

A Review:

Emergency Management

Department of Military Affairs
Office of Justice Assistance

May 2010

Report Highlights ■

The Department of Homeland Security awarded Wisconsin \$318.5 million from FY 2004-05 through FY 2008-09.

The FY 2008-09 emergency management grants we reviewed were spent in accordance with federal requirements.

Wisconsin does not yet have a statewide communications system for emergency responders.

Additional efforts are needed to improve emergency preparedness.

**Key Facts
and Findings**

The State of Wisconsin and local governments share emergency management responsibilities that can be critical for saving lives, protecting infrastructure and property, and minimizing costs from natural or man-made disasters and hostile action. The Department of Military Affairs is the lead state agency for planning and responding to emergencies. Its Division of Emergency Management—commonly called Wisconsin Emergency Management (WEM)—coordinates federal, state, local, and private emergency management activities statewide. The Office of Justice Assistance (OJA) disburses most Department of Homeland Security grants to fund emergency management activities, while counties have primary responsibility for coordinating emergency management activities within their borders.

Severe winter storms, flooding, and other recent events have raised questions about the effectiveness of emergency response efforts and whether federal emergency management funds have been spent appropriately. Therefore, at the request of the Joint Legislative Audit Committee, we:

- determined the amount of federal funds received from the Department of Homeland Security from fiscal year (FY) 2004-05 through FY 2008-09 and assessed whether these funds were spent appropriately in FY 2008-09;
- assessed the ability of state and local government agencies and emergency responders to communicate with one another during emergencies; and
- analyzed preparedness for future emergencies.

Federal Grant Awards

Emergency management responsibilities are decentralized and shared by the State and local governments.

The Department of Homeland Security directly awarded local governments and others \$99.8 million from FY 2004-05 through FY 2008-09.

Unresolved funding issues will continue to pose challenges to the development of a statewide communications system.

WEM has not shared all parts of the Wisconsin Emergency Response Plan with county and tribal emergency management departments.

There is no existing inventory of all emergency management resources.

WEM's process for analyzing responses to specific emergencies could be improved.

OJA is awarded the largest share of Wisconsin's federal emergency management grants from the Department of Homeland Security. It distributes these funds to WEM, other state agencies, local governments, technical college districts, and American Indian tribes.

Department of Homeland Security Grant Awards FY 2004-05 through FY 2008-09 (in millions)	
Emergency Management	
OJA	\$115.0
WEM	26.2
Department of Homeland Security	99.8
Subtotal	241.0
Presidentially Declared Disasters	
WEM	77.5
Total	\$318.5

The Department of Homeland Security also awards certain grants directly to WEM and to local governments. In addition, federal disaster funds are awarded directly to disaster victims and to WEM, which distributes them to state agencies, local governments, and nonprofit organizations.

Grant Expenditures

OJA administered five programs that spent \$15.4 million in Department of Homeland Security funds in FY 2008-09 and a total of \$120.8 million from FY 2004-05 through FY 2008-09. The Homeland Security Grant Program accounted for 97.9 percent of total expenditures during that five-year period.

Homeland Security Grant Program funds may be used to prepare for, prevent, respond to, and recover from terrorism and other disasters. In FY 2008-09, 122 entities in 50 counties—including county emergency management departments, fire departments, state agencies, and law enforcement agencies—spent a total of \$12.5 million in program funds.

Most Homeland Security Grant Program expenditures were for equipment such as radios, security cameras, and emergency medical supplies. Program rules allow the funds to be spent for a wide variety of emergency management purposes. We found that the funds were used in FY 2008-09 as permitted under broad federal program rules.

WEM spent \$7.3 million in Department of Homeland Security funds in FY 2008-09 and a total of \$26.2 million from FY 2004-05 through

FY 2008-09. We focused on its largest source of federal emergency management funding, the Emergency Management Performance Grant Program.

Emergency Management Performance Grant Program funds are made available to county and tribal emergency management departments for planning, training, equipment, and other purposes including local staffing, travel, office operations, and other administrative costs. We reviewed \$1.7 million in program funds that WEM provided to 70 county and 4 tribal emergency management departments in June and July 2009. We found that the funds were used for purposes permitted under the broad categories allowed by federal program rules.

Local governments and others received a total of \$99.8 million directly from the Department of Homeland Security over the past five years, including \$21.5 million in FY 2008-09.

In that year, the Assistance to Firefighters Grant Program provided \$14.2 million to 181 fire departments and emergency medical services (EMS) organizations in 65 counties. Recipients indicated that most of these funds would be used to purchase emergency response and personal protective equipment, as well as fire trucks, ambulances, and other vehicles.

To assess compliance with program rules, we contacted eight fire departments and one EMS organization that accepted a total of 12 grants totaling \$1.8 million in FY 2008-09. We found no instances in which program rules had been violated.

Interoperable Communications

Communications technology that allows easy radio communication among jurisdictions is a high priority for emergency responders because it is essential for responding to and managing emergencies efficiently.

Wisconsin does not currently have an interoperable communications system that would allow all emergency responders statewide to communicate with one another during a large-scale emergency. However, four regional interoperability initiatives have been established under the leadership of local governments to improve communications among emergency responders.

OJA is implementing Wisconsin's Statewide Communications Interoperability Plan, which anticipates that the basic infrastructure for a statewide communications system will be operational in 2011. OJA has relied on federal emergency management funds, including \$15.4 million from the federal Public Safety Interoperable Communications Grant Program, to fund most of the system's basic infrastructure costs.

OJA anticipates that the basic infrastructure will initially provide radio coverage in 95.0 percent of Wisconsin, but only for in-vehicle radios with strong antenna ranges. As a result, many local governments will need to purchase communications equipment to gain access to the system.

Equipment costs are still unknown but are expected to vary among local governments. Local governments will also share the system's ongoing maintenance costs. Those costs and how they will be allocated have not been precisely determined by OJA.

Ten of the 26 grant recipients we contacted had concerns with the system, including that:

- it relies on the VHF band, which does not penetrate buildings as well as other radio bands and can be difficult to use in urban areas with heavy radio traffic;
- most portable radios used by emergency responders have weak antenna ranges and may not be able to gain access to the system from all locations in their jurisdictions; and
- the costs for local governments to purchase communications equipment to gain access to the system are still undetermined but in some cases may be significant.

Planning for Emergencies

Responsibility for emergency management is decentralized. The Wisconsin Homeland Security Council advises the Governor and coordinates the State's emergency management efforts with those of local officials. In addition, more than ten key councils, committees, and work groups provide input to state and local emergency management officials.

State emergency management officials must manage and integrate this advice. In particular, WEM and OJA must continue to coordinate their efforts as they manage funding from the Department of Homeland Security.

The Wisconsin Emergency Response Plan was developed by the Adjutant General. WEM is currently updating the plan so that it follows the Department of Homeland Security's recommended format.

However, WEM has not yet completed and shared all sections of the plan with all county and tribal emergency management departments, nor has it yet implemented an electronic system for tracking all emergency management resources statewide, although it expects to do so later in 2010. Such a system would be particularly useful during large emergencies involving multiple counties.

While the State and local governments have made progress in improving some aspects of emergency preparedness, responses to two recent and significant natural disasters indicate that additional efforts are needed, particularly to achieve interoperable communications among all responders to large emergencies.

In addition, an improved and formalized process for analyzing responses to specific emergencies could help the State and local governments to increase accountability and the likelihood that Wisconsin is prepared, particularly for large-scale emergencies involving multiple jurisdictions.

Recommendations

Our report includes recommendations for:

- OJA to report to the Joint Legislative Audit Committee by August 31, 2010, on the construction of basic infrastructure for the statewide communications system and on costs to local governments for purchasing related equipment and helping to maintain the system (*p. 46*);
- WEM to report to the Joint Legislative Audit Committee by August

31, 2010, on its plans for completing and approving all incident-specific sections of the State's emergency management plan and sharing them with all county and tribal emergency management departments, and on efforts to implement an electronic system for tracking emergency management resources statewide *(p. 52 and 54)*;

- WEM to improve and formalize its process for reviewing responses to emergencies and using the results for improving preparedness statewide *(p. 56)*;

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