



Office of the
Washington
State Auditor
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PERFORMANCE AUDIT

Report Highlights

Opportunities to Improve Washington's Preparedness Efforts in Emergency Management

The 2014 landslide near Oso, Washington, was one of the deadliest in state history. It called for a large-scale response from emergency personnel from local, state and federal agencies, private organizations and volunteers. It revealed that even a disaster affecting only a limited area can be challenging to manage. Being well prepared can minimize the effects disasters have on the state.

Emergency response is primarily handled locally, where local authorities direct and coordinate initial response efforts. This is true in Washington where local governments respond first and maintain control over incidents. If a local government becomes overwhelmed, it is also responsible for escalating requests for help to other branches of government. Although response is initiated locally, every level of government plays a part, from local to state and federal agencies. Incident response is complex because it involves multiple stakeholders and various levels of government. The role of the state's Emergency Management Division (EMD) is to implement a statewide emergency management plan and coordinate with those responsible for responding.

Given the significance of EMD's role in disaster response, we selected this audit topic in order to follow up on two recommendations issued after the Oso landslide by the SR 530 Landslide Commission. We wanted to determine whether roles and responsibilities have been further defined and if the resource management process could be further improved. The audit also assessed whether there were additional improvements EMD could make to strengthen communication and collaboration efforts with local partners.

Do state and local emergency management personnel have clearly defined responsibilities and roles when responding to disasters?

The SR 530 Landslide Commission recommended state, county and incident management teams (IMTs) work together to establish expectations before an incident occurs. The guidance on roles and responsibilities that the Commission recommended has not yet been developed. However, regional training sessions led by IMTs can help educate local partners on their role. EMD can assist IMTs by helping coordinate the regional training sessions and sending an EMD representative to each one to answer questions about the state's operations. In addition, some local partners are uncertain about the role an EMD liaison performs at an incident scene. EMD can establish a clearer understanding of the EMD liaison's role by publishing guidance for its local partners.

What improvements can EMD make to request, track and mobilize resources more effectively during disasters?

Leading practices suggest establishing a standardized process for requesting resources and for credentialing personnel. EMD has established a standardized process for local authorities to request resources from the state. However, Washington does not have a statewide credentialing program. The benefits of a statewide credentialing program are that personnel are better prepared and more easily identified when an emergency does occur. EMD faces legislative and funding obstacles to implementing such a program. Working with local partners, EMD can determine what is needed to establish a statewide credentialing program. It can also benefit from a national system to manage credentialed personnel that is currently being piloted by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

What improvements to communication can EMD make to strengthen collaboration with local partners?

Effective communication and collaboration before a disaster strikes are essential to the success of emergency response. The absence of these factors can affect the ability of EMD and local emergency managers to work successfully together. National standards state that establishing effective communication before an incident occurs paves the way for a more successful response. Although EMD provides several opportunities for engagement, some local emergency managers said these strategies do not promote effective communication or help build necessary relationships. They suggested ways EMD could improve its communication with them. However, EMD's multiple stakeholders, competing priorities, and limited funding restrict its ability to give local authorities the attention they desire.

State Auditor's Conclusions

Washington is susceptible to a variety of natural disasters including fires, earthquakes, floods and landslides. Depending on the scope and magnitude of the incident, the emergency response may involve numerous local, state and federal agencies. The agencies have to work together to form an effective response. A key factor in successful coordination during a disaster is to establish expectations for how coordination will work before the disaster ever strikes. This requires a common understanding of each agency's role and responsibilities, as well as clear protocols for accessing additional resources when necessary.

Under state law, the Emergency Management Division (EMD) within the Washington Military Department is responsible for coordinating the state's emergency response efforts. With response efforts primarily handled by local authorities, and EMD's limited ability to impose mandates, this is not an easy charge. In the absence of strong legal authority, effective coordination requires EMD to build strong relationships with local emergency management personnel and involve them in the planning process, and give them clear and actionable guidance. The results of this audit show that while EMD has taken some steps to provide guidance and training, and to communicate effectively with local emergency management personnel, there is still a lot of work to do. Local authorities still need clear guidance on roles and responsibilities, especially regarding the role of the EMD liaison. It also appears EMD could have more open, effective lines of communication with local authorities.

Recommendations

We made a series of recommendations to the Emergency Management Division to increase clarity around roles and responsibilities in disaster response, to improve the state's current resource management system, and to strengthen communication and collaboration with local partners.