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Identifying Opportunities to Strengthen Wisconsin's Emergency Response

Extreme weather is more frequent and federal aid less certain, underscoring value of preparedness

Wisconsin is expected to face more frequent, more severe extreme weather events in coming years. Residents rely upon a network of local and state agencies and community organizations to prepare our communities to respond to them.

As their work faces federal funding cuts and future uncertainty, it is an opportune time to analyze its current features and how it could be strengthened, a new Wisconsin Policy Forum report finds. Opportunities include strengthening coordination among government agencies and with community organizations, and increasing public engagement in preparedness activities.

State government could play a larger role by gathering information on individuals' assessments of their own hazard risks and preparedness. The report notes that another option could be providing additional relief aid and assistance in response to emergencies.

"However, trying to fill in for federal resources would be difficult given the potential scope of the need and the state's fiscal constraints," the report finds.

This comes as the federal government denied the region's request for public assistance for local governments in the wake of last year's floods in southeastern Wisconsin. As previous Forum research noted, this storm set Wisconsin's all-time record for most rain in a 24-hour period, causing more than $240 million in damage. Yet, of Wisconsin's 23 declared disasters since 2000, the 2025 flood was the only time that public assistance for infrastructural repairs (rather than individual assistance for households and business owners) was not approved by the federal government.

A network of emergency responders, officials

Wisconsin communities face the greatest threats from severe storms that can result in flooding, tornadoes, or destructive straight-line winds. In winter, extreme cold and heavy snowfall pose particular dangers, while extreme heat and wildfire smoke have emerged as increasingly significant threats in summers.

When an emergency occurs, Wisconsin's multifaceted response begins, starting with our first responders. Firefighters, police officers, paramedics, and more respond to medical emergencies, fires, traffic crashes, and other situations requiring rescue or immediate intervention. Volunteer and nonprofit groups also play a key role.

Before these emergencies even hit, however, extensive work is done to prepare for disasters. Every county, city, village, and town in Wisconsin is required to have a head of emergency management. Their work includes creating hazard mitigation plans, often referred to as local blueprints or playbooks for emergency response. When disasters happen, these officials spring into action, coordinating and overseeing the response.

Wisconsin Emergency Management (WEM) is the statewide body responsible for providing guidance to local emergency preparedness efforts. The agency also assembles damage estimates used to request emergency declarations. Public health staff at the state and municipal levels also work to understand health threats and provide guidance.

Case studies of three counties

To understand how local communities are assessing risks and preparing for severe weather events and other emergencies, we took a closer look at emergency preparedness activities in Milwaukee, Pepin, and Richland counties. We find that Milwaukee County's creation of a coalition, the Extreme Weather Task Force, to distribute information and resources for dealing with extreme weather -- and for collaboration across different government entities -- may have potential to be utilized elsewhere in the state.

In Pepin County, local officials surveyed residents and obtained useful information for their future severe weather planning and mitigation efforts. Other communities may want to consider a similar approach. And in Richland County, where flooding is a recurring threat, citizen groups have stepped to monitor water flow and quality -- underscoring the importance of citizen science to address data gaps.

Federal changes could bolster preparedness

Our prior research has documented the fiscal constraints facing local governments, which limits resources available for emergency management. As federal support to local governments for hazard mitigation and recovery efforts becomes more uncertain, these funding gaps are likely to widen.

Officials interviewed by the Forum also point to federal-level changes that could meaningfully improve preparedness and resilience statewide. These include restoring funding for hazard mitigation and recovery projects, revising hazard mitigation planning requirements and incentives to better reflect local needs, and broadening eligibility criteria for mitigation projects that reduce future disaster risk.

Ultimately, the report concludes, the work of emergency preparedness is largely invisible to most -- especially when it is successful.

"It only makes the news when something goes terribly wrong," the report notes. "As a result of this 'preparedness paradox,' it is difficult to argue the importance of this work to the public and to those who are forced to make difficult decisions about how to distribute a limited county or tribal budget."

Yet, recent events have underscored the value of preparing for extreme weather and other emergencies, which are only likely to become more frequent in the years to come. We hope that our analysis provides valuable insights for decisionmakers as they develop future preparedness strategies across Wisconsin.

Click here to read the report.

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