Emergency Procurement in Multi-Event Scenarios
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2020 will long be remembered as the year of the COVID-19 pandemic. From early warnings in January to growing concerns in February to a full-blown pandemic crisis by March, procurement officials were faced with a combination of challenges not seen in recent history. Organizations scrambled to mobilize a fully-remote workforce without time to develop infrastructure, secure equipment, or establish alternative workplace policies. Procurement staff were challenged to source PPE, equipment, and supplies, finding themselves vulnerable to a supply chain turned upside down. Compounded by civil unrest and natural emergencies, e.g., hurricane season, the multi-event emergency environment has catapulted procurement professionals into uncharted, unprecedented, and unpredictable waters.

While procurement organizations may have emergency policies and procedures, they likely were developed for singular emergency or are customized toward a particular type of emergency. How many were written considerate of simultaneous or compounding emergencies? And how many agencies simply have not faced large-scale, complex disasters? Jack Pellegrino, Director of Purchasing and Contracts for San Diego County put it this way:

“Although the County of San Diego had previously successfully managed regional emergencies such as local wildfires and health outbreaks and has a very robust emergency operations structure, we found ourselves with a host of new unanticipated conditions because of the global emergency. This required Procurement and Contracting to truly be “mission focused” throughout the response, supporting different and urgent needs of each of the County departments.”

Indeed, we are all facing unprecedented times with a precarious blend of international, national and regional emergencies challenging the very capacity of our organizational preparedness. Agencies have quickly discovered those “linear” emergency procedures fall significantly short when competing disasters are vying for competing priorities and competing resources.

A multi-event scenario presents a set of unique challenges. The emergencies likely have conflicting needs, may require a multitude of responses and will undoubtably place significant constraints on already tapped financial and human resources. As tropical storm Cristobal moved toward landfall, Mississippi emergency managers were having to deal with COVID-19 layered on a weather emergency. For Jackson County, MS, sheltering citizens became an unexpected issue. With a population of 124,000, the county has three shelters, each with 75,000 square feet available. But implementing the CDC COVID guidelines means only 210 of those 124,000 people can be sheltered. How can an agency be better prepared for this type of unpredictable circumstance?

The COVID pandemic has also caused significant changes to the procurement-supplier relationships overnight. We have witnessed massive disruption in markets, with suppliers crossing into new markets without experience, creating difficulties for procurement vetting risk, quality and responsibility. As Stacy Gregg, Procurement Manager at the University of South Carolina, pointed out:

“Without warning, the market turned from having suppliers competing for our business. We were faced with competing with one another to get the supplies we
need to keep our stakeholders safe. Many of us were outside of our elements because procurement professionals are naturally collaborative. We are each other’s resources. What we found, however, was that even in a market that was hostile to us and created competition among us, we held on to our natural inclinations and still found ways to offer assistance to one another.”

Multiple emergencies occurring simultaneously or in close proximity require a different approach from the traditional, linear emergency planning, policies and procedures. If there is anything our current situation has taught us is that we need more comprehensive and flexible emergency policies, practices and procedures. Procurement must be prepared for multiple emergencies and must have the ability to adapt to unique situations brought about by these compounding events. A matrixed approach to emergency management focuses on planning for multiple competing events, identifying vulnerabilities, gaps and overlaps to establishing more dynamic, comprehensive and adaptable responses. Rebecca Kee, Purchasing Agent for the City of Virginia Beach put it this way:

“The reality of multiple events happening simultaneously requires preparation and flexibility by procurement professionals. Strategic thinking and working across organizations are the only roads to success during these challenging times.”

Public procurement professionals have shown themselves to be critical resources to their organizations and their communities. Agencies around the country and the world have quickly realized not only the immediate need for emergency policies and procedures (where none exist), but also the need to develop or refine existing procedures to address the complexities of multiple emergencies. Planning for a matrixed approach to emergency management will require applying best practices, developing a more robust and diverse emergency plan, developing and running of multiple table-top exercises and developing/refining emergency policies and procedures. Together, we can continue to prepare public procurement for the unprecedented times ahead.

Note: The NIGP Consulting Program is available if your agency needs assistance with establishing emergency management policies and procedures. Please contact us at info@nigp.com.

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