

The Role of Hazard Mitigation Planning in Building Local Capacity and Commitment: A Tale of Six States

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State governments play an important but little understood role in hazard mitigation through the use of a number of capacity building initiatives intended to assist communities in developing hazard mitigation plans and policies. Case study analyses, mail surveys, and telephone interviews with State Hazard Mitigation Officers (SHMOs), are used to analyze several state-level measures (staffing, funding, cost-sharing, policies, and programs) for six coastal states. Findings address the relative degree to which state approaches facilitate an enhanced local capacity to engage in hazard mitigation activities, including planning.

Research Questions

- (1) How do states vary in terms of the staffing, funding, policies, and programs to carry out state hazard mitigation goals?
- (2) How strong are states' local capacity and commitment building efforts to translate federal mitigation policy into local mitigation planning through the delivery of technical assistance?
- (3) To what degree are states encouraging local governments to integrate land use planning approaches into mitigation planning and how successful are these efforts?

Methodology

This research assesses six coastal states—California, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, Texas, and Washington—currently being analyzed as part of a six-year national study of quality of coastal state and local hazard mitigation plans conducted by the authors of this paper. This approach draws on previously collected information and recent case study reporting, surveys, and interviews.

The approach used to assess state capacity and commitment to assist local governments engaged in hazard mitigation planning and policy making involved writing state case study vignettes and conducting mail surveys and telephone interviews with State Hazard Mitigation Officers (SHMOs). Each state maintains a federally-funded SHMO position that is responsible for the oversight and administration of state hazard mitigation planning and grants management activities, as well as providing technical assistance to local governments.



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Key Findings

States exhibit wide variation in capacity and commitment to local hazard mitigation activities. **On the whole, the six states emphasize building local government capacity rather than focusing on helping local governments identify and establish a comprehensive, proactive, and sustained risk reduction strategy. State land use policies are not well integrated into state hazard mitigation plans and capacity building initiatives. State mitigation officials believe that most local governments do not possess the capacity or commitment necessary to develop sound hazard mitigation plans or administer grants.**

Comparison of State Hazard Mitigation Qualities

	California	Florida	Georgia	North Carolina	Texas	Washington
Staffing	19	48	11	12	13	5
Grant Matching: State Government Non-Federal Match Payer	0%	0%	10% for declared counties	100% for HMGP; 0% for others	0%	Depends
Grant Matching: Local Government Non-Federal Match Payer	25%	Varies by community	25%	25% or more	18.75% for homeowner-based projects, or 25% for other projects	Depends
Grant Matching: Individual Property Owner Non-Federal Match Payer	0%	Varies by community		25% or more	6.25% for relocation projects	Depends
Technical Assistance: Number of Methods	9	9	6	7	6	8

Staffing figures varied widely across the six states with Florida maintaining a staff that is more than twice as large (48) as California’s (19), which represented the second highest total. Georgia, North Carolina, and Texas maintain a similarly sized staff (11/12/13), while Washington possesses the smallest staff (5) of those surveyed.

The amount of the non-federal match that is assumed by the state for pre- and post-disaster hazard mitigation grant programs was used to assess the commitment of the state to local hazard mitigation efforts. A state’s willingness to shoulder some (or all) of the non-federal match requirements influences the actions of local governments in two important but contradictory ways. First, as states assume more of the non-federal cost share, this can help low-income communities and property owners participate in hazard mitigation grant programs that they may not be able to afford otherwise. Given this effect, SHMOs have been discussing the possibility of advocating for a lowering of the non-federal match requirement. Second, cost sharing arrangements can create a disincentive for local communities and individuals to adopt proactive measures, waiting instead for post-disaster assistance paid principally by federal and state agencies. In an effort to increase local commitment, some of the case study states require a percentage of the non-federal match to be assumed by local governments and/or individual property owners.

The delivery of planning support is provided by states in a number of ways. For instance, all states but Texas reported that they created manuals and guidebooks as a way to help inform local communities about hazard mitigation planning. All states conduct workshops and conferences to provide information and training to local officials, review local plans prior to their submittal to FEMA for approval, and furnish data for use in local plans. Many states have employed other techniques, such as identification of best practices and hazards analysis training. Two types of support were less prevalent, including serving on local planning committees and connecting local government officials with consultants or regional planning agencies.

Even though most states in this study utilize workshops and conferences, several SHMOs mentioned a lack of general awareness of hazard mitigation at the community level. **According to SHMOs, a number of factors have hindered the ability of states to increase awareness and commitment to hazard mitigation at the local level, including an overreliance on consultants, a lack of hazard mitigation awareness among citizens and elected officials, and the inability to identify a local advocate for hazard mitigation.**

When asked what made states and local governments successful, SHMOs routinely cited the presence of an advocate that not only understood the technical nature of hazard mitigation planning and its connectivity to grants management and land use, but perhaps more importantly, how to build and maintain diverse coalitions. **According to SHMOs, successful plans and the hazard mitigation strategy they contain tended to be the result of a long-term commitment to generating interest, garnering political support, identifying differing technical experts, delivering sound guidance, conducting training programs, and providing data that support local efforts.**

When asked about the connectivity between hazard mitigation and land use planning, SHMOs alluded to the fact that they encouraged local governments to address the issue, yet when pressed, all **SHMOs noted that land use was not adequately addressed in local hazard mitigation plans and asserted that most local governments sought to meet the**

minimum hazard mitigation planning criteria as established by FEMA.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study suggest the need to enhance the capacity of states to better fulfill their critical role in national hazard mitigation planning and policy:

- **Improve the ability of states to carry out state mitigation goals.** Specific changes should focus on the sustained provision of pre-event resources to states in order to better carry out state hazard mitigation goals. This is an important counterpoint to the current set of federal policies that have led to an overreliance on post-disaster assistance.
- **Improve the ability of states to build local capacity and commitment to hazard mitigation through improved technical assistance strategies.** This involves taking a more strategic approach, emphasizing a balanced delivery of training and informational messaging to those who have a stake in hazard mitigation, including informing those who may not be aware of their important role.
- **Increase the emphasis states place on encouraging the application of land use policies, tools, and techniques in local hazard mitigation plans.** Both local and state government officials should better utilize available resources in order to advance a land use planning agenda that includes hazard mitigation.
- **Establish a National Hazard Mitigation Strategy that Meets the Intent of the Disaster Mitigation Act.** Moving forward, there is a need to develop a clear national strategy that addresses identified limitations in existing local, state, and federal policies.

Full Article

The full version of this publication and others are available at <http://hazardscenter.unc.edu/mitigation-planning/> and at <http://www.ie.unc.edu/cscd/projects/dma.cfm>.

Additional Information

More about the Coastal Hazards Center and its work can be found at <http://hazardscenter.unc.edu>. More about the Institute for the Environment and its work can be found at www.ie.unc.edu.

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