

## Fugate brings new thinking, Fla. ideas to FEMA

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Craig Fugate brought three lessons with him when he took over the Federal Emergency Management Agency: Always be ready for disasters, make sure people take responsibility for themselves and get the message out creatively.

He also is stressing FEMA isn't the only team that handles disasters, but rather part of a network that needs every level of government to be prepared - unlike what happened when Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005. That's why he changed the agency's mission statement to include the words "working together as a nation" in emergencies.

Fugate earned widespread praise leading Florida's emergency response through hurricanes, floods, tornadoes and wildfires and is now settling into the job of leading an agency that hasn't always earned the same level of respect.

Things at FEMA have changed since 2005, when officials were ridiculed for their handling of Katrina's aftermath in Louisiana and Mississippi - it now has more freedom to prepare and respond to emergencies without a governor or president calling in the agency. Now Fugate is hoping to build on those changes from his Florida experiences.

That includes his "thunderbolts" - no-notice exercises that simulate a disaster.

"Most of the exercises that I'd ever dealt with on the federal side were always well-advertised, well-practiced," Fugate said. "One of the things I wanted to introduce was a no-notice environment, that we don't know when the next disaster is going to strike so we're going to take the opportunity to exercise."

So soon after arriving in Washington, he announced an exercise at 6 a.m. that simulated a major California earthquake. He picked the time because most of the staff wasn't in the office and he wanted to see how they'd respond. Similarly, but on a much smaller scale, he held a no-notice event to honor the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. He activated the agency's communications centers to make sure they were ready.

"Every disaster is come as you are. If you're not ready right now, don't tell me what you're going to be doing a month from now, don't tell me what's on order, don't tell me who's coming on board, don't tell me what training course you're going to have. What are you ready to do right now?" Fugate said.

Another big push Fugate resumes from his days in Florida is the relentless effort to get every citizen to prepare for disasters. Former Gov. Jeb Bush appointed him director of the state's Division of Emergency Management in 2001, where he remained until President Barack Obama appointed him to FEMA in March. He received widespread praise for his division's preparedness

after eight hurricanes - including Charley and Ivan - hit Florida in 2004 and 2005.

Unprepared people have to compete for the attention of rescue workers - and that keeps help from getting to people who need it most. That makes the notion of helping neighbors all the more important, Fugate said.

"One of the biggest untold stories of Katrina was you saw the Coast Guard, you saw the fish and wildlife officers from Louisiana doing searches and getting people, but a lot of people got rescued by neighbors helping neighbors," Fugate said.

But getting people to be prepared and in a position to help themselves and others is a seemingly endless struggle.

"It's changing a behavior that is not going to occur as a soundbite. This is not some campaign that you run for six months and you're done," said Fugate, who compares his preparedness crusade to past campaigns to get people to wear seat belts and stop smoking.

"When I was growing up, smoking cigarettes was norm, not wearing a seat belt was norm. If you wore seat belts and didn't smoke you were an outlier. Right now when you look at preparedness, being prepared is the outlier. We need to change that dynamic where being prepared is norm," Fugate said.

He wants to take a look at different ways of delivering that message. For instance, numbers on a storm surge map don't mean much to the average person. However, most people will quickly understand images of the storm surge from a Category 3 hurricane battering a house.

"I'm not just going out there trying to scare people, but I'm not going to sugarcoat it either," he said. "I'm not going to tone it down."

He's been using social media like Twitter and Facebook to get his message out - though he said those tools could be a good way for FEMA officials to get feedback about what problems could be handled differently, too.

"There's this tendency to go, if it ain't official, I don't care what somebody's tweeting," Fugate said. "But I kind of subscribe to the theory of the wisdom of crowds, that if I've got enough people telling me the same thing, this has probably got more ground truth."

Those average folks often give better information than what officials post - and they typically can spread it faster, Fugate said. Which is why a Waffle House might be a better indicator than numbers on a page.

"If you're heading down to the coast and a Waffle House is closed, it ain't good," Fugate said. "I'm looking at, particularly with social media-type ideas, what are the Waffle House indicators that can help us refine and focus in on those areas where things aren't happening, where there are no resources getting in, where the retail sector is not able to function and focus on those."

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