

# Collaboration in Times of Crisis



PARTNERSHIP FOR PUBLIC SERVICE

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The challenges facing our nation in the 21st century transcend the traditional societal partitions we build in organizations, levels of government and sectors. So should our solutions. This is particularly true in emergency management.

Whether a disaster is of natural or man-made origin, major incidents can quickly overwhelm the capacity of any single jurisdiction and require support from many organizations, various levels of government and multiple sectors.

The Partnership for Public Service explored ways to enhance coordination across sectors through its *Collaboration in Times of Crisis* series. This effort included three half-day sessions to focus on three specific types of partnerships:

- Collaboration Across Federal Agencies
- Collaboration Between Levels of Government — Federal, State and Local
- Collaboration Across Sectors

The sessions consisted of roundtable discussions with subject-matter experts from the public and private sectors, who shared key lessons and strategies from their experiences responding to crises.

There was broad consensus among participants that increased collaboration was necessary for our government to fulfill its responsibilities to keep Americans safe. But most panelists believe that more time has been spent talking about enhanced collaboration than actually doing the hard work necessary to ensure a seamless, coordinated response the next time disaster strikes.

The following summaries memorialize the discussions and offer practical lessons to improve collaborative capacity — whether you are an epidemiologist at the CDC, a wildland fire fighter, or a volunteer from the Red Cross. The lessons generated by these discussions and captured in this document can be used to initiate partnerships and spread the culture of collaboration throughout the federal workforce.

## COLLABORATION ACROSS FEDERAL AGENCIES

*Many federal agencies share common objectives but fail to coordinate their efforts. This lack of cooperation can have negative consequences ranging from wasted resources to missed opportunities. There is no greater illustration of the adverse impact of poor interagency coordination than the lead-up to 9/11, when a failure to “connect the dots” cost federal authorities a shot at disrupting the plot.*

*To identify ways government gets interagency cooperation right, the Partnership for Public Service convened a panel of experts from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Centers for Disease Control*

*and Prevention (CDC) to discuss how these agencies work together to respond to outbreaks of food borne illness. Focusing on a recent interagency collaboration — the response to the spinach E. coli outbreak in 2006 — Dr. David Acheson from the FDA, Dr. David Goldman from USDA’s Food Safety and Inspection Service and Dr. Art Liang from the CDC discussed the strategies used to work together and stop the outbreak to protect public health. The E. coli case study offers to following lessons.*

## LESSON 1: WORK TOWARD COMMON GOALS

Federal agencies have unique missions, areas of expertise, organizational structures and cultures. Not surprisingly, when they work together, they can sometimes clash. A key to overcoming some of this friction is recognizing and defining the common goals, as well as the roles and responsibilities each agency must carry out to achieve that goal. For example, the FDA and USDA are regulatory organizations administering laws governing food safety. The CDC is a scientific agency with a focus on collecting and analyzing data. However, each worked toward the common goals of stopping the spread of E. coli and preventing further illness.

## LESSON 2: ESTABLISH CROSS-AGENCY RELATIONSHIPS EARLY

Interagency contacts should be established before a crisis and regularly maintained. Establishing cross-agency relationships in advance of a crisis can help cultivate the trust essential for sharing information and dividing critical responsibilities. In addition, early relationships facilitate an understanding of the interests and working styles of counterparts in partner organizations. The FDA, USDA and CDC experts from the panel modeled this practice; they all knew each other from previous experiences and were familiar with each other’s positions, interests and styles.

## LESSON 3: INSTITUTE AGENCY LIAISONS

The FDA, USDA and CDC help ensure strong cross-agency relationships and effective communication among their organizations through formal liaisons. As employees of one agency located with their peers in a different agency, liaisons help to disseminate information and coordinate efforts. The liaisons are “bi-lingual,” understanding the information needs of their home agency as well as those of peers in the host agency. With the flood of information to manage in a crisis, liaisons help by distinguishing what information is important to their home and host agencies and interpreting and sharing what is relevant between the two.

## LESSON 4: COORDINATE PUBLIC COMMUNICATION

While communicating the right information to partners is essential to effective collaboration, communicating with the public can be an even greater challenge during a crisis. The panelists noted that public communication worked best when done jointly (e.g., representatives from FDA and CDC jointly communicating with the media rather than FDA handling all media relations in the event of an outbreak). Although close coordination of public communication may be complicated, it ensures clear and consistent messages.

## SUMMARY

The spinach E. coli response is an example of effective cross-agency coordination, which delivered significant public value. Following the panel discussion, our experts and audience discussed ways to improve coordination across other agencies and advance the collaborative capacity of the federal workforce. Their recommendations include:

- Engage leadership who support and model collaborative behavior
- Plan and budget for collaborative efforts
- Enable workers on the ground to regularly interact across teams and agencies

Challenges confronting the American public are increasingly complex and often require a collaborative response. Improving cross-agency collaboration ensures that the federal government will more effectively work together and provide better services to citizens.

## COLLABORATION BETWEEN LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT

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*Hurricane Katrina showed that some challenges are so great that they require a response from federal, state and local authorities. It also exposed what the consequences can be when the different levels of government do not work together effectively in response to a crisis.*

*The Partnership for Public Service convened experts from the federal, state and local levels to discuss practical approaches to improve intergovernmental collaboration. Arlington County, VA Fire Chief James Schwartz offered his perspective having led the response to the 9/11 attack on the Pentagon. Panelists representing the wildland fire community, urban fire service and emergency management shared best practices from their experience coordinating federal, state and local resources battling wildfires and responding to other hazards.*

*Participants shared the following lessons which are essential for more effective collaboration before, during and after a crisis.*

### LESSON 1: RECOGNIZE THE NEED FOR COLLABORATION

The value of collaboration, while apparent to some, must be recognized more broadly. On the ground, local responders cannot be successful on their own when major incidents overwhelm their capacity. Before the 9/11 attack on the Pentagon, the Arlington County Fire Department recognized the need to work across boundaries and formed regional agreements. Chief Schwartz led a successful response to the Pentagon attacks because he had pre-determined relationships. Local responders were supported by resources from surrounding jurisdictions and federal agencies. In the wildland fire community, federal firefighters regularly augment local departments. Regardless of jurisdiction, forces closest to the emergency initiate the response to lessen the extent of the damage. No single locality can effectively respond to every disaster. We must work collaboratively.

### LESSON 2: EXPAND THE TRADITIONAL ROLE OF LEADERSHIP

Effective collaboration in a crisis requires proactive leaders who push boundaries and build relationships across organizations and functions. Collaborative leaders need to know both how to lead and how to follow. Leaders must focus not just on what they can get, but also what they can provide. Fire Chief Schwartz actively works with regional fire departments, police and public health departments, and state and federal contacts to build mutually beneficial arrangements. Collaborative leaders set the example of looking for new ways to communicate, interact and build trust with counterparts in different areas of expertise and jurisdictions.

### LESSON 3: CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR SHARED LEARNING

Learning together is a practical and effective way to build collaborative capacity. While joint exercises can be valuable, first responders can be “exercised” to death. Meaningful training experiences with the right people in attendance and scenarios where there is a chance for failure are essential. Moreover, exercises should be followed up with efficient methods of sharing lessons learned. Participants remarked that lessons learned are not always communicated to those who participated in the exercise. The wildland fire community’s success in working collaboratively is in part because they face up to 4,000 fires across the nation on any given day. They do not just practice in the classroom. They work together, build relationships and share lessons learned confronting real and immediate challenges.

### LESSON 4: BUILD MUTUAL RESPECT

Effective collaboration begins with respect for potential partners and the value they bring to the table. Historically, there has been some arrogance or even animosity between people across levels of government — a feeling that one level of government, or jurisdiction, is superior to another. This perspective must be replaced with mutual respect and appreciation for different roles and responsibilities. Local representatives expressed concern that their federal counterparts lack a basic understanding of how local government operates. We need to understand not just how our own organizations work, but how other jurisdictions operate — their mission, strengths and resource constraints.

### SUMMARY

Chief Schwartz and representatives from the wildland fire community recognize the need to collaborate and are committed to overcome the barriers of working across levels of government. Participants agree that as we face the challenges of an increasingly interconnected society, building the collaborative capacity of emergency responders, leaders and policy makers is imperative to keeping Americans safe.

## COLLABORATION ACROSS SECTORS

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*No one sector is equipped with all the resources, knowledge and expertise necessary to respond to large scale disasters. Public, private and nonprofit entities must work together to ensure safe communities when preparing for and responding to emergencies.*

*The Partnership for Public Service convened experts from the government, private industry and nonprofit organizations to share ways to create and sustain cross-sector partnerships. FBI Special Agent Paul McCabe and Mike Rackley from the Target Corporation highlighted their efforts in Minnesota with the Twin Cities Security Partnership (TCSP). The TCSP brings together executives from industry with high level security and response personnel throughout Minneapolis and St. Paul to coordinate response efforts and create preparedness plans that they jointly access in times of crisis. The TCSP provides a great model for the type of collaborative efforts we need more broadly to prepare for and respond to crises effectively.*

*Representatives from the Red Cross, FEMA, Business Executives for National Security (BENS), DuPont, FBI, Target and others highlighted the following key actions that will improve collaboration across sectors.*

## LESSON 1: RECOGNIZE THE NEED FOR COLLABORATION

The events of 9/11 changed our world. The FBI and other federal agencies historically kept their distance from the private sector. Now, emergency responders and policy makers are realizing that information sharing and working across sectors is essential to effective disaster response. The public sector needs the unique resources owned by the private sector. The private sector, which controls 85 percent of our nation's infrastructure, is hugely affected by disasters. Companies want to contribute to response efforts and need information from the public sector. Nonprofits, like the Red Cross, coordinate tens of thousands of volunteers who respond to emergencies. We can't do it alone. Crisis requires broad public assistance. While there are different roles that each sector takes in preparing for and responding to disasters, it is only by working together that public, private and nonprofit organizations can save lives and property during disasters of all scales.

## LESSON 2: BUILD RELATIONSHIPS AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

While relationships should be established at all levels, building relationships on the ground is particularly important. Local responders are typically the first on the scene and often lead the response effort. Locally based connections underlie a thriving partnership effort. BENS, a nationwide organization of business executives striving to enhance the safety of our nation, has effectively built security related collaborations across the United States. One key to their success is that BENS takes a tailored approach to meet the specific needs and culture of each locality. BENS representatives work with the local leaders to help form collaborative partnerships. The BENS model identifies the right people at the local level to engage. They then work to build and maintain the relationships. There is no "one-size-fits-all" approach to collaboration, we must allow for flexibility at the local level.

## LESSON 3: ENSURE CLEAR COMMUNICATION

Clear methods of communication between public, private and nonprofit organizations need to be established before a crisis. Throughout the crisis, information must be readily available to determine the needs, available resources and how the response is managed. Communications must provide important and appropriate information in a timely manner. The TCSP relies on a secure online communication network through which non-crisis and crisis information is passed. Their system is instrumental in sustaining the relationships between the FBI, local agencies and corporate partners, and in coordinating emergency responses. The consistency and relevance of communications passed through the system builds trust between participants. In fact, the TCSP has not had a breach of secure information since its formation. Participants know that what they share and receive is credible and valuable.

## SUMMARY

Participants from the public, private and nonprofit sector all emphasized the need to collaborate. As we recognize the value of working across boundaries, we can act as catalysts in initiating partnerships and spreading the culture of collaboration. In effect, each of us can multiply collaborative efforts. We should all do what we expect of others — communicate accurate and timely information, share resources and expertise, and foster a culture of respect and understanding across sectors. Each sector has unique resources that can impact response efforts and should be leveraged appropriately. As we improve collaboration between public, private and nonprofit organizations — before and during a crisis — we will better keep our communities safe.