

Hurricane Sandy: FEMA, social media and first responders

Posted At : October 30, 2012 10:56 AM | Posted By : Evan Halperin

Related Categories: Homeland Security, Federal, Justice/Public Safety & Homeland Security, Grants, State & Local, Social Media

As states along the East Coast begin cleanup efforts from one of the most destructive storms in history, we examine how Hurricane Sandy stands out compared to other recent weather catastrophes. During previous national disasters such as Hurricane Katrina, there was no Twitter or Instagram that put breaking news in the hands of civilians. People around the world had to wait patiently by their TVs and computers for the latest images of New Orleans completely underwater, or devastating earthquake damage in Haiti. Despite widespread Internet use and the growing use of smartphones, news still wasn't quite instant.

Yesterday, in the face of one of the biggest natural disasters to hit the East Coast, people took pictures, shot videos, sent tweets, and posted to Facebook, all in real time. [According to Mashable](#), Instagram users posted 10 Hurricane Sandy photos per second. Photos coming in at 60 a minute and 3,600 per hour provided more than 86,000 images in a 24-hour period. And this is just *one* of many social media sites.

While it is difficult to quantify how these pictures, tweets, Facebook messages, etc. affected the response times of first responders, or how many lives were saved, it is clear that news stations and first responders benefit from seeing where an emergency is in real time. In Manhattan, the [911 system was completely overloaded](#) due to the receipt of 10,000 calls per *hour*; the city typically receives 1,000 per *day*. Using social media tools to send emergency images to news stations or police Twitter accounts was essential and will continue to be a vital component in rescue efforts.

Another piece of the puzzle that must be examined is that of disaster-relief funding. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has provided coordinated disaster relief across the United States since 1978. Though the powers bestowed upon FEMA have changed, it is still a regional agency that not only coordinates relief, but provides funding to state and local governments to support restoration and other emergency efforts. While many people have differing views on what FEMA should provide as a sub-agency of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), after large-scale disasters like that of Superstorm Sandy, local governments need help. Should funding be provided by states themselves? Should FEMA, with its larger infrastructure, be the one to determine the funding provided after a natural or other disaster? I'll let you decide.

When looking at funding levels in recent years, you will see a [clear downward trend](#). Over the past two years, there has been a 43 percent reduction in FEMA grants that pay for disaster preparedness. Additionally, should sequestration occur in January 2013 as planned, an additional 8.2 percent of disaster relief would be cut. One point in favor of letting FEMA provide emergency services and funds is that states in the red don't have any funds for large-scale restoration. On the other hand, should the federal government sink deeper in debt to help? Again, it's a matter of opinion.

As we look back on Hurricane Sandy months and years from now, the widespread destruction and loss of lives will be on many people's minds, but we should also not forget the outpouring of social media response that curtailed even greater damage. State and local governments can now inform citizens instantly about closures and other situations that require real-time information. Disaster relief and rescue will never be the same.