

On the Front Lines of the Pandemic

How four alumni are driving FEMA's COVID-19 recovery for New England and creating a blueprint for the rest of the nation

By Tara King Clark, Editor of *The Bulletin*



CAPT Russ Webster '77, FEMA's Region 1 Administrator attending a departure ceremony in honor of the U.S. Army Reserve Urban Augmentation Medical Task Force 811-1 that had been deployed to Stamford Hospital. Webster and three other alumni are leading FEMA's response and recovery efforts in New England.

As early as January, CAPT (ret) Russ Webster '77, the Regional Administrator for New England at the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) began preparing for the potential impacts of the novel coronavirus as reports of its lethal effects began trickling out of China. In these early meetings and briefings with his counterpart at the Health and Human Services Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response, the sheer scale and scope of the pandemic could only be imagined.

Then on March 13, Webster became FEMA's Federal Coordinating Officer (FCO) for the COVID-19 response in New England when President Trump made the historic emergency declaration that stretched from coast to coast and beyond. As FCO, Webster ensures that federal assistance is provided in accordance with the declaration, applicable laws, regulations, and FEMA-State and Tribal Agreements.

Webster is no stranger to high-profile response efforts. While in the Coast

Guard he led Northeast operations in the aftermath of 9/11 and oversaw the response to the 1999 JFK Jr., and Egypt Air Flight 990 air crashes. He also worked for FEMA from 2008-2015 as New England's first Federal Preparedness Coordinator and Region 1's initial coordinator during the 2013 Marathon Bombings and has served in his current role since June 2019.

For the COVID-19 response, Webster's first few months included securing ventilators for those states hardest hit, ensuring hospitals had the appropriate PPE, providing spaces for overflow from regional hospitals, securing federal medical personnel, providing meals to those who most need them, and more. In Connecticut alone the federal support totaled \$26.4M as of May 19.

The scale and nature of this disaster resulted in two unique challenges not typically a problem during FEMA response operations: scarcity and susceptibility. With all 50 states, five territories, Washington D.C. and one

tribe each declaring a major disaster at the same time, scarcity of supplies and testing capabilities presented Webster and his team with a unique set of challenges. He also experienced setbacks for his team when members were exposed to COVID-19 while assisting at a testing facility and had to be quarantined. Family members of FEMA employees were affected; some passed, including a longtime retired FCO who had overseen 9/11 operations. That susceptibility also resulted in a completely different way of operating with no apparent end in sight.

"We have run this disaster response with as many as 230 people from 22 federal agencies completely virtually for the first time in our history," said Webster. His job, normally outwardly facing and expeditionary, has relied heavily on technology except for visits to field hospitals to experience the work environment and honor military medical personnel. He jokingly calls his home office the "command couch" where since March 13, Webster has kicked off each workday at 7:30 a.m. with a Zoom call with his regional coordination group, followed by daily briefings with his counterparts across the nation, calls with relevant federal agencies, states, etc. Virtual meetings and calls often continued into the late evening.

"The thing that has prepared me the most for leading New England's charge on COVID-19 for the federal response has been learning to live and manage and lead in the Coast Guard in an atmosphere of scarcity," said Webster.

Thankfully, Webster's not the only alum on the FEMA front line in New England able to apply those lessons. Both CAPT (ret) Jim McPherson '82 and CDR (ret) Bob Fogel '83 work on the recovery side of FEMA's operations under Webster's direction.

Since 2013 McPherson has served as FEMA's New England region Federal Disaster Recovery Coordinator (FDRC) and is the COVID-19 Recovery Task Force Leader, while Fogel serves as his Deputy FDRC. McPherson retired as the Chief of Staff for District 1 following 30 years of active duty in the Coast Guard. Fogel left active duty to serve in the reserves, while pursuing a successful career as an education executive with

strong ties to the Harvard Business School.

Almost immediately following the shutdown of the region, McPherson and Fogel quickly realized that bouncing back from this disaster was going to look quite different than your average FEMA recovery.

"The size of the economic disaster is in many ways going to be bigger and longer lasting," said Fogel, who heads up the recovery team's Economic Task Force. "People that are living on the edge... after a disaster, they generally don't get better. They get worse."

With Webster's blessing, McPherson and Fogel pulled the economic recovery up front. Typically, the recovery side of FEMA operations come in anywhere from two to three months following a disaster, never simultaneously.

"We quickly realized that supply chains and lodging and food and restaurants are going to potentially collapse," said Fogel. "70% of seafood is sold in New England between Memorial Day and Labor Day at restaurants and hotels. If they are shut down, the seafood industry can collapse. 45% of daycares in CT will likely not ever reopen. In RI, it's 60%. Vermont is having the same problem. If they don't open, how do people go back to work?"

While Webster was working the response side of things, McPherson and Fogel tackled the economic recovery with the states, "trying to align federal Cares Act dollars and resources to beef up these areas that are at great risk because of the shutdown," said Fogel. To get a good picture of what will be needed and where, they reached out to another alum Dr. Stephen Flynn '82.

As founding-Director of the Global Resilience Institute at Northeastern University, Flynn leads a university-wide research enterprise to inform and advance societal resilience in the face of growing man-made and naturally occurring turbulence. Over the last few years, he has led a research team in developing a robust assessment tool that gauges the resilience of a community by looking at social capital, economic factors, and systems and infrastructure. Flynn applied these tools in New Orleans in 2019 to great success and was about to do the same for the State of Maine when COVID-19 hit.

McPherson, a fellow classmate, asked Flynn if those same tools could be applied across New England to assess the economic impacts of the shutdown and eventual reopening. "As a classic Coast Guard guy, I said 'of course!'" shared Flynn, a former Permanent Commissioned Teaching Staff member at the Academy and senior fellow at the Council for Foreign Relations. "We can use our understanding of key resilience indicators to work with the six New England states to understand what the needs are coming out of this disaster and help them prioritize the actions they need to take and their strategy for what recovery should look like."

Using a sampling approach, Flynn and his team of researchers asked each state to provide them with three representative communities that they could assess in order to understand the unique issues facing each state. The data collected will be used to develop a strategy for FEMA to discern where and what resources federal agencies can bring to bear as the states reopen.

"We are trying to lean forward in recovery for FEMA and are months ahead of where we'd normally be," said Fogel. "We are creating a template for how to work on recovery in a more streamlined and rapid process than usual. We're changing the way we do things as we do them, which can be hard to do in the federal government."

All four alumni agreed that Coast Guard folks are uniquely qualified to bring agencies together. "A successful Coast Guard officer is somebody who figures out how to collaborate with others to get the mission done, but also has experience with dealing with the full spectrum of societal needs and the players who provide it," said Flynn.

"If you don't have everything that you need, then you better be good at relationships, forming them, maintaining them, nurturing them, leveraging them," said Webster. "That has been critical in this particular role... making up for inadequate capability and resources through relationships - I attribute that directly to my time in the Coast Guard."

"What the Academy and Coast Guard has taught us is to be mission focused, flexible, and to take bold action," said McPherson. "Because of our CG background, we know to bring a sense of urgency to response and recovery. Make decisions. Do your research. Come up with a plan. Execute the plan. Because of that, I can say that we are really leading the nation in recovery."

As the effects of the pandemic and the economic impacts of the resulting shutdown ripple throughout America and the world, these four alumni are shaping the recovery strategies that will serve as the blueprint for the rest of the nation. Their work ensuring New England bounces back even stronger will continue for months and likely years.



Bravo Zulu to the dedicated men and women of the US Coast Guard who work tirelessly every day to ensure the safety and security of this great nation's maritime commerce.

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