposed Budget Fiscal Years 2024-2025 & 2025-2026; BERK, 2025
Note 1: While most numbers are "actual" reported amounts, some are more recent estimates are "adopted" or "proposed" in recent city budgets.
Note 2: San Francisco's Department of Emergency Management contains Police's 911 Call Center as well as emergency medical services. Because of this, it serves a fundamentally different role as Seattle OEM and should be carefully compared. BERK was unable to obtain enough budgeting information to separate out these accessory functions.

Exhibit 8. Peer City Comparison - Total City Expenditures

	FY21	FY22	FY23	FY24	FY25
Seattle	$ 6,594,217,000	$ 7,143,467,000	$ 7,551,062,000	$ 7,838,541,000	$ 8,496,979,000
Denver	$ 3,223,256,000	$ 4,186,897,000	$ 4,731,079,000	$ 5,445,410,000	$ 5,449,549,000
Portland	$ 6,367,066,358	$ 6,978,891,946	$ 7,412,530,505	$ 8,281,926,518	N/A
San Francisco	$ 13,081,743,340	$ 12,758,292,987	$ 14,613,035,863	$ 15,883,345,834	N/A

Source: Seattle Office of Emergency Management 2025 Adopted & 2026 Endorsed Budget; City and County of Denver 2025 Mayors Budget; Adopted Budget City of Portland, Oregon Fiscal Year 2024-25; City and County of San Francisco, California Proposed Budget Fiscal Years 2024-2025 & 2025-2026; Statistics Canada. Table 17-10-0148-01 Population estimates, July 1, by census metropolitan area and census agglomeration, 2021 boundaries; BERK, 2025
Note 1: While most numbers are "actual" reported amounts, some are more recent estimates are "adopted" or "proposed" in recent city budgets.
Note 2: San Francisco's Department of Emergency Management contains Police's 911 Call Center as well as emergency medical services. Because of this, it serves a fundamentally different role as Seattle OEM and should be carefully compared. BERK was unable to obtain enough budgeting information to separate out these accessory functions.

Exhibit 9. Peer City Comparison – Emergency Management Budget as a Percentage of Total City Expenditures

	FY21	FY22	FY23	FY24	FY25
Seattle	0.04%	0.04%	0.04%	0.04%	0.04%
Denver	0.10%	0.15%	0.17%	0.17%	0.14%
Portland	0.13%	0.14%	0.14%	0.12%	N/A
San Francisco	0.94%	0.99%	0.95%	0.89%	N/A

Source: Seattle Office of Emergency Management 2025 Adopted & 2026 Endorsed Budget; City and County of Denver 2025 Mayors Budget; Adopted Budget City of Portland, Oregon Fiscal Year 2024-25; City and County of San Francisco, California Proposed Budget Fiscal Years 2024-2025 & 2025-2026; BERK, 2025
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Note 2: San Francisco's Department of Emergency Management contains Police's 911 Call Center as well as emergency medical services. Because of this, it serves a fundamentally different role as Seattle OEM and should be carefully compared. BERK was unable to obtain enough budgeting information to separate out these accessory functions.

Exhibit 10. Peer City Comparison - Emergency Services Budget per Capita

	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Seattle	$ 3.42	$ 4.33	$ 3.76	N/A	N/A
Denver	$ 4.76	$ 9.00	$ 10.99	N/A	N/A
Portland	$ 12.59	$ 15.38	$ 16.08	N/A	N/A
San Francisco	$ 141.40	$ 148.19	$ 165.93	N/A	N/A

Source: Seattle Office of Emergency Management 2025 Adopted & 2026 Endorsed Budget; City and County of Denver 2025 Mayors Budget; Adopted Budget City of Portland, Oregon Fiscal Year 2024-25; City and County of San Francisco, California Proposed Budget Fiscal Years 2024-2025 & 2025-2026; BERK, 2025
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Note 2: San Francisco's Department of Emergency Management contains Police's 911 Call Center as well as emergency medical services. Because of this, it serves a fundamentally different role as Seattle OEM and should be carefully compared. BERK was unable to obtain enough budgeting information to separate out these accessory functions.

Exhibit 11. Peer City Comparison – FTE by Emergency Management Department

	FY21	FY22	FY23	FY24	FY25
Seattle	15.00	15.00	15.00	15.00	13.00
Denver	9.37	11.37	11.51	12.62	12.62
Portland	23.90	27.90	26.90	19.90	N/A
San Francisco	295.31	294.67	313.13	304.46	N/A
Vancouver	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	16.00

Source: Seattle Office of Emergency Management 2025 Adopted & 2026 Endorsed Budget; City and County of Denver 2025 Mayors Budget; Adopted Budget City of Portland, Oregon Fiscal Year 2024-25; City and County of San Francisco, California Proposed Budget Fiscal Years 2024-2025 & 2025-2026; BERK, 2025
Note 1: While most numbers are "actual" reported amounts, some are more recent estimates are "adopted" or "proposed" in recent city budgets.
Note 2: San Francisco's Department of Emergency Management contains Police's 911 Call Center as well as emergency medical services. Because of this, it serves a fundamentally different role as Seattle OEM and should be carefully compared. BERK was unable to obtain enough budgeting information to separate out these accessory functions.

Exhibit 12. Peer City Comparison - EMAP Certification

	EMAP Certification
Seattle	Yes
Denver	Seeking Recertification
Portland	No
San Francisco	No
Vancouver	No

Source: Peer city interviews and emap.org
Note 1: Please note that while Denver does not currently have EMAP accreditation, they are actively pursuing accreditation.

Exhibit 13. Peer City Comparison - Location of Emergency Management Services

	Location of Emergency Management Services
Seattle	Mayor's Office
Denver	Mayor's Office
Portland	Mayor's Office (City Administrators)
San Francisco	Mayor's Office
Vancouver	Office of Chief Safety Officer

Source: Peer city interviews

Exhibit 14. Peer City Comparison - FTE Resource Allocation

FTE Allocation	Seattle		Denver		Portland		San Francisco		Vancouver	
	Position Title	FTEs	Position Title	FTEs	Position Title	FTEs	Position Title	FTEs	Position Title	FTEs
Administration	Director Deputy Director Admin Specialist Executive Assistant	4	Executive Director Executive Ops Admin Deputy Director STC Admin I UASI Admin I UASI Admin I	6	Administration Director Executive Support Group Deputy Director Executive Support Group Comm. Service Aide Support Services Admin Specialist Support Services Admin Specialist Support Services Executive Assistant	6	DES Deputy Director Assistant DES Deputy Director Special Projects Coordinator Division Support Coordinator	4	Director	1
Operations & Planning	Planning Program Manager Operations Program Manager Recovery and Mitigation Coordinator Finance and Grants Coordinator Hazards and Technology Coordinator Planning Coordinator Operations Resilience Coordinator	7	EM Specialist - Operations EM Specialist - Mitigation (vacant) EM Specialist - Continuity Sr. EM Specialist - Plans EM Specialist - Planning Grants & Finance Manager	6	Preparedness and Response Manager Operations Support Group Program Manager Operations Support Group Coordinator Preparedness and Response Coordinator Preparedness and Response Coordinator Preparedness and Response Coordinator (vacant) Preparedness and Response Coordinator (vacant) Preparedness and Response Comm Service Aide (hiring) Emergency Services Analyst Emergency Services Coordinator (vacant) Emergency Services Analyst (vacant)	11	Operations Manager Citywide Logistics Manager Operations Supervisor Preparedness Supervisor Planning Coordinator Watch Center Specialist Watch Center Specialist Watch Center Specialist Logistics Specialist Planning Specialist	10	Operational Readiness Manager Resilience & Disaster Risk Reduction Manager Disaster Risk Reduction Senior Specialist Senior Resilience Specialist Operational Readiness Senior Specialist Operational Readiness Specialist Data & Operations Specialist Senior Analyst	8
Trainings	Training and Exercise Coordinator	1	Sr. EM Specialist T&E (vacant)	1		0	Training & Exercise Coordinator Training & Exercise Specialist	2		0
Community Outreach & Education	Community Engagement Manager (Community Engagement Coordinator - vacant)	1	Communications & Outreach Manager Public Information Specialist Community Outreach Specialist Outreach Trainers (on-call)	4	Community Preparedness Manager Community Preparedness Program Manager Community Preparedness Program Manager Community Preparedness Coordinator Community Preparedness Comm. Service Aide (hiring) Community Preparedness Comm Service Aide (vacant)	6	Community Programs Manager Community Manager Community Specialist	3	Community Readiness Manager Public Education and Risk Communication Senior Specialist Emergency Support Senior Specialist Office Support Clerk	4
Other		0	STC Program Manager UASI Program Manager	2		0	GIS Specialist Grants Manager Accountant	3	Senior Manager of Public Safety - FIFA Senior Specialist - FIFA Senior Specialist - FIFA	3
Total		13		19		23		22		16

Source: Seattle Office of Emergency Management; Denver Office of Emergency Management; San Francisco Department of Emergency Management, BERK 2025.
Note 1: There are discrepancies between the total FTEs outlined in Exhibit 11 and Exhibit 14 due to the way that "vacant" FTEs are calculated.
Note 2: The "(Community Engagement Coordinator – Vacant)" position was not counted toward Seattle's FTE total because of its vacancy.
Note 3: Some emergency management organizations included members from their Regional Disaster Preparedness Organization (RDPO) in their organizational chart. FTEs from RDPOs were not counted toward an emergency management organization's FTE total.

Denver, Colorado

BERK Consulting spoke with Matthew Mueller, the Executive Director of Denver's Office of Emergency Management (Denver OEM).

Mission, Vision, and Values

Mission. Lead Denver's emergency management efforts to cultivate safe, prepared, and resilient communities.

Vision. Create America's most disaster resilient city.

Values. Empathetic, Adaptive, Accountable.

Denver OEM's Role in Denver

Denver OEM's fundamental role is "to ensure that the city is prepared to respond to and recover from emergencies". Its core functions include planning, public information and warning, operational coordination, community resilience, logistics and supply chain, mass care, and infrastructure systems[13].

Denver has emergency response plans for 21 different emergency events covering categories such as weather, civil, human services, and technological emergencies. Staff noted that Denver OEM has typically activated five to six times annually over the last several years, which is an increase in frequency, and that these activations are now less often related to weather and more frequently caused by a humanitarian crisis or social unrest.

Value Proposition

The Executive Director attributed Denver OEM's value to its ability to cross disciplines and to help departments operate in a command-and-control structure that operating agencies could not achieve on their own. He emphasized that the Office is preparing for things the general public is not thinking about, and that they excel in tackling the problems that don't fit neatly into a single department's jurisdiction. This can make it difficult to articulate the agency's value when the constituents they serve are not thinking about or are not aware of the problems that Denver OEM helps to mitigate. It's far easier to articulate departmental value in responding to more traditional emergencies.

Funding and Operational Capacity

Denver OEM makes up approximately 0.1%[14] of Denver's overall city budget. Denver OEM's funding is seen as sufficient to cover the core functions that Denver OEM performs including: alerting the public, managing emergencies, planning for future emergencies, facilitating trainings and exercises, and public education. Staff noted that additional funding could enhance these functions and acknowledged that

[13] Mayor's 2025 Budget – City and County of Denver

[14] Please note, this will not align with the figures outlined in the Peer City Comparison - Budget as a Percentage of General Fund exhibit above because this exhibit is comparing Denver's OEM department with Denver's general fund, a smaller portion of Denver's larger city budget.

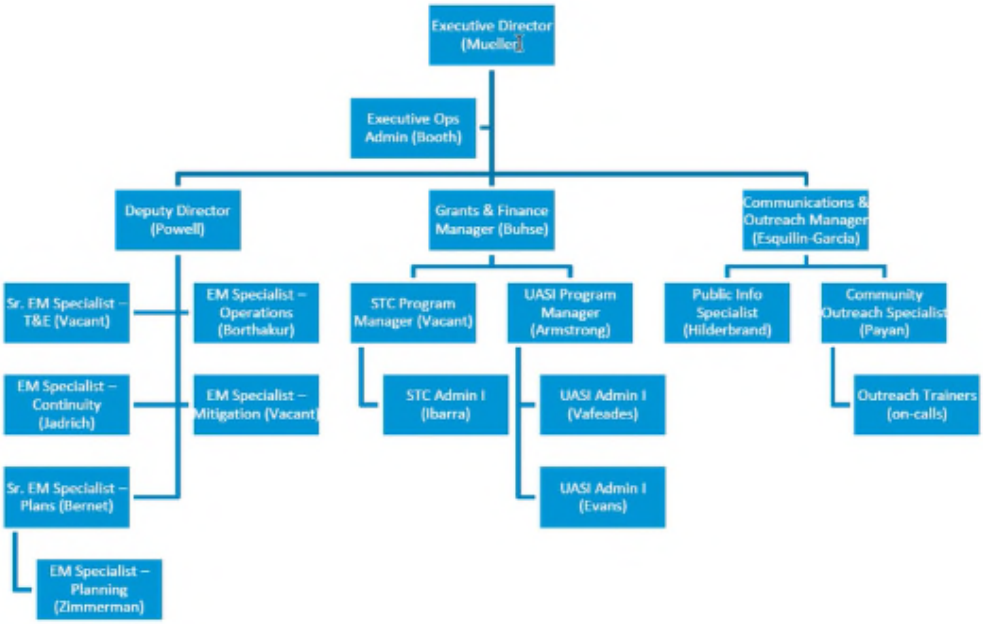
many cities are struggling to fully resource emergency management functions given competing demands for local funding and the potential loss of federal funding.

Department Structure and Resource Allocation

Denver OEM exists as an office under the Mayor. Matthew stated that he is strongly in favor of the current structure and has repeatedly advocated against suggestions to consolidate the emergency management function under police or fire. Because of their expanded role in addressing human services, cyber security, and other emergencies, this requires Denver OEM to work across all departments of the city. He sees police, fire, and other major departments as peers.

Denver OEM's organizational structure is illustrated in Exhibit 15. The Office currently has 19 FTEs, including 6 grant-funded FTEs.

Exhibit 15. Denver OEM Organizational Chart



Source: Denver Office of Emergency Management, 2025

Public Communication

Denver has several staff dedicated to public communication, and when Denver OEM is activated, they become the primary conduit between all city activities and the public. When not activated, their communication efforts are primarily focused on preparedness and education. Denver is seeking to consolidate several public alert systems. The City uses Everbridge, but it is not managed by Denver OEM.

Training

Denver OEM has a Senior Emergency Management Specialist of Trainings & Exercises (Sr. EM Specialist T&E) who is responsible for coordinating trainings and exercises throughout the city. This role typically helps facilitate at least one large, functional exercise that includes a mock scenario, an activated EOC,

and 100+ participants who are physically present in the EOC. In addition to this large-scale exercise, Denver OEM helps facilitate several table-top exercises where participants will talk through a hypothetical scenario. Denver OEM has several required trainings that emergency operations staff must participate in on a reoccurring basis. These trainings are required through an Executive Order that requires departments to come to Denver OEM's EOC for regular trainings.

Coordinating with Other Departments

Matthew noted that balancing Denver OEM's roles as leaders and facilitators is one of the most challenging components of their work. When formally activated, Denver OEM gains authority to actively coordinate city resources per the Revised Municipal Code of the City and County of Denver[15]. Matthew emphasized that this codified authority is accompanied by authority and trust extended by the Mayor's Office. Matthew noted that for smaller emergencies, coordinating efforts can be much more difficult because OEM doesn't have the formal authority they need to delegate and allocate department resources. In these scenarios, the departments are more cautious of allocating their resources, and it makes it very difficult for Denver OEM to operate effectively.

Similarly, he noted that when Denver OEM is formally activated in large event, it's understood that everyone will report to Denver OEM's EOC. In smaller emergencies, other departments may choose to stay in their own EOC which can fragment response capability.

Evaluation Criteria

Matthew stated that evaluating success is challenging in an emergency management context. It is possible to measure "progress" by tracking movement toward stated goals, but evaluating "effectiveness" is much more difficult. It is possible to count the number of trainings or exercises facilitated, but such enumerations do not necessarily equate to preparedness.

Denver has let its EMAP accreditation lapse, but is in the process of regaining accreditation. Matthew identified both pros and cons with the EMAP certification, noting that it is costly and doesn't guarantee an effective program, however it can also serve as an inspirational focus for staff and help set the organization's direction.

[15] https://library.municode.com/co/denver/codes/code_of_ordinances?nodeId=TITIIREMUCO_CH16EMPR_ARTIINGE

Portland, Oregon

BERK interviewed several member of the Portland Bureau of Emergency Management (PBEM) including Shad Ahmed, Director; Jordan Wiley, Deputy Director; Rachit Nerwal, Business Continuity Planner; and Chris Carey, Preparedness & Response Manager. PBEM and the City of Portland's government structure is undergoing significant organizational transition. Whereas previously, the emergency management function was decentralized in multiple different bureaus, the City is moving towards a more centralized, interdepartmental emergency management function as is more typical of major cities. The Bureau is in its infancy in its current form.

Mission, Vision, and Values

Bureau Goals. Promote readiness, coordinate response, and build resilience for Portland.

PBEM's role in Portland

PBEM seeks to develop and implement strategic planning, programs, and policies to continually advance the City's mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery capabilities. Interviewees described their core function as convening subject matter experts across the City in preparing, responding, and recovering from an emergency. PBEM has traditionally responded to severe weather events, civil unrest events, infrastructure threats, and cyber security events. More recently, the Bureau has been involved in more non-traditional roles including the City's responses to the opioid epidemics, homelessness, and gun violence.

Value Proposition

Interviewees identified PBEM's primary value contributions in three distinct ways:

- Building community resilience,
- Bolstering city leadership, and
- Supporting city departments.

They noted that they, like many other emergency management departments, struggle to excel across all three categories and that they are strongest at building community resilience.

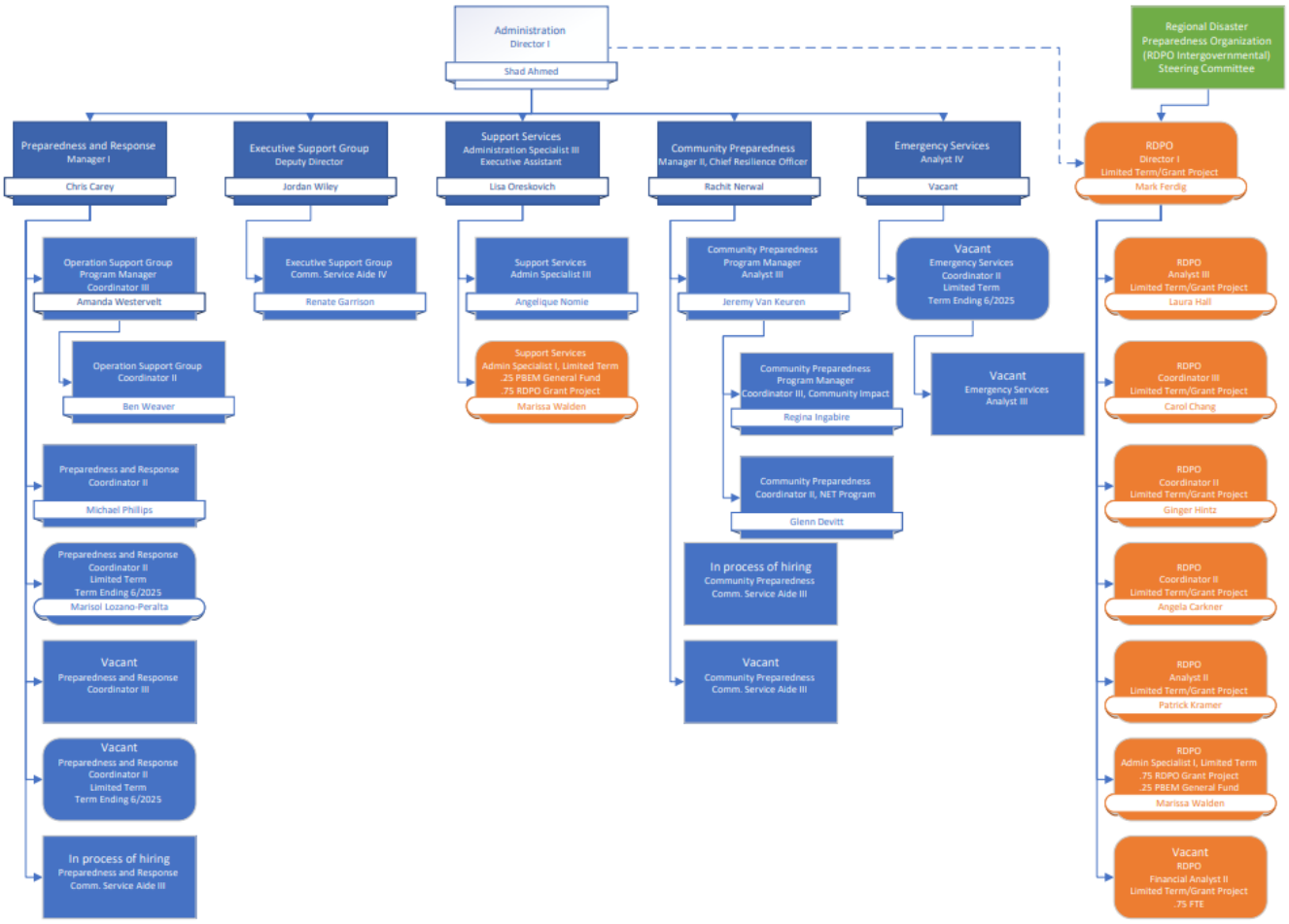
Funding and Operational Capacity

PBEM staff noted that they have the minimum funding required to perform core functions. Additional funding is desired in the future to fully build out the Bureau's capabilities.

Department Structure and Resource Allocation

PBEM operates with approximately 20 FTEs across five major categories of work (Exhibit 16).

Exhibit 16. Portland Bureau of Emergency Management Organizational Chart



Source: 2024 – 2025 City of Portland City Summaries and Bureau Budgets (Volume 1)
Note: Position on the far right of Exhibit 16 under "Regional Disaster Preparedness Organization" are not included in this FTE count as they are a part of a separate organization.

Training

While they currently have one FTE specifically dedicated to trainings, PBEM indicated a desire for three to five FTEs coordinating their trainings and exercises. They currently offer some Incident Command Systems (ICS) level trainings and are working to establish a unified training model that across several bureaus throughout Portland. Portland's internal training efforts are currently scattered across multiple bureaus, but PBEM is looking to work towards a more centralized approach with standard curricula and exercise schedule for the entire City.

Coordinating with Other Departments

During a declared emergency, PBEM can act as the designee of the Mayor, with the ability to set policy, direct department resources, and make decisions on behalf of the City. Interviewees noted that it's a challenging line to walk with so many subject matter experts within other departments. As with trainings, the City is moving from multiple, decentralized EOCs to a centralized PBEM-operated EOC.

Evaluation Criteria

Portland does not currently hold an EMAP certification. PBEM identified numerous criteria they use to evaluate their effectiveness including:

- Number of plans up to date
- Number of trainings / exercises administered; number of people trained
- Number of Community Organizations Active in A Disaster (COADs) supported
- Number of duty officers staffed
- Number of activations
- Number of days activated
- Number of activations without emergency declaration

San Francisco, California

BERK interviewed Mary Ellen Carroll, Executive Director of the San Francisco Department of Emergency Management (DEM). DEM's scope of responsibilities are broader than other departments studied in this report. DEM manages the San Francisco 911 Call Center as well as some other emergency communication and emergency medical services. Our interview focused on the Emergency Services Division (ESD) which more closely resembles Seattle OEM's span of responsibility. This summary will specifically refer to either DEM or ESD.

Mission, Vision, and Values

Mission. The Department of Emergency Management (DEM) leads the City in planning, preparedness, communication, response, and recovery for daily emergencies, large-scale citywide events, and major disasters. DEM is the vital link in emergency communication between the public and first responders, providing key coordination and leadership to city departments, stakeholders, residents, and visitors.[16]

ESD's Role in the Community

The Emergency Services Division is tasked with preparing for and responding to everyday and not-so-everyday emergencies. They are responsible for convening the EOC when appropriate and their day-to-day work is primarily comprised of solving immediate problems and planning for both predictable events (e.g., the Super Bowl or other major community events) and unpredictable events (e.g., active shooters, earthquakes, etc.).

Value Proposition

Mary Ellen described ESD's primary value as offering "coordination, convening, collaboration, and communication." ESD acts as the information gatherer and disseminator. She went on to say that "Most cities have issues with siloed departments and no emergency requires a response from only one department, so that is where ESD comes in; our sole purpose is bringing departments together to solve problems."

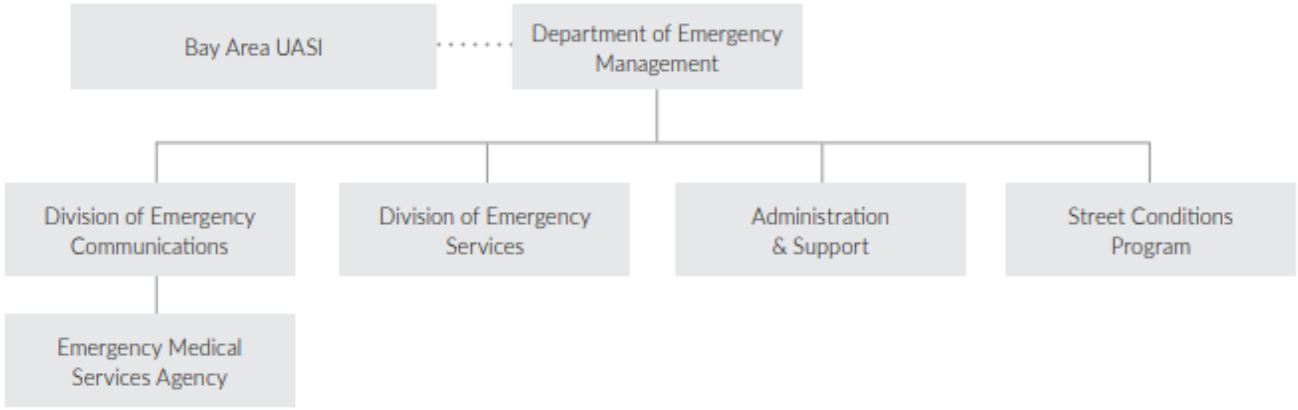
Department Structure and Resource Allocation

San Francisco DEM is its own department and reports directly to the Mayor. Mary Ellen believes that DEM's value is greater as a separate, independent entity.

Exhibit 17 outlines the department structure for all of San Francisco's DEM. Exhibit 18 outlines the department structure for DEM's Emergency Services Division.

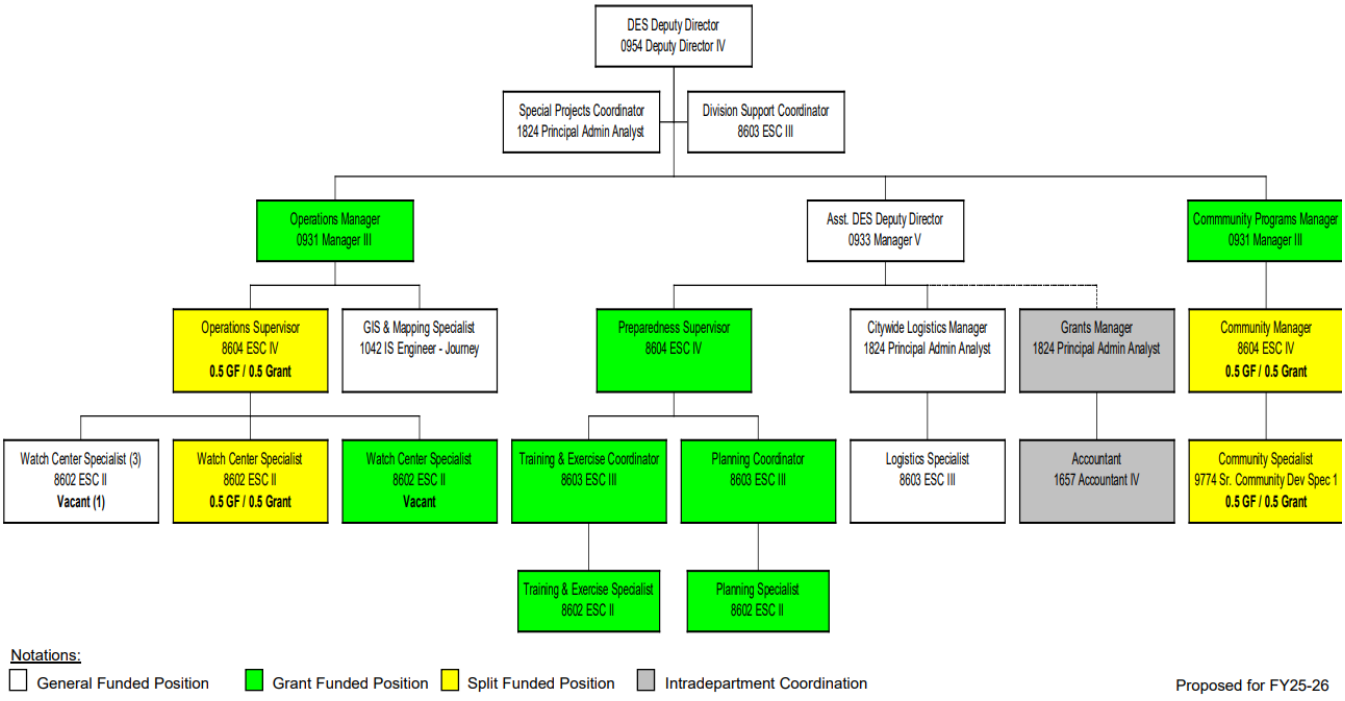
[16] City of San Francisco Proposed Budget Book June 2023

Exhibit 17. San Francisco Department of Emergency Management Organizational Chart



Source: City of San Francisco Budget Book June 2024

Exhibit 18. San Francisco Emergency Services Division Organizational Chart



Source: City of San Francisco Department of Emergency Management

The primary functions of ESD can best be summarized as:

- **Operations.** The operations component is responsible for operational logistics and facilitating the watch center which includes managing emergency notifications, EOC maintenance, and EOC activation.
- **Planning, Exercises, and Trainings.** This component of ESD prioritizes creating plans for future emergencies and scheduling trainings and exercises that increase the readiness and preparedness of those involved with emergency management procedures.

- **Community Outreach.** The community outreach component of ESD prioritizes sending out sending out public notifications, operating the emergency alert system including weather and other emergency alerts. This group also helps facilitate the public preparedness website sf72.org and will attend community meetings, tabling, and workshops as appropriate.

Training

ESD facilitates trainings and exercises for the DEM team, individuals in other departments, and for the San Francisco community. ESD conducts workshops and small-scale exercises in the community regularly. They have partnered with groups like the Boy & Girls Club, senior centers, and other non-profit groups to help facilitate these exercises. ESD also facilitates some larger-scale exercises directed at preparing city employees and emergency management professionals. Additionally, ESD coordinates an annual exercise for Fleet Week each year in collaboration with military partners.

Part of ESD's training responsibility is to keep staff certifications up-to-date. They do not have authority over other department personnel to mandate training. This makes facilitation of trainings extremely difficult.

Coordinating with other Departments

At the operational level, ESD has a Department Preparedness Coordinator Program where each department has a liaison to ESD with decision making authority. ESD and the department liaison meet on a regular basis to stay up to date on the latest procedures. Additionally, DEM's Executive Director facilitates a group of approximately 20 other large city departments that meets regularly and can facilitate conversations to keep procedures up to date. Finally, there is also a policy group that the DEM Executive Director helps facilitate which provides additional opportunities for coordination with other departmental leads.

ESD's coordination with other departments and EOC facilitation is a strong point of ESD's abilities. They ran COVID for two years out of the Moscone Convention Center with about 500 people per day working from there. When facilitating the EOC, they are primarily spending their time coordinating, documenting, communicating out, and keeping constant communication with other departments.

EOC activation also takes place during major community events such as the Asian Pacific Economic Conference (APEC), NBA All Start weekend, and the Chinese New Year Parade. For pre-planned events, DEM's role is to corral the many different voices and leaders in a tight space. They are working to revise their template for planned events to better define event leadership.

Evaluation Criteria

San Franciso is not EMAP certified.

Vancouver, British Columbia

BERK interviewed Kelly Anderson, Manager of Operational Readiness and Miranda Myles, Manager of Community Readiness with the Vancouver Emergency Management Agency (VEMA). Because VEMA is a public agency in British Columbia, Canada, there were some fundamental differences around VEMA's governance structure.

VEMA's Role in the Community

VEMA is responsible for coordinating emergency management services, managing the city's EOC, directing volunteers, and disseminating public information. Historically, VEMA has only been required to focus on the "response" component of emergency management, however, recent legislation from the Province of British Columbia is requiring broader responsibilities, including preparation, mitigation, and recovery.

Value Proposition

Kelly and Miranda described VEMA as seeking to coordinate and help resolve issues that go beyond the day-to-day through information sharing and coordinating city-wide responses.

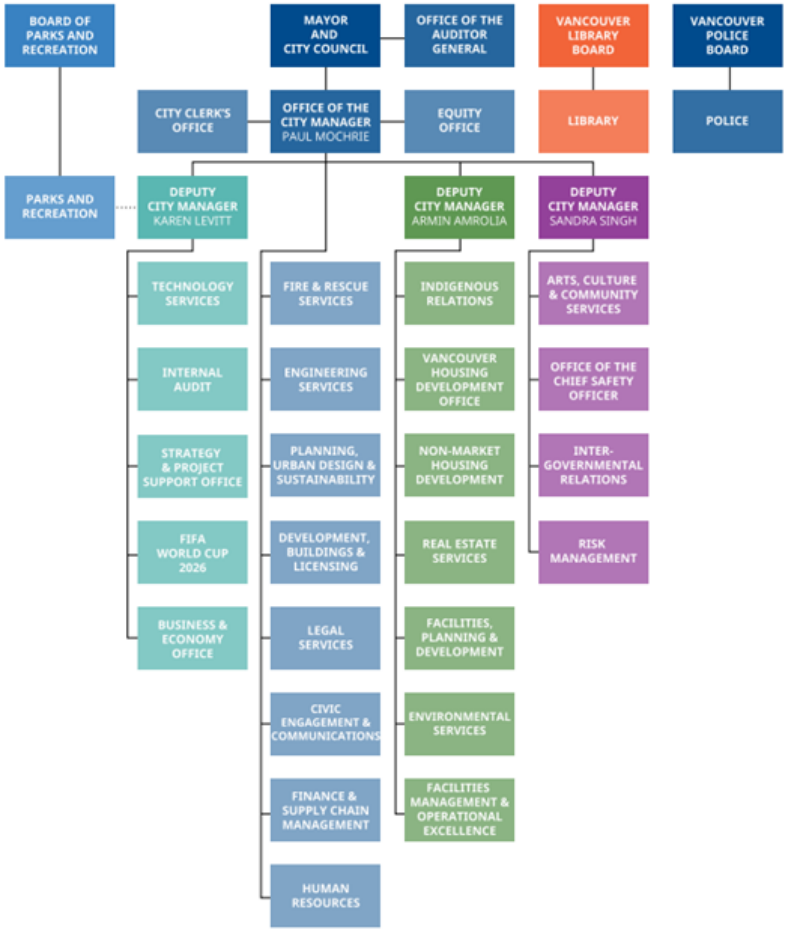
Funding and Operational Capacity

VEMA, like many other emergency services organizations, feels short staffed, however, they do feel well supported in terms of funding. City level emergency management programs in British Columbia do not receive federal funding. Rather, all operating and staff compensation come from the city budget. VEMA is able to recoup some costs of services provided through the Province of British Columbia.

Department Structure and Resource Allocation

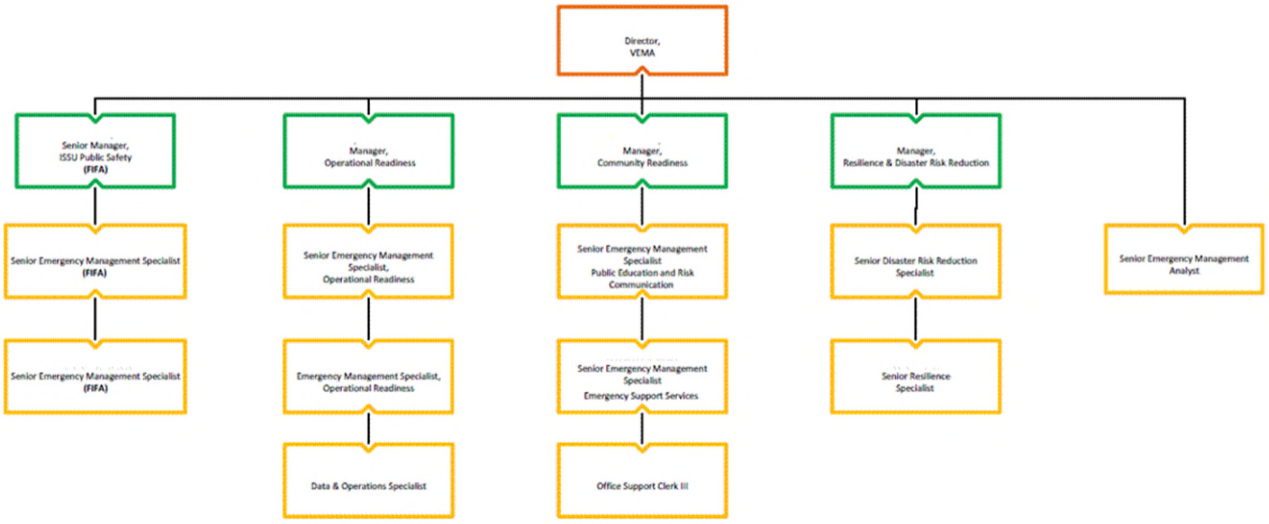
VEMA has existed as a part of several different departments during its tenure as an agency. It currently sits under the Office of the Chief Safety Officer along with several other public safety functions (Exhibit 19). VEMA staff believe their current positioning works well, stating they are able to perform their duties best when they are not buried in a large department with a specific functional focus. See Exhibit 20 for a more detailed breakdown of VEMA's organizational chart.

Exhibit 19. Vancouver City Structure Organizational Chart



Source: Vancouver Emergency Management Agency

Exhibit 20. VEMA Organizational Chart



Source: Vancouver Emergency Management Agency

VEMA's primary functions were described as:

- **Operational Readiness.** This means being prepared to coordinate city responses and act swiftly in the event of an emergency.
- **Community Readiness.** This consists of conducting information sharing, planning for supporting displaced people in the event of an emergency, and working with other departments to best support community members.
- **Resilience and Disaster Reduction.** This is the more strategic side of emergency management including mitigating the impact of future emergencies, conducting hazard, risk, and vulnerability analyses, and conducting community engagement and outreach to bolster neighborhood preparedness.

Training

VEMA provides training on EOC essentials, rapid damage assessment, and trainings focused on preparing for the 2026 World Cup. While they don't facilitate many large-scale training exercises, VEMA annually activates for a three-night Festival of Light. This activation provides a great opportunity to refresh EOC skills and train less experienced staff members. Very few of VEMA's trainings offered are required.

Coordinating with other Departments

VEMA helps make the EOC functional, available, and VEMA staff are trained to operate the EOC, however, they are often not in charge of the EOC when its activated. The EOC lead for a given emergency may be someone from VEMA, or it might also be someone else from another department based on the emergency at hand. Whoever the EOC director is assigns policy decision making to a designated policy group that that the EOC will then enact. The policy group is typically comprised of the city manager, and department managers and is held accountable by the mayor, city council, and the public.

Evaluation Criteria

VEMA largely tracks the number of activations that took place, but they also account for "complexity". This is a measure of how the activation lasted, how many people were involved, whether they combatting multiple vulnerabilities, and other factors. VEMA also uses activation and event debriefs to identify opportunities to strengthen identified weaknesses.

EMAP accreditation is not relevant to Canada.

Appendix C: Review of Recent After Action Reports

Recent activations and incidents in Seattle offer important insights into the strengths and areas for improvement in the City's emergency coordination, communication tools, and planning efforts. OEM's After Action Reports document what occurred, why it happened, and how future responses can be strengthened. This review of OEM's AARs synthesizes some of the key improvement opportunities.

MLB All Star Game (2023)

- There is a need to integrate large, planned events into OEM and City strategic plans.
- OEM can take a leadership role in early coordination by including major events in the City's rolling three-year planning cycle.
- Additional opportunities exist to strengthen collaboration with other City departments ahead of such events.

Tyre Nichols Readiness Activation (2023)

- No major issues or coordination challenges were reported during this activation.

Pride Parade Activation (2024)

- OEM used the activation period to conduct concurrent tabletop exercises, a productive use of time that supported ongoing preparedness.
- On-site representation was lower than in previous years, with several key partners either unavailable or participating in an on-call capacity.

Bomb Cyclone (2024)

- OEM relied on virtual coordination via Microsoft Teams and daily calls, which many felt did not allow for timely decision-making.
  - Responders noted that in-person EOC activation could have improved coordination around fuel access, shelter planning, and public communications.
  - The absence of an activated Joint Information Center (JIC) limited unified messaging and added barriers between responders and communication staff.
- Scheduling conflicts prevented King County OEM from joining Seattle OEM's coordination meetings.

South Park Flooding (2024)

- Emergency response efforts in a diverse neighborhood highlighted the need to better incorporate equity considerations, including ensuring access to interpretation services.
- Microsoft Teams proved insufficient for managing complex emergencies, underscoring the need to establish incident command structures early, before conditions escalate.
- The incident happened over a holiday which limited ability to respond quickly and demonstrated a need for department staffing plans to consider possible emergency response.

See the next page for a detailed case study on the South Park Flooding Incident, highlighting a comparison of After Action Reports from OEM and Seattle Public Utilities.

OEM Response: South Park Flooding Case Study

The South Park Flooding Incident

In December 2022, the Duwamish River flooded the South Park neighborhood, resulting in widespread damage to about 25 homes and several businesses. Residents faced immediate displacement, many of whom had little to no access to resources to deal with the immediate disruption to daily life. The South Park neighborhood is ethnically and racially diverse, with a greater proportion of residents living below the poverty line. Residents most impacted by the flooding were Spanish, Vietnamese, and Khmer speaking.

The South Park flooding event revealed critical vulnerabilities in Seattle's emergency management approach, emphasizing the need for the Office of Emergency Management (OEM) and other offices to prioritize adaptability in planning and response. This event demonstrated that modern disasters are increasingly complex, often falling outside standard training and response frameworks. As the frequency and unpredictability of emergencies grow, OEM must be equipped to respond to crises that defy conventional categorization.

Incident Response

Flooding caused by river rising, rather than storm surge causing sewage backup to homes, did not fit neatly into Seattle's hazards planning. Because of that, a traditional Incident Command Structure (ICS) was not immediately established. Seattle Public Utilities (SPU) carried out the initial response for the city with limited initial support from other departments due to the incident occurring over a holiday. The City did not issue an emergency proclamation in the early weeks of the incident that could have helped alert all departments, get additional staffing support, and stood up a Joint Information Center (JIC).

After Action Reports

The After Action Reports from SPU and OEM differ in their characterization of the incident response. SPU notes that roles were not defined, improvement is needed with OEM's Seattle Recovery Framework, and there is a need to coordinate City partners to deploy a City-wide public information officer. These items were not listed as corrective actions needed in OEM's report.

SPU and other departments asked OEM to activate a JIC many times and were denied. OEM's After Action Report does identify the need to establish a Concept of Operations that would include triggers for EOC and JIC activation. This work was apparently completed in November 2023, but issues with a lack of JIC during the Bomb Cyclone demonstrates a continued issue for OEM.

Appendix D: Stakeholder Interviews

BERK conducted online interviews with the following individuals. Interviews lasted one hour, with questions focused on OEM's strengths, weaknesses, and challenges, as well as opportunities to improve current and future emergency management efforts.

Council

- Councilmember Kettle

Mayor's Office

- Deputy Mayor Burgess
- Sarah Smith, Deputy Chief Public Safety Officer
- Ben Dalgetty, Internal Communications Manager

Central Budget Office

- Jennifer Devore, Fiscal and Policy Manager
- Geoffrey Detwiler, Financial and Policy Analyst

Office of Emergency Management

- Curry Mayer, Director
- Andrew Stevens, Deputy Director

Seattle Police Department

- Assistant Chief Dan Nelson

Seattle Fire Department

- Chief James Collins
- Captain Randy Anderson

Seattle City Light

- Brittany Barnwell, Emergency Management

Seattle Public Utilities

- Chad Buechler, Emergency Management

Seattle Department of Transportation

- Patti Quirk, Emergency Management

Input from individual interviewees is aggregated thematically below under the following topic headings:

- Challenges
- OEM's Role
  - Pre-Disaster Planning and Mitigation
  - Response
  - Recovery
- Big Picture Themes
- Setting OEM up for Success
- Highest Priority Areas of Focus

Challenges

Structural Challenges Specific to City of Seattle Operating Context

- **OEM has struggled with inconsistent leadership and support.** The department has reported to four different individuals in roughly the same number of years, Shifting priorities and inconsistent levels of engagement from City leadership have complicated OEM's operating environment, as has its move from SPD to its current role as an independent department.
- **Operating as a newly independent department has presented administrative challenges.** As a relatively new free-standing department, OEM needs to build capacity in managing its own budget and internal administration.
- **Inconsistent participation on the Emergency Executive Board.** Stakeholders noted that executive and policy maker participation in the Emergency Executive Board is inconsistent. This is seen both as a symptom of and contributor to the perception that OEM-led functions are not valued.
- **"OEM has no authority; it can only ask other City departments to act or share resources."** Peer city case studies offer examples of emergency management offices with greater authority during emergency responses. This is often the case in communities with more frequent emergencies, while the Pacific Northwest is frequently cited as "challenged" from an emergency management perspective by the relative infrequency of disasters.

OEM Resources

- **Staffing reductions have impacted OEM's capacity.** The department has only one training coordinator, down from multiple staff in previous years. Community engagement staffing has also been cut from five to just one. One interviewee stated that OEM has seen a high level of turnover; the validity and potential causes of that observation have not been investigated in this study.
- **Budget cuts hit OEM harder than larger departments.** Unlike agencies embedded within larger City departments, OEM has no parent organization to absorb across the board budget cuts. Reductions in funding directly impact its ability to operate.
- **Like other large cities (see** Exhibit 5**), Seattle OEM is highly reliant on federal grants.** Many of its programs, including community resilience efforts and planning efforts are supported by grants. If funding were to decrease, sustaining these programs would require finding additional revenue to replace lost federal funding in a time where the City of Seattle is already facing a budget shortfall.

Challenges Common to the Emergency Management Discipline

- **Emergency managers frequently note that it is difficult to gain support for emergency preparedness and mitigation in the face of pressing day-to-day challenges faced by executive staff and policy makers.** While mitigation efforts have been shown to provide a positive ROI, immediate needs often prevail, and while training and exercise is valued in principle, in practice other demands on participant time often take precedence.
- **The function of emergency management is often not well understood.** The success of an emergency management office often depends on being seen as a trusted and credible coordinating partner. Without buy-in from other stakeholders, it cannot be effective. As noted in Exhibit 4, more

than 25% of survey respondents in a national survey stated that "stakeholder confusion about the role of EM" is one of their most significant challenges.

- **Effective emergency management professionals must excel at a variety of skills.** Emergency management professionals need to be skilled planners, grant writers, and crisis managers who remain calm under pressure. They need to be both leaders and facilitators depending on the circumstances. This diverse skillset makes recruitment and retention difficult.
- **Emergency response is incompatible with many current ways of working.** Many public sector employees are not accustomed to being called upon for emergency work outside standard business hours. Ensuring availability for evening, weekend, and holiday responses can be a challenge.

OEM's Role

When asked to describe OEM's role, two strong themes emerged:

- **OEM exists to reduce the impacts of disasters on everyone in Seattle.** This includes residents, visitors, students, and businesses. The office is responsible for pre-disaster preparations, mid-disaster response coordination, and post-disaster recovery.
- **OEM serves as a facilitator for other City departments.** Rather than directly managing all emergency responses, it ensures that each department has strong emergency management protocols in place. In response, it often acts as a support system, helping operating agencies coordinate from a shared information base, rather than taking over their responsibilities.

The following sub-topics explore stakeholder perceptions of OEM's role, strengths, and weaknesses in its pre-disaster, response, and post-disaster modes.

Pre-Disaster: Mitigation and Preparedness

Role

Key aspects of OEM's pre-disaster role were described as:

- Coordinating citywide planning and mitigation efforts.
- Providing training and exercise opportunities to City staff.
- Educating Seattle residents and business owners and encouraging them to sign up for Alert Seattle and make their own preparations.

Strengths

- **Coordinating through the Disaster Management Committee, Strategic Workgroup, and Emergency Executive Board.** One stakeholder, who has been involved at all three levels stated: "I'm not a fan of meetings, but the structure makes sense."
- **Providing tabletop exercises and community-facing trainings.** While some interviewees questioned the number of trainings and exercises offered to city staff, others described recent efforts as high quality and called out OEM's staff lead for inserting injects into an otherwise uneventful Seafair activation. One stakeholder praised OEM for offering more trainings and exercises than in the past.

- **OEM is playing a key role in preparing for the FIFA World Cup.** The office is actively involved in emergency planning for Seattle's role as a host city, ensuring that public safety and disaster response plans are in place. "OEM is taking a very appropriate role and their staff lead is doing a great job quarterbacking and consolidating departmental plans. We see people falling back into old habits, wanting PD to lead. OEM has been good at nudging other departments to contribute, including Curry going to other department directors."

Language accessibility should be prioritized for major events. The FIFA World Cup will bring many non-English-speaking visitors to Seattle, and translation services should be available based on expected language needs. OIRA could perhaps be better integrated in planning efforts.

Desired Improvements

Several stakeholders expressed a desire for more proactivity on OEM's part:

- **Identify risks and strategic priorities.** OEM should daylight concerns and bring them forward for consideration by the Mayor's Office and others. This was described as requiring a more proactive stance, confident leadership, and the ability to rally others to focus on priority concerns.
- **Make sure departments have Continuity of Operations Plans (COOPs) in place.** OEM does not currently have the authority to require departmental planning.
- **Ensure emergency operations staff and protocols are practiced and ready.** Several stakeholders expressed concerns that EOC representatives are not fully prepared and confident in their roles. Another common theme was that protocols describing how the City's Emergency Operations Center should interface with departmental incident command centers in large activations.

Stakeholders expressed a desire for more training for staff and community members, though a first step is providing greater clarity in what is being offered.

- **Many stakeholders felt that OEM should provide a more robust training and exercise program for City staff.** Others noted that it would be beneficial for OEM to publish a training calendar in a format that can be meshed with others' calendars to allow departmental emergency managers to better plan and take advantage of OEM-sponsored events.
- **Community engagement and communications.** As noted above, OEM currently has one FTE focused on community outreach and engagement. While some stakeholders referred to this as a secondary function, others saw it as core to OEM's ability to leverage community preparations far larger than what they can accomplish as a staff of 14.

One interviewee suggested that OEM could take on the role of **coordinating special event permitting**, saying that benefits would include adding staff to the OEM team and establishing an integrated and deconflicted special events calendar.

Refinements to Strategic Workgroup, Disaster Management Committee, Emergency Executive Board

Two suggestions were made to improve the working of these standing bodies:

- One stakeholder felt that more value could be gained from Strategic Work Group engagement by reducing the size of regular attendees to 10-12, with some current participants attending less frequently.

- Another stakeholder reported that they have made repeated requests for advance notice of Emergency Executive Board agenda items so they can prepare their director appropriately.

Response

Role

- **The EOC is a critical coordination hub.** During crises, it brings together key stakeholders, including City agencies, to ensure a unified response. It also helps bridge operational challenges between departments with strong and independent cultures, such as Police and Fire.
- **OEM serves as the City's central information hub during emergencies.** It gathers, manages, and disseminates critical information to ensure that agencies, City leadership, and the public stay informed. It also plays a key role in emergency preparedness by hosting training sessions and coordinating communication.

Strengths

Several stakeholders said that information sharing when EOC is activated is effective: "In person and remote activations go really well, with good information flow and coordination."

Desired Improvements

Stakeholders expressed a strong desire for OEM to offer greater value in information synthesis and active coordination. The following quotes capture this sentiment:

- "Their job is to make sure our response is strategic and not siloed and they don't do a good job of that, making sure that decision makers have the information they need."
- "I'd like to see more value produced when OEM is quarterbacking big community events. Fire and police share their plans, but we don't get anything back. OEM should function more like a fusion center and produce a synthesized citywide plan."
- "They do a good job of providing structure while activated, but I sense they feel their role is to open the facility and pass the microphone around. I want them to intake all the information and process it and disseminate it in a way that glues everyone together."
- Whether we continue to invest in WebEOC or an alternative, OEM is lacking a well thought out and practiced common operating picture. They should be organizing [in a] single place to see what everyone is doing, but right now this is just random touchpoints rather than more continuous informative internal department communication. We need more web-based common operating pictures and real-time data."

Procedures and protocols around EOC are needed. Stakeholders noted that multiple coordination points create confusion during emergencies and decision makers are often not in the EOC.

- "Decision makers don't go to the Seattle EOC when it's activated but remain in the Mayor's Office or within an operating department. This structure can be ok, but it's important to be explicit beforehand about our expectations and emergency decision making model."
- Stakeholders expressed a concern that better-defined coordination mechanisms are needed in instances when operating departments activate their own command centers. Without these, there

are unclear roles and responsibilities. Full-scale exercises are desired to practice coordination across the EOC and departmental incident command centers.

- Stakeholders also noted that decision makers are often not in the EOC. “Currently the OEM EOC is not where decisions are being made. That’s happening at other department incident command centers.”

Stakeholders uniformly emphasized the need for OEM to have a greater operational focus.

- Stakeholders emphasized that few OEM staff have direct operational experience responding to medium- and large-scale disasters. They suggest prioritizing that in future hires.
- Several stakeholders asserted that OEM should activate more frequently, both for events such as the recent South Park flooding and the bomb cyclone, and for predictable instances that may rapidly deteriorate into an emergency: “I think they should activate any time there is a swell of activity when our transportation and public safety infrastructure will be stressed to the max. We’re one small thing away from cascading events with big consequences in such instances.”
- “I would like to see a more aggressive activation policy, with OEM communicating dates and types of planned activations [for community events, scheduled protests, etc.] so departments can preplan and have resources available.”
- Several stakeholders support a more formal activation policy with triggers and tiers to describe the level of activation.

Recovery

Several stakeholders expressed a desire for OEM to describe its role in recovery and to clarify the function of the Seattle Disaster Recovery Framework which may not be appropriate to neighborhood scale recovery such as with the South Park flooding.

Big Picture Themes

Many stakeholders expressed a desire for a more proactive approach to addressing OEM’s responsibilities:

- “There is a belief among City leaders that they are not essential.”
- “I would like to see more ownership and agency, whether it’s in identifying concerns we should all address, encouraging signups to Alert Seattle, or pursuing grants.”
- “We need a strong leader who pushes their way to the table” when circumstance require cross-city coordination. This was expressed as a desire for more proactive coordination and project management, not that OEM staff should lead or direct the response at either a policy or tactical level.

Departmental stakeholders asked for additional support in emergency response functions not related to departmental operations.

- "There is a complete lack of faith in OEM among city operating departments. We don't trust them to respond and support us, or even understand what we do. We work around them."
- Interviewees requested OEM support in with tasks such as providing portable toilets, language access, and sheltering that are not core to departmental functions.

Setting OEM up for Success

Resources

Stakeholders were divided about whether OEM needs additional resources.

- "The emergency management function is underfunded and understaffed in most organizations, but I have not seen anything of value from OEM to justify additional resources."
- "They are not resourced properly to be able to respond and coordinate like a city emergency management department should. They need more staffing, equipment, including an incident command mobile trailer, and advanced technology. They have very lean operational staffing for a big city and we have to assume that in any given activation some will be sick or unable to report to the EOC."

Organizational Placement

Interviewees generally see benefit in OEM remain an independent department. Some took care to list both benefits and counterpoint considerations to this approach.

Benefits:

- Emergency management needs a citywide perspective and should not be controlled by a public safety or operational department.
- Independence, peer-to-peer relationship.

Co counterpoints:

- OEM should be kept in another department if the executive doesn't have capacity to prioritize providing direction, accountability, and administrative support.
- Being a part of a larger department offers greater protection from budget cuts and administrative support.
- Placing OEM within an operating department would give it greater influence over the deployment of resources. As noted elsewhere, this emergency authority can be granted to OEM regardless of where it is located.

Performance Management and Reporting

There is confusion about the number of trainings, exercises, and public education opportunities OEM provides or facilitates. This should be easily remedied with summary reporting.

EMAP accreditation is not seen by OEM staff, peer cities, and stakeholder interviews as a guarantee of competency and effectiveness. Some acknowledge benefit in the exercise of reviewing required documents and plans.

Highest Priority Areas of Focus

Most stakeholders emphasized a need to focus on core functions which they largely described planning, training and exercising, and resourcing. There was not a desire for Seattle OEM to play a role in broader, endemic social challenges such as homelessness and drug use.

- **Strengthening the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) should be a priority.** Addressing structural and operational weaknesses within the EOC will improve the city's overall emergency preparedness and response capabilities.
- **Focus on emergency management core:** Hazard assessment that informs plans, resourcing, and training and exercising.

Other areas of potential focus mentioned by interviewees include the following.

- **Grant Writing.** Unlike rate-funded departments like utilities, OEM secures significant external funding. Last year alone, the department brought in over $7 million in mitigation grants. Additional staff capacity in grant writing might provide a positive return for OEM and other departments in normal times, but federal funding is anticipated to be significantly reduced under the current administration. This will increase the importance of local funding and a strengthened connection to the Washington State Emergency Management Division.
- **Community Outreach and Communications.**
  - **OEM should expand community outreach.** The department should actively recruit participants for training programs and seek additional staff and resources to grow its outreach and education activities. "OEM should see public communication as a key role. I'm not sure if they are fully staffed, but they are *the* public facing entity and they should be the primary interface with the public."
  - **With additional resources and focus on this function, OEM should incorporate nontraditional organizations in emergency planning.** City policies should require broader input from community organizations, businesses, and other stakeholders to strengthen preparedness efforts. Multiple stakeholders questioned the department's focus on ham radio operators, however, which should be justified or adjusted as appropriate to its strategic value.
- **Relationship Building.** "OEM should develop deployable response teams rather than static personnel lists. Instead of maintaining a simple roster of staff available to participate in a response, OEM should actively train and prepare teams to work together in emergency situations. This would build real working relationships that only occur through the actual lending of materials and staff across organizational silos."

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.*

Brian Murphy
Project Manager

Oliver Hirn
Engagement Analyst

Maddie Immel
Research Analyst

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

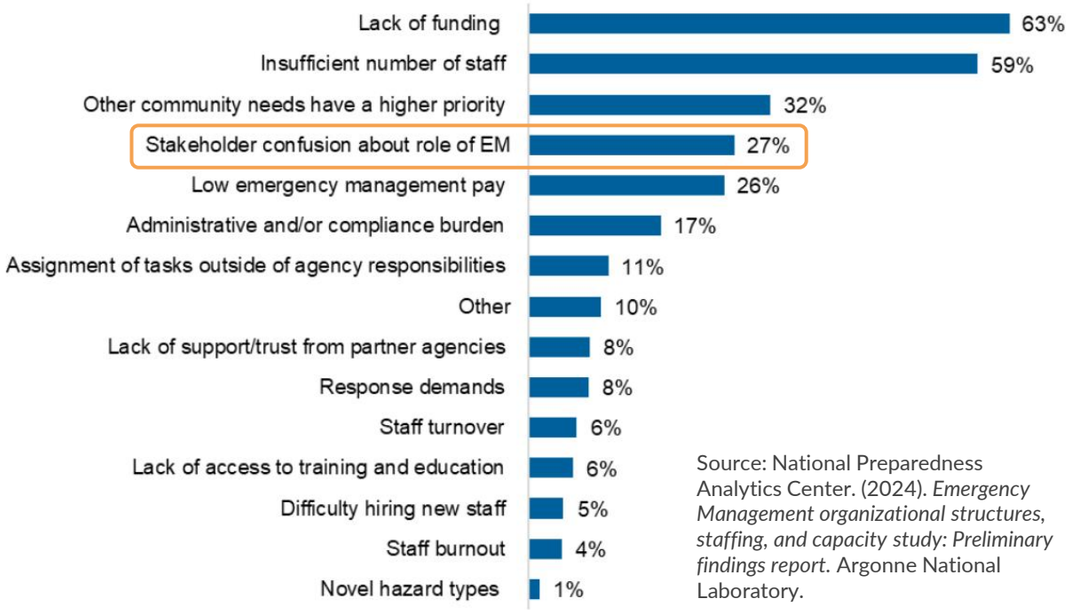
Emergency management includes planning and mitigation, disaster response, and recovery.

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.



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:

Questions?

Thank you!

Legislation Text

File #: Inf 2816, **Version:** 1

Public Safety Legislative Work Planning

Public Safety Committee

Committee Work Planning & the Strategic Framework Plan for a Safer Seattle

Chair Robert Kettle

Updated Public Safety Framework

1. Police Staffing
2. Furthering a Functional Criminal Justice System
3. Gun Violence Reduction, Prevention and Community Safety
4. Crime Reduction Through Urban Blight Remediation: Vacant Buildings & Lots and Graffiti
5. Addressing the Seam between Public Safety and Public Health, Housing, and Human Services
6. Collaboration with County & the State

Quarter One

- Evaluation of the Office of Emergency Management
- KCPAO Trafficking 101
- OIG Public Drug Use and Possession Ord Evaluation
- Alternative Response among Public Safety Departments
- Community Safety and Violence Reduction Deep Dive
- Drug Diversion and Overdose Response

Quarter Two

- Parks Safety Plan
- FIFA Security Plan
- Fire Response Infrastructure
- CARE Expansion
- Accountability Partners Update
- Criminal Justice Partners Update

Long Term Legislative Planning

- Furthering Community Safety Efforts
- Advancing Drug Diversion Impacts and Neighborhood Safety
- Clarifying the Roles of Diversified Emergency Responders
- Furthering a Functional Public Safety System
- Ensure implementation of our Strategic Framework Plan for a Safer Seattle

What are your areas of interest for making Seattle safer?

Ex: Commercial Sexual Exploitation and Human Trafficking