

An Insider's Perspective How one IMAS pilot state feels about the project

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A few days before Christmas, the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC) contacted me to ask if the Louisiana Fire Chiefs Association (LFCA) would be interested in participating in a project called the Intrastate Mutual Aid System (IMAS), a partnership between the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the National Incident Management System's (NIMS) Integration Center. My reply was immediate and affirmative, and Louisiana is now one of 10 pilot states in the project, which aims to improve intrastate mutual aid.

Why was I so eager to accept this invitation? As president of the LFCA, I had already charged two committees with responsibilities that would help the fire service operate better at the state level in future disasters. The committees were newly formed and had not even held their first meeting. We were in the research phase, trying to figure out what needed changing and how to make those changes. The IMAS project is broader than the first steps we were making, but it's where we needed to go. The timing of the IMAS project and its objectives was, therefore, perfect for our current needs.

Lessons Learned from Katrina

Last year, Louisiana, Mississippi and other Gulf States suffered the devastating effects of Hurricane Katrina. Following Katrina, Hurricane Rita wrought devastation on southwest Louisiana and southeast Texas. Before I address some of the problems Louisiana faced in this crisis, allow me to thank those who offered assistance during both hurricanes. Greater than the floods that poured through the levees was the flood of help that poured into Louisiana from all across the nation.

Louisiana faced many problems during the hurricanes. First, the fire service was not included in the State Response Plan, which hindered the valiant efforts of many firefighters who tried to assist individual citizens, as well as entire fire departments that had been devastated. This exclusion is a fact, not an accusation. State-level agencies and departments are now working with us to correct the problems we all had overlooked in the past.

Additionally, in the past, local department-to-department mutual aid had been sufficient for the most part. The idea that so many fire departments would be wiped out was almost unimaginable. People are used to their fire department coming to the rescue, but during the hurricanes, many fire departments needed operational help, and in some areas, it was the rescuers who needed rescuing.

The IMAS project provides an opportunity to ease the pain of change and speed the process of preparing for the future. How can this project help? One of the IAFC's Committees has been looking at plans and practices from around the country — the same thing we had started doing here in Louisiana; however, the IAFC was far ahead of the effort we had begun. Using the information we had gathered and combining it with the extensive research compiled by the IAFC, the process of change became easier, faster and, therefore, less painful for us.

Getting a Jump Start

At the LFCA's January board meeting, I told the board I had accepted the IAFC's offer for Louisiana to become a pilot state in the IMAS project. The next step: Attend a stakeholders meeting in Denver in early February. The IAFC had invited chief associations from all 50 states to attend — at the expense of the IAFC, through a grant from the DHS. The bad news: Only 35 states accepted the invitation. The good news: The participating states seemed very focused on making the most of a wonderful opportunity.

On Feb. 6, the meeting began with presentations about the goals of the IMAS project. After several presentations, we formed five work groups. My group was composed of

representatives from the five Gulf Coast states in the pilot program (Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia). The other five pilot states are from the Rocky Mountain Region — New Mexico, Colorado, Montana, Wyoming and Idaho.

We spent most of the afternoon brainstorming ideas. We discussed issues that could become barriers to creating state mutual aid plans as well as the possible benefits of such plans. We talked about identifying who might be stakeholders of state plans and how to market the plan to other players so they would buy in to the plan.

Information gathered by the IAFC IMAS Committee aided our discussions and efforts tremendously. For example, prior to the meeting, four states had been recognized as having plans in place that work well; these states were designated "anchor" states — California, Florida, Illinois and Ohio. The state mutual aid plans in the anchor states are as diverse as the states they come from; these states represent a variation of good plans that reach the same goal. Additionally, technical experts from each anchor state have been assigned to pilot states to help expedite each state's effort.

I must add that when I left Louisiana to attend the meeting, I felt a definite sense of urgency — an urgency shared by most in my state as we try to prepare for the next hurricane season. I wondered what the mood would be from other state leaders from around the country. But the response I witnessed was exceptional. Many chiefs were eager to get help so we could go home and make the changes needed in our states. Chiefs from states with existing plans were helping others and collecting ideas that could enhance their plans.

The Plan's Value

As the meeting wrapped up on Monday afternoon, IAFC Executive Director Garry Brieze asked me if I thought meetings like the one we were involved in were of value. My answer was a clear "Yes." Brieze then asked if I would share my comments with the meeting participants the next morning. Honored to be asked, I accepted his invitation. I am clearly in favor of creating such mutual aid systems. But the question still remains: Why and how does this project have value?

First, data gathering is an important part of any project, and the IAFC staff and committee working on this project have helped gather an impressive amount of information. The compilation of resource material is a benefit in its own right, but technical experts have augmented the IAFC's information, too. One of the great values of having technical experts is they understand the process that led to creating and revising other states' mutual aid plans. Having knowledge from others about what did or didn't work and why should help us achieve a successful plan at a faster pace.

Another reason the Denver meeting was valuable: the opportunity to evaluate the work we had begun in Louisiana. Fortunately, the work we were doing lined up with the best-practice recommendations from the IMAS committee. It is very important we all create plans that will interface with those of our neighbors; this is the next step toward interstate mutual aid.

But perhaps the most important aspect of meetings like this is the relationship-building process. Working together in groups gave us the opportunity to work face to face with people whom we may need to call on someday or render assistance to. Imagine this: My state is in trouble so I call you for help. We have never met and you have never heard of me. How likely are you to send help? Now, what if we knew each other? The end result will likely change, and you are sure to come to my aid if we are friends. The fire service is a brotherhood that has and will continue to help each other, but the more we work together and develop relationships, the better off we are.

The bottom line: The value of the project and the Denver meeting far outweighs the cost. Projects like IMAS will not stop hurricanes, earthquakes, wildfires or any other disaster from occurring; however, IMAS will make the response faster, safer and organized. The true value of IMAS or future interstate mutual aid will be in the response. A good response follows a good plan.

The IAFC, DHS and NIMS Integration Center have made the creation of a national fire service intrastate mutual aid system a high priority, and have invested much time and money in this project. The LFCA would like to say thank you for the help. Hurricane season will be upon us soon. We will endure the hardships of rebuilding homes and businesses, we will endure the struggle of change, we will be wiser because of yesterday's battles, and we will have a brighter, stronger future as a reward for our endurance. While we hope and pray never to experience another storm like Katrina, if another one hits, we must be prepared.

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