

Catalysts for change: How partnerships and transparency created the Maryland Department of Emergency Management

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ABSTRACT

The Maryland Department of Emergency Management was established in October 2021 after decades of reorganisation and relocation within state government. The elevation of the agency from under the Maryland Military Department to a cabinet-level department was a result of years of partnership building with stakeholders as well as two significant external pressures: the COVID-19 response and the interest in improving 911 delivery through the implementation of next-generation 911 technology. This case study examines the history

of emergency management organisation in Maryland and highlights lessons learned and best practices for emergency managers seeking to elevate emergency management from a sub-agency level to a cabinet level or direct report to the highest elected official.

Keywords: emergency management, disaster management, public administration, organisational management, organisational leadership, government

INTRODUCTION

Emergency management as a discipline and profession has evolved significantly over the course of the last century, largely in reaction to the events impacting communities and nations, whether they be natural hazards, wartime threats, or manmade risks related to industry. Emergency management is a core function of government, and just as critical a responsibility of elected officials as providing for police, fire, public health, education and roads. The impact of well organised, appropriately resourced emergency management is a safer, more resilient constituency. Ineffective emergency management will cost lives and create a cycle of disaster response and recovery that burdens communities for years or even decades.¹

Access to and support from decision makers before, during and after disasters is critical to the success of the emergency

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management system. This case study shares the experience of the newly formed Maryland Department of Emergency Management (MDEM), outlining the long road to establishing a cabinet-level department with direct authority to coordinate not only emergency response, but also mitigation, preparedness and recovery efforts related to all hazards and risks faced in Maryland. The department encountered an array of challenges both prior to its creation and during its first year as a new cabinet-level entity, which yielded a number of lessons learned and best practices for other agencies pursuing elevation.

EVOLUTION OF EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

To understand how the Maryland Department of Emergency Management was established, it is important to understand the history of emergency management in Maryland and its evolution to the present day. Like most places in the USA, from small municipalities all the way up to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the provision of emergency management in Maryland can be traced back to early civil defence organisations and missions in the face of external threats, and as the threat landscape has evolved, emergency management functions have had a variety of homes.

Maryland's emergency management story began with the Maryland Council of Defense, which was established in 1917 during the First World War. The Council, made up of representatives from the Preparedness and Survey Commission as well as county representatives, was responsible for a variety of tasks ranging from shipbuilding and munitions to food production and Red Cross work. In a report provided to the Maryland General Assembly in 1920 summarising the Council's work during the war, the

Maryland Council of Defense hailed the Assembly's forethought in giving, 'the Maryland Council of Defense the means by which the people might serve themselves by working together for saving civilisation and the liberty of mankind'.² Once the war was over, however, the Council was discontinued.

In 1941 as the Second World War raged overseas, the Maryland General Assembly re-established its Council of Defense. With German U-boats off the coast of Ocean City and the threat of enemy air raids, the Council not only focused on providing needed support for troops abroad but also planning for possible impacts on Maryland soil. The Council's activities included organising disaster relief plans, public warning and information efforts like air-raid sirens, and economic impact studies. While the Council was disbanded at the end of the Second World War, the Civil Defense Agency was established in 1949 to continue many of the efforts undertaken during the war.³

The functions of emergency management in Maryland were renamed, reorganised and relocated multiple times throughout the mid and late 20th century. In 1970, the Maryland Civil Defense and Emergency Planning Agency was placed under the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services, which at the time included the State Police and later also housed Maryland's 911 governing body, the Emergency Numbers Systems Board. The term 'emergency management' was not used in the agency's name until it was renamed the State Emergency Management and Civil Defense Agency in 1981. In 1989 the (once again) renamed Maryland Emergency Management Agency (MEMA) was moved under the Military Department, where it stayed until 2021.⁴

This history of reorganisation, renaming and restructuring of emergency

management functions is not unique to Maryland. Those who study and work in US emergency management are familiar with similar reorganisations and changes at the federal level. Prior to the establishment of FEMA, the responsibility for emergency planning, preparedness, response and recovery were scattered across a variety of federal entities and were hazard-specific.

The federal focus on civil defence lasted throughout the Cold War, emphasising personal preparedness in the face of potential nuclear attack or Soviet invasion. The Federal Civil Defense Administration, which included responsibility for emergency preparedness, was short-lived and combined with the Department of Defense's Office of Defense Mobilisation to establish the Office of Defense and Civil Mobilisation in the Executive Office of the President in 1958. By 1961, civil defence responsibilities lay with the Office of Civil Defense within the Department of Defense, while a new Office of Emergency Preparedness was established at the White House to focus on domestic response to natural hazards. In the face of growing focus on the impacts of hazards ranging from weather to nuclear power plants,

President Carter established FEMA in 1978 as an independent agency reporting directly to the President. After the September 11th attacks, FEMA was placed under the newly formed Department of Homeland Security, where it has remained since 2002.⁵

The movement, reorganisation and renaming of the organisation and personnel responsible for emergency management functions is not simply a result of changing political administrations or updated ideas on how government can be more effective. It also illustrates the changing roles and responsibilities of emergency management and its evolution from a part of another public safety entity's 'other duties as assigned' to a distinct discipline and core capability of government. These same changes have taken place at every level of government, often shifting responsibility and resources from one public safety entity to another until emergency management emerges as a standalone, or at the very least independent, entity with specifically designated functions separate from its other public safety partners. In its 2022 biennial report, the National Emergency Management Association

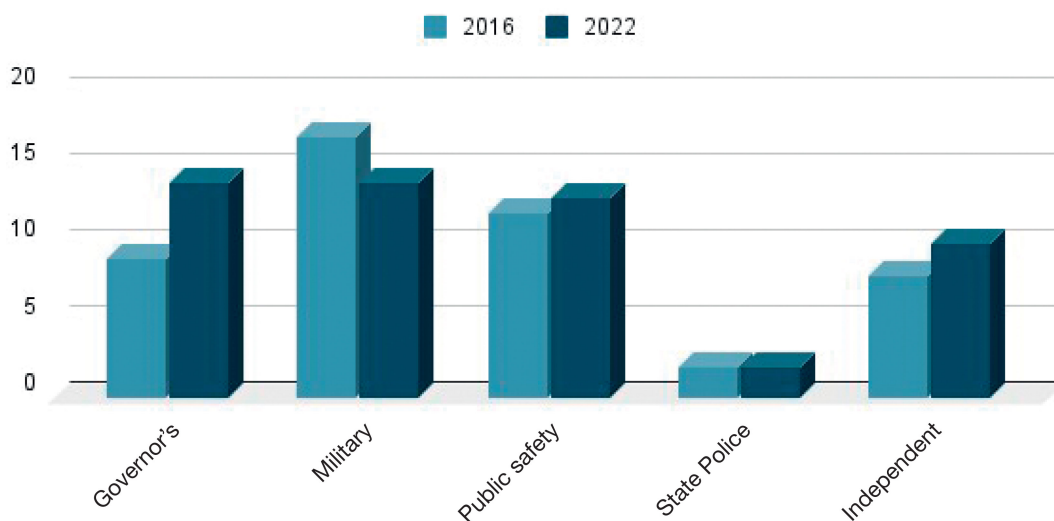


Figure 1 State-level emergency management organisation in the USA, 2016–22

— the organisation that represents state emergency management interests in the USA — reported that 22 states now have emergency management functions either within their respective Governor's Office or as an independent agency.⁶

EXPANDING ROLE OF EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

As the discipline of emergency management became more distinct, the application of emergency management principles became more attractive to use in situations outside of what would traditionally be considered public safety responsibility. In Maryland, the most specific example of this is Governor Hogan's Declaration of a State of Emergency in March 2017 in response to the heroin, opioid and fentanyl crisis. In Executive Order 01.01.2017.01, the Governor ordered the establishment of a 'multidisciplinary, multiagency incident management structure to mobilise and coordinate state and local stakeholders' and added the Maryland Emergency Management Agency as a member of the Governor's Inter-Agency Heroin and Opioid Coordinating Council. In Executive Order 01.01.2017.02, the Governor recognised that, 'the Maryland Emergency Management Agency provides a proven operational infrastructure to effectively deal with this crisis by enhancing the cooperation between State agencies and local emergency management personnel' and assigned a representative to the agency to act under the authority of the Maryland Public Safety Article, Title 14, Subtitle 1: Emergency Management. While the opioid emergency did not fit into traditional hazards typically planned for by emergency managers, the Governor recognised that emergency management had fundamental capabilities that would enhance the state's ability to tackle the threat.

This declaration and subsequent coordination of operations to address the spike in heroin, opioid and fentanyl overdoses through the use of emergency management organisational management and operational strategies signalled a significant expansion of the role of emergency management in state government. Substance use disorder has long been the purview of public health and law enforcement, but the crisis unfolding in Maryland demonstrated the need for a highly coordinated and collaborative governmental effort to address the complex network of factors that was resulting in thousands of overdoses in the state. The requirements for local government emergency management offices to be directly engaged in the opioid effort ensured that this expansion did not just happen at the state level; in order to be eligible for grant funding related to addressing the opioid crisis, local emergency managers, who are appointed by the Governor under Maryland law, were required to sign off on applications along with the local health officer. Emergency management played a critical role in establishing information sharing networks and engaging cross-disciplinary partners in coordinated efforts to address the crisis across the state. As such, both state and local emergency managers engaged more directly with policymakers and elected officials throughout the response, increasing familiarity of emergency management capabilities and access to emergency management professionals.

Emergency management at the state level also played a significant role in coordinating support for Baltimore City during the civil unrest that followed after the death of Freddie Gray while in custody of the Baltimore City Police Department. In a report submitted in 2016, just prior to the Governor's State of Emergency declaration for the opioid crisis, the Governor's Emergency Management Advisory

Council (GEMAC) made a number of recommendations related to the organisational effectiveness of the state's emergency preparedness and response coordination efforts. The GEMAC recognised that emergency management in Maryland needed to be better positioned to directly support decision makers across all aspects of emergency management. In the report, the Council identified a number of challenges with emergency management's organisation under the Maryland Military Department, including:

- Limited ability to develop the consistent voice, visibility and authority needed to build credibility with state government partners and direct preparedness and consequence management efforts;
- Divided but overlapping mission areas between emergency management and homeland security, located in the Governor's Office, with limited policies and authorities defining roles and responsibilities; and
- Lack of consistent and unified authority to carry out the policy and direction of the Governor.

As a result of these identified gaps, the GEMAC made three recommendations specific to the organisation of emergency management at the state level:

- Establish the Maryland Emergency Management Agency as an element of the Governor's Office or as an independent state agency;
- Consider integrating emergency management and homeland security functions into a single combined organisational entity; and
- Complete a comprehensive update to the state law, regulation, executive orders and policy governing emergency management and homeland security matters.⁷

At the time of the GEMAC report, the predominant structure for emergency management at the state level was organised under either the military departments or public safety departments. In 2016, 17 states charged the military department with emergency management, while 12 were under a public safety department. Only eight states had an independent agency for emergency management, while nine states located the function within the Governor's Office.

Maryland's statewide emergency management's capabilities continued to be highlighted through responses across a variety of hazards. Between 2009 and 2021, the state responded to events with at least a partial emergency operations centre (EOC) activation for weather, cyber attacks, agriculture impacts, critical infrastructure impacts, civil unrest and public health hazards. Figure 2 provides a partial list of major MDEM responses over the decade.

These responses and emergency management's ability to collaborate with stakeholders and coordinate resources effectively provided an excellent foundation for the three major catalysts that ultimately succeeded in moving emergency management to a cabinet-level department in Maryland.

ACKNOWLEDGING THE RISKS

The elevation of emergency management to entities with direct lines of communication to the highest elected official is a growing trend, and while there are numerous compelling arguments for this, such changes are not without risk.

Emergency management agencies within larger organisations can be somewhat insulated from the day-to-day politics of government. Given its critical role in public safety, ensuring emergency management remains nonpartisan can be

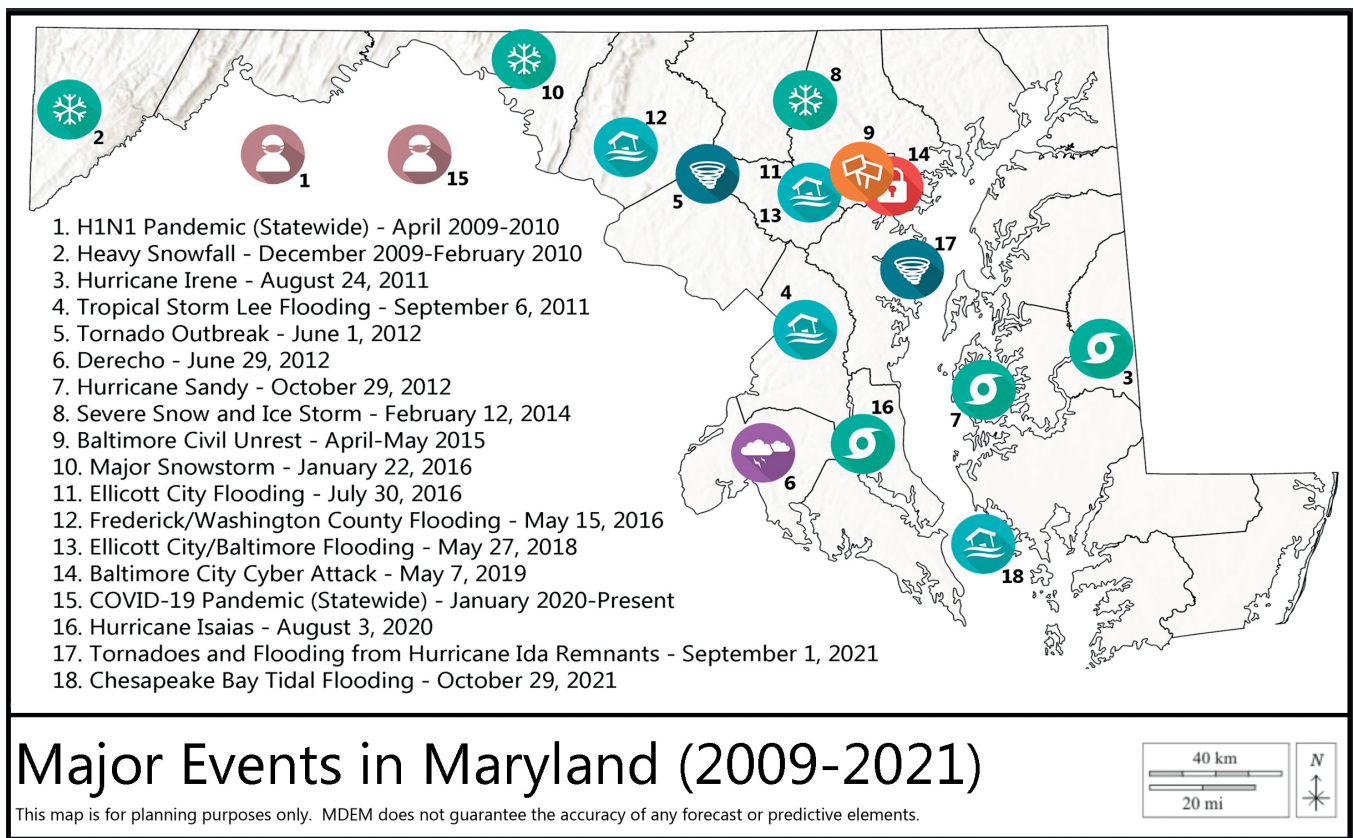


Figure 2 Major MDEM responses, 2009–21

easier when it does not report directly to the highest elected official, regardless of the level of government. As the entity responsible not only for coordinating response, but also hazard mitigation investment, disaster relief operations and other community-impacting mission areas, emergency management must have the freedom to coordinate efforts based on vulnerability, need and equity considerations. Hurricane Katrina, Superstorm Sandy, Hurricane Harvey, Hurricane Maria and the COVID-19 response all provide recent, glaring examples of how disasters may be politicised, and how the political party in power can and will impact the speed and robustness of response and recovery. In their review of FEMA disaster spending across all 50 states, published in 2020, Horwitz and Stephenson identified

clear trends in the politicisation of disaster relief, noting that disaster declarations are most frequently called during election years and in swing states, and that those states with a higher representation on committees overseeing FEMA received more disaster relief funding.⁸

These decisions can be made more challenging if the leader of the emergency management entity is a high-level political appointee who reports directly to the Governor (or other elected officials at varying levels of government), as the at-will nature of these appointments can result in undue political pressure to make decisions based on political benefits rather than response or relief needs. It also makes the position itself — a cabinet-level appointment — ripe for political favours, as so famously demonstrated in the G.W.

Bush administration with Michael Brown's appointment as Administrator of FEMA, and FEMA's subsequent failure in its response to Hurricane Katrina.

While elevating emergency management may bring some higher risk of politicisation to the appointed position, it may also provide additional visibility and transparency for emergency management-related areas like hazard mitigation investment and disaster relief and recovery support for both communities and the legislature. When emergency management is a subunit of government, budgets and activities can often be glossed over in the context of a much larger department. As a cabinet-level, standalone entity, budget hearings and actions are far more visible at a more granular level. This may invite additional scrutiny, particularly in divided government structures (eg the Governor represents a different party than the majority in the legislature), but it also ensures greater accountability for political appointees and emergency management actions.

There is also a risk that, as a cabinet-level department, emergency management may be over-tasked to coordinate complex issues that may not be in the department's mission areas. The bipartisan and neutral stance of emergency management, coupled with its characteristic capability to coordinate and resolve multi-disciplinary challenges, make it a tempting agency to task with innovative thinking for long-time challenges. As just one example, in December 2021, the mayor of San Francisco declared a state of emergency and placed the executive director of emergency management in the lead to coordinate a drug-related crisis in a district of the city. The goal was to cut through red tape and coordinate resources to get help where it was needed most. Behavioural health and housing coordination for the

chronically unhoused is not a typical role for emergency management, but the discipline's focus on coordination of information and resource management will continue to make it applicable to a variety of situations outside of the normal scope. Discrete short-term efforts to set up collaborative problem-solving through operational coordination structure development and initial direction for highly complex problems like homelessness and housing are areas where emergency management can shine, particularly if given the authority of a cabinet-level department. However, emergency management agencies are not typically designed to support the long-term coordination of social services, health operations or other areas of government. Emergency management leaders will need to reinforce the role of newly elevated departments to ensure there are exit strategies and end states identified for success.

CATALYSTS FOR CHANGE: GRASSROOTS SUPPORT, 911 AND COVID-19

Ultimately, the creation of the MDEM can be traced to three events that became catalysts for change: the COVID-19 pandemic response, the formation of the Maryland Association of County Emergency Managers and the establishment of the Commission on the Advancement of Next Generation 911. Leadership within MEMA and local emergency managers built on the work of the GEMAC and other vocal proponents of emergency management's elevation to the highest level of government, including the National Emergency Management Association and academic works on the topic, and took advantage of the timing of the moment to make a significant change in state policy and organisation.

Catalyst 1: Formation of the Maryland Association of County Emergency Managers

The Maryland Association of Counties (MACo) is a nonprofit organisation that represents the 23 counties and Baltimore City, and plays a significant role in policy-making in the state. The local appointed emergency managers established an emergency management affiliate group through MACo as a network to engage more directly with local and state-elected officials on topics important to emergency management in the state. Since its inception in 2016, the Maryland Association of County Emergency Managers (MACEM) has identified common ground in a bipartisan manner that addresses key concerns related to emergency management, including the status and organisation of MEMA in state government.

MACEM became a critical voice advocating with local elected officials and in the Maryland General Assembly for improved emergency management policy. In the majority of counties in Maryland, the local appointed emergency manager is a direct report to the highest county elected official. While COVID-19 provided a specific use-case for why MEMA's organisational structure needed to change, the structure of emergency management at the local level provided clear examples of how and why emergency management should report to the elected official(s) responsible for making critical life-and-death decisions during an emergency. MACEM was able to engage with local elected officials throughout the response to articulate why MEMA's position in state government should be elevated. The grassroots efforts by the local emergency managers to identify this as a major policy issue for all county governments were a significant catalyst in MEMA's transition.

The Executive Director of MEMA at the time of its creation also made a

significant effort to be engaged with and supportive of the MACEM group. Russell Strickland, now Secretary, participated in their meetings, made senior staff available to answer questions or concerns identified in state policy, and was transparent about some of the challenges MEMA faced as a subordinate agency. The open communication helped MACEM members better understand the work that needed to be done to see the improvements they desired in state emergency management policy.

It is hard to overstate the importance of MACo, and by extension MACEM, in Maryland government. MACo's bipartisan stance and advocacy for issues of mutual interest from each corner of Maryland provides them with a unique position in the state's policy and legislative process. Emergency managers have often shied away from politics, considering public safety to be apolitical. At its formation, MACEM identified the necessity of being engaged in policy making, and thus politics, in order to advocate for the decisions and investments necessary to make Maryland as resilient as possible. The group has focused on remaining bipartisan and representative of all communities in Maryland. It sends a powerful message to elected officials when the 24 Governor-appointed local emergency managers speak with one voice to advocate for an issue.

Catalyst 2: Commission to Advance Next Generation 911

In some ways, the creation of MDEM has its roots in a few deadly thunderstorms that impacted Maryland over the span of two years. In July 2010, environmentalist and Montgomery County resident Carl Henn gathered with friends to celebrate the second summer harvest of a community garden he helped create in his home county. Around 3.15 pm, a thunderstorm blew in, sending the attendees running for cover. Mr Henn was struck by lightning,

and when his companions discovered him a few minutes later and tried to call 911, the lines were busy due to an influx of calls related to the storms. Mr Henn was eventually taken to the hospital, where he was pronounced dead.⁹

Just two years later, in June 2012, Maryland experienced the immensely destructive Midwest and Mid-Atlantic derecho. The swath of thunderstorms moved across the country, beginning in Iowa and Illinois and travelling 700 miles in 12 hours, blowing across Maryland, Virginia and the District of Columbia, and affecting 911 service across multiple counties in the area.¹⁰ The impact to 911 service was significant enough to prompt the Federal Communications Commission's

Public Safety and Homeland Security Bureau to seek comment on 911 resiliency and reliability directly related to the storm in August of that year.

These issues galvanised Maryland State Senator Cheryl Kagan (D-17), a representative of Montgomery County where Mr Henn was killed and a personal friend of the deceased, to understand how and why 911 was impacted by the storms and what could be done to improve resiliency of the system. At the time of these incidents, the Emergency Numbers Systems Board (ENSB) was an independent agency within the Department of Public Safety and Corrections. The Office of the ENSB was minimally staffed and its primary role was to support the Governor-appointed

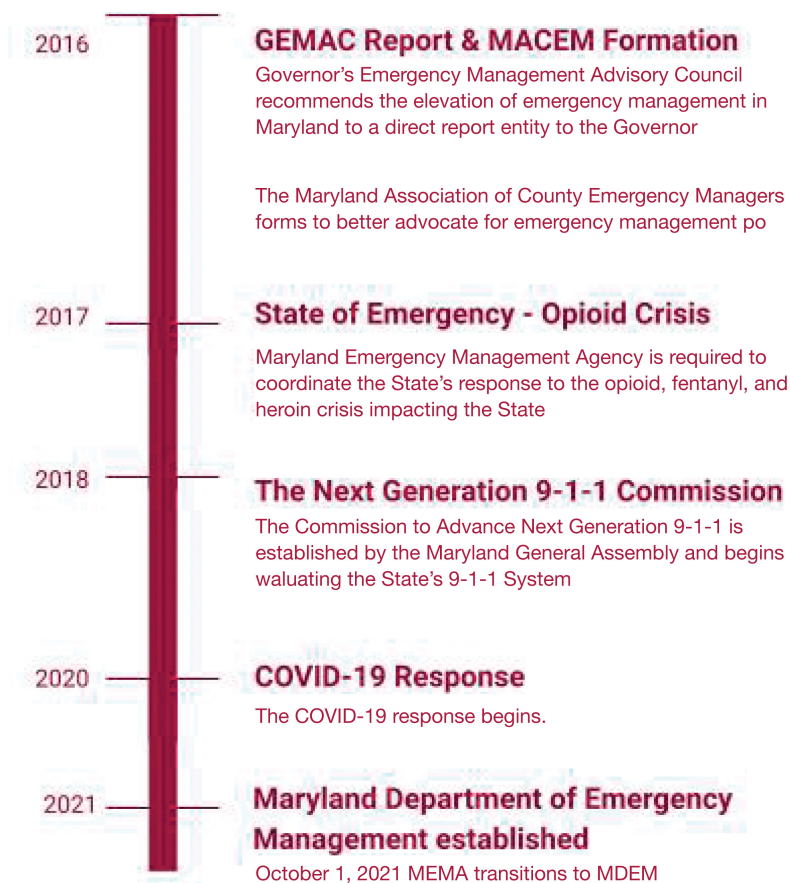


Figure 3 Milestones in the creation of MDEM

board in approving spending of a 911 trust fund that supplemented local 911 spending in accordance with the strict statute governing its uses.

Senator Kagan introduced a bill in 2018 to establish the Commission to Advance Next Generation 911, commonly referred to as the NG911 Commission. The Commission was charged with studying and making recommendations about the development and implementation of a next-generation 911 statewide communications system. MACo was responsible for appointing a number of members and chose to include two emergency managers with responsibility for 911 among the appointments. One additional emergency manager with 911 responsibility was appointed by the Governor. The Commission included representatives from county governments across the state, private industry and technical subject matter experts. Perhaps most importantly, the Commission was bipartisan and bicameral, with one Democrat and one Republican from each chamber represented.

Over three years, the NG911 Commission evaluated the ENSB's structure, mission and authorities related to supporting the advancement of 911 in Maryland. Initially, Commission members acknowledged that the ENSB was administratively supported well by its home department, but that its mission did not align with the primary roles and responsibilities of the Department of Public Safety and Corrections. The Commission undertook surveys of 911 leadership, considered the future needs of a 911 agency, and examined the practical aspects of reorganising state government structure. The Commission also evaluated national structures, identifying a strong trend for 911 to be placed under independent emergency management agencies. By 2020, the Commission concluded that the most effective use of state resources would be

combining the now-renamed Maryland 911 Board (formerly the ENSB) and MEMA into a new, cabinet-level department. From the report:

‘The Commission recommends that MEMA become a Cabinet-level entity reporting directly to the Governor. In conjunction with the shift, the Commission recommends that the 911 Board be housed within MEMA to strengthen the support to local jurisdictions before, during, and after crises. It is the intent of the Commission that the 911 Board retain its autonomy in terms of authority, enforcement, structure, training, and funding — including the management and distribution of grants.’¹¹

The report was distributed to the Governor and the Maryland General Assembly leadership.

Catalyst 3: COVID-19 response

There is no shortage of articles and opinion pieces discussing emergency management's critical role (or at times, lack of role) during the COVID-19 pandemic. For the shift of emergency management to a cabinet level-department in Maryland, the COVID-19 response was an important watershed moment that brought the full breadth of resilience into focus for policymakers at both the local and state level. There were the obvious public health-related things to coordinate at the outset: public information related to prevention and treatment of the disease, distribution of medical supplies, testing and vaccination access, and clinical information and guidance being just a few. These fall well within the scope of our public health partners. However, there were also a number of cascading impacts that are well outside of public health's role, including mass feeding and non-congregate sheltering

operations, supply chain management, law enforcement's implementation of various executive and emergency orders, and unprecedented need for support from both state and local governments to implement continuity of operations efforts. Those cascading impacts are where the core capabilities of emergency management, including overall incident management and organisation, information sharing and collaborative effort, logistics and continuity of operations planning, are absolutely vital to pandemic response. However, as the GEMAC report noted several years before, MEMA's position within the Military Department limited its ability to have a consistent voice among decision makers and often resulted in it being left out of critical conversations during the response.

MEMA's complicated positioning in state government and its subsequent role in the COVID-19 response was routinely a topic of conversation among local emergency managers. In Maryland, the 23 counties and Baltimore City form the primary governing entity at the local level, with which most power rests; this differs from many other states where municipalities hold a majority of power. Maryland statute allows the Governor to appoint a local emergency manager for each county and Baltimore City as recommended by the highest county-elected official. During a crisis, these local emergency managers represent the county government to the state, and in common practice are the primary stakeholders for the state emergency management agency. They have a significant role in shaping Maryland's emergency management policy.

Under the leadership of Secretary Strickland, MEMA focused on aligning state and local emergency management efforts to ensure a coordinated system built on mutual trust, policies and processes that prioritised local efforts to build resilience across Maryland. Secretary

Strickland cultivated the relationships with local jurisdictions by prioritising transparency, communication and coordination between state and local governments, laying out a vision for an emergency management network capable of managing significant crises across the state. Secretary Strickland had experience as a local emergency services director previous to his posting at MEMA, and used his understanding of local jurisdiction needs to build strong partnerships with local governments. These strong partnerships significantly contributed to the support MEMA received when the proposal to elevate the agency to a department was introduced formally.

As the COVID-19 response ramped up, local emergency managers expressed frustration that MEMA's role in the coordination was not more robust. Particularly in the early months of the response, when normal procedures for requesting assistance and resources, communicating and requesting information and public information coordination were not followed, local emergency managers frequently discussed MEMA's seeming lack of voice and influence with state decision makers, including the Governor's Office. They identified MEMA's placement within the Maryland Military Department as a complicating factor for communication and believed it made coordination of the overall response more challenging at both the state and local level. While local emergency managers had for several years discussed emergency management's need to be elevated in state government, the direct impacts of MEMA's positioning within the Military Department during the COVID-19 response led local emergency managers to conclude that the best solution would be to remove MEMA from the Military Department and place it either within the Governor's Office, or establish it as an independent agency

within state government to ensure its leader had a direct and unfiltered line to the Governor in times of crisis. The local emergency managers also recognised that, given the focus on emergency management during the pandemic, the 2021 legislative session would be the right time to advocate such a move.

Through the culmination of years of work by MEMA leadership, local emergency managers and the General Assembly, the Maryland Department of Emergency Management was established in law in 2021. The bill was introduced in the Senate and cross-filed in the House with bipartisan cosponsors. The favourable witness lists included county executives, several local emergency managers, the Maryland Association of Counties, Maryland Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics and the University of Maryland Baltimore. It passed both chambers unanimously and was signed by the Governor on 18th May, 2021.

NOT ALONE

Maryland is not the only state to recognise that emergency management's position within the executive branch is a critical aspect of how resilience might be prioritised and interwoven into state operations. Oregon's Office of Emergency Management experienced a similar pathway to Maryland, having been assigned at various parts of its history to the State Police and Military Departments. At just around 100 employees, Oregon's office is the same size as Maryland's and its responsibilities are nearly identical to Maryland's, including disaster risk reduction, emergency response and 911 system coordination.

In a draft after-action report on the COVID-19 response for January 2020 to 31st May, 2020 introduced to the record by Representative Paul Evans, the primary

bill sponsor, a number of findings pointed to the challenges Office of Emergency Management had related to roles, responsibilities, expectations and authorities as they related to other state agencies. Specific areas for improvement included role clarity, policy making responsibility and internal operational communities. Not surprisingly, these areas for improvement noted multiple decision makers without clear accountability or processes to make those decisions; lack of understanding and buy-in from state agencies regarding their roles in the response; and a lack of common operating picture and operational priorities. The after-action report concluded that the position of the Office of Emergency Management within the Military Department should be revaluated and consideration should be given to aligning them within the state organisational structure, 'to provide more visibility and alignment with partner response agencies'.¹²

In his reform package presentation to the Committee considering the bill, Rep. Evans identified other reasons for elevation to cabinet level. These included multiple audits and reports recommending the strengthening and resourcing of state emergency management; reported frustration from local and regional emergency management entities with 'structural obstacles' to relationship building; federal grant audits demonstrating inappropriate use of funds; and 'structural misalignment' between emergency management and the Office of the State Fire Marshal.¹³

Like Maryland, the move garnered strong support from the emergency management and broader public safety community. The Oregon Emergency Management Association, the Association of Public Safety Communications Officials and National Emergency Numbers Association, the Oregon Association of Chiefs of Police and Oregon State

Sheriffs' Association, the Oregon State Ambulance Association, the Oregon Fire District Directors Association and Oregon Volunteer Firefighters Association in addition to various local and regional emergency management officials provided written testimony in support of the bill proposing to elevate the Office of Emergency Management to a cabinet-level department. There was no official opposition testimony submitted for the bill.¹⁴

The Oregon legislature saw fit to elevate its Office of Emergency Management to a standalone, cabinet-level department in 2021 with broad bipartisan support. The Governor signed the bill and the Department of Emergency Management was established in July 2022. Oregon's Director of Emergency Management at the time of transition provided additional insight into the impact of becoming a cabinet-level department: 'By pulling us out from underneath a response-oriented organisation, it allows us to be a little bit more intentional with how we focus on risk-reduction and hazard mitigation and preparing our communities for whatever bad day lies ahead'.¹⁵

Like in Maryland, the bill also transferred additional responsibilities under the newly formed department, although the areas transferred were different in Oregon. In Oregon, the Oregon Emergency Response System (OERS) call staff and responsibility were moved from the Department of State Police beginning in 2023. Unlike Maryland, the some responsibilities were transferred out of the new department — the Oregon Homeland Security Council, previously under the Office of Emergency Management, was moved to the Governor's Office. There were also two advisory councils formed under the legislation, establishing the Emergency Preparedness Advisory Council and the

Government Emergency Management Advisory Council.¹⁶

BEST PRACTICES AND LESSONS LEARNED

MDEM's journey from subordinate agency to cabinet-level department was a reflection of the emphasis on collaboration, transparency and relationship building over several years of consistent leadership within the agency. Given the right leadership, the steps taken to elevate emergency management to a cabinet-level department are replicable in other areas. Over approximately a year of transition, MDEM catalogued a number of best practices and lessons learned that may provide insight for other organisations considering a similar move:

- *Work closely with local emergency management leaders to identify an organisational structure that will benefit both local and state government:* MDEM's leadership fostered close relationships with local emergency managers for over a decade leading up to the elevation of the department, emphasising transparency and open dialogue between state and local leadership. MDEM leaders were routinely invited to participate in MACEM meetings and MDEM invited local emergency managers to strategise on how to build a more effective emergency management system for the state. MDEM leadership meets with local emergency managers monthly via teleconference to share information and updates on the emergency management system and prior to the COVID-19 response met in person quarterly. This relationship-building developed a significant amount of trust between MDEM leadership and local officials, resulting ultimately in the support necessary to elevate MDEM to a department;

- Establish an interdisciplinary team of leaders to guide the transition.* An integrated, cross-agency team will ensure that all possible aspects and angles to the transition are considered and addressed: Cabinet-level departments are seldom created in state government. There was no playbook or checklist for all of the functions that MDEM would need to absorb or create in order to ensure success. MDEM worked closely with the Military Department to understand which processes, particularly across human resources and finance, the department would need to establish. The transition team identified a number of core components necessary for a successful uncoupling from the Military Department, including establishing procurement capabilities, legislative affairs capabilities, expanding human resources, expanding fiscal capabilities including budgetary management and establishing legal capabilities. Secretary Strickland identified a team of senior leadership and support staff from across the agency to develop a full accounting of the requirements for a smooth transition beyond the Military Department and to coordinate with the required agencies throughout the summer in preparation for the deadline of 1st October, 2021;
- Be transparent about challenges with decision makers:* Emergency management should be nonpartisan, but it is not apolitical. The processes and policies we put in place to mitigate risks and prepare for, respond to and recover from disasters will be political, but they do not have to be antagonistic. While Maryland's one-party dominant political landscape may make it somewhat easier to predict how certain policies will be received by political leadership in the state, the local landscape is not so uniform. MDEM's leadership navigated the political waters by being transparent with the challenges they faced when asked, and were willing to risk some internal backlash to advocate for the policy changes they believed to be key to improving resilience in the state. The message remained the same regardless of what side of the aisle or which county was asking. MDEM viewed each interaction as an opportunity to educate and share information on how emergency management works in Maryland and how policy changes related to the agency's position in state government would allow a more consistent voice in state leadership for emergency management. Had MDEM viewed interested elected officials as 'the other side', the opportunity to engage and shape landmark legislative policy would have been lost;
- Engage with and learn from other organizations:* The relationships the MDEM leadership team formed with counterparts at other state emergency management agencies were critical during this transition. Emergency management's fundamental practice of identifying lessons learned and best practices and applying them moving forward was truly at work as MDEM shifted to stand on its own. The MDEM leadership team spent time understanding what worked and what did not from fellow state departments, swapped policies and procedures, and outlined which best practices made the most sense for Maryland. The National Emergency Management Association's spring and autumn meetings provided excellent space to discuss how other states handle things like legislative affairs, legal counsel, human resources and grants management;
- Document business processes, including those of the parent agency:* The team encountered a variety of challenges

throughout the summer as we prepared to go solo. Some of these challenges were technical; for example, transitioning to a new department in the middle of a budget cycle caused accounting challenges, which were not made easier by some of the antiquated systems used to manage state budget and personnel operations. Other challenges were rooted in policies and legal authorities and new requirements in state law which suddenly applied to MDEM (including a variety of legislative reporting requirements to the legislature which were previously handled by the Military Department). One critical lesson learned was that failure to robustly document business processes prior to uncoupling created uncertainty and lack of a clear pathway forward during transition in some areas of MDEM operations. The effort to remedy this is ongoing within the MDEM even a year later, as the department identifies new requirements and expectations of cabinet-level agencies.

GOING FORWARD

Elevating emergency management in Maryland to a cabinet-level department was over a decade in the making and took both vision and leadership at the local and state levels. Looking to the future of emergency management, a successful department will need to be structured to handle both typical emergency management functions and atypical demands on our teams.

We are already seeing major expansions in the roles of emergency management across the nation, with a focus on whole communities and a more holistic understanding of resilience bringing emergency management into situations previously reserved for other sectors. MDEM is working hard to be in a position where

the department can be flexible and responsive to meet community needs both new and ongoing. There are two critical pieces to the department's success in its new, elevated role: the Chief Resilience Officer and Chief Equity Officer. The Chief Resilience Officer and the new Office of Resilience was established in law in the 2022 Maryland General Assembly session. We are working closely with states and locals that have resilience officers, as well as academics and subject matter experts in the resilience space to understand how best to structure and organise the office and the position to ensure silos of effort are dismantled and resilience is incorporated throughout all state operations. The Chief Resilience Officer is required by law to:

- Coordinate state and local efforts to build resilience to risks identified in the Maryland Hazard Mitigation Plan;
- Develop a state resilience strategy and assist local agencies in their efforts to prepare and implement resilience strategies;
- Coordinate across state and local agencies to prepare and implement resilience strategies;
- Identify, secure and assist local governments in accessing federal, state and private funding streams and technical assistance that can be used to support state and local resilience efforts;
- Work with business leaders from industries vulnerable to the risks to identify best practices for preparing for and responding to risks; and
- Ensure that investments prioritise vulnerable communities and environmental justice.

The Chief Resilience Officer is an exciting opportunity for MDEM to engage across the state in a broader context than typical emergency management. The Office of

Resilience and Chief Resilience Officer legislation is clear in its all-hazards approach and with MDEM at the cabinet level in state government, the timing to establish the new office could not be better.

We are also excited to bring on a Chief Equity Officer, which is equally as important in the evolution from agency to department. The Chief Equity Officer was not mandated by law, but it was a key priority of Secretary Strickland as the department shifted out of the Military Department. The Chief Equity Officer will be responsible for both internal and external efforts, including building MDEM's diversity, equity and inclusion programme in coordination with our human resources personnel and ensuring the department's efforts in mitigation, preparedness, response, recovery and overall resilience do not leave any Marylanders behind. It is MDEM's intent that the Chief Equity Officer serves as both a resource and a referee, providing advice and consultation to programme managers, senior leadership and local emergency managers on how best to ensure the most vulnerable community members are able to thrive in a resilient Maryland.

As the department finds its footing, MDEM is considering several ways to enhance its ability to meet the needs of residents, stakeholders and policymakers through improving our structure and organisation. Maryland welcomed its first Black Governor in January 2023, along with its first female Comptroller and first Black Attorney General. There will be historic representation across the executive branch and new representatives in the state legislature. We are looking forward to new ideas and the opportunity to work with incoming strategists on how to improve our operations as a newly elevated department.

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