

## *Principles of ethics for emergency managers*

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This article reviews several alternatives in ethical theory available as possible criteria for the development of ethical principles for the emergency management profession. It also examines the basic elements (core values) of existing codes of professional ethics for emergency managers in the context of these criteria. The developing emergency management profession, it is suggested, requires more scholarship directed to the establishment of a more complete ethical theory and a more clearly articulated set of ethical principles for emergency managers. The discussion concludes with a suggestion as to what a more comprehensive, informative, and functional statement of ethical principles for the emergency management profession might look like. But this proposed formulation, offered for discussion purposes, assumes the need for more effort at defining the moral criteria that will give these principles their ultimate meaning.*

*Key words: ethics, administrative ethics, emergency management ethics*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The moral and ethical dimensions of emergency management, while increasingly recognized as important, remain underexplored and underdeveloped. A paucity of scholarly work in this area makes it difficult to adequately consider the moral foundations of public emergency management policy and, equally important, to establish principles of ethics for the developing emergency management profession. Progress has been made of course, but movement toward a definitive theory and a set of more precise ethical principles is required for the emergency management profession and its continued development.

The purpose of this essay is to pick up some of the

threads of ethical theory that are available and to suggest a more inclusive statement of ethical principles for the emergency management profession. It will not be possible in the space of this article to resolve all questions and all ethical issues relevant to the profession, but it will be possible to provide a foundation for further analysis and discussion.

### **ETHICS AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT**

It is clearly established and largely agreed upon that emergency managers are ethically responsible under a specific set of conditions:

- They have knowledge of or are able to predict an emergency or disaster.
- They have the capability of making a decision and acting on it.
- They have free choice; that is, they could have chosen otherwise.
- Their decision has value consequences; it affects lives, welfare, and rights of other persons.<sup>1</sup>

An analysis of these “conditions” is certainly a place to begin articulating the nature and scope of ethical responsibility for emergency managers. But what are the moral criteria for this analysis? Several alternatives have been suggested.

Among the basic alternatives for moral criteria are: utilitarian rationales, the concept of basic rights, culpability and prevention of harm standards, the imperative of knowledge, and public service rationales.<sup>2-4</sup> Let us briefly examine each of these alternatives to

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highlight their implications as moral criteria for emergency management. Without any attempt to analyze in detail or to choose from among these alternatives, it is possible to see that each has had some impact on ethical thinking in relation to emergency management and, perhaps, some influence on ethical codes developed in the profession.

Utilitarian philosophers such as Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill evaluate the desirability of an action based on its usefulness for creating the greatest good for the greatest number.<sup>5</sup> With respect to public disaster policy and emergency management functions, the preferred or ethical action seeks, from the utilitarian perspective, to maximize net social benefits.<sup>2</sup> The utilitarian approach has been institutionalized in the public sector through the implementation of cost-benefit analysis and, whether emergency managers are explicitly aware of it or not, many emergency management policy decisions are driven by it. Of course utilitarianism has limits for its critics. At what point does the social cost become great enough (i.e., exceeding benefits however quantified) to justify tolerating risks, including life-threatening ones, that place the public at greater danger? The utilitarian focus on costs and benefits may lead to outcomes that are morally unacceptable. Hence utilitarianism is often tempered by some notion of a basic right to safety.

The basic rights argument suggests that every individual has certain basic rights, including the right to physical security.<sup>6</sup> Individuals have the right to a basic minimum level of public safety that cannot be compromised even where the costs would exceed the social benefits. In the emergency management context, this would suggest that it is not morally acceptable to allow a "significant loss of life from a disaster, without taking public actions to prevent or minimize it, simply because such an outcome would, in the long run, be socially inefficient."<sup>2</sup>

The basic rights argument is compatible with the Lockean concept of Life as a property right and the associated notion that government may not violate or allow to be violated "lives, liberties, and estates."<sup>7</sup> It also embodies the Jeffersonian notion of Life as one of the unalienable rights that serve as the foundation

for American culture. Given the value placed upon human life, the saving of lives and the prevention of human suffering would be the primary goals and moral objectives of emergency management.<sup>3</sup> This argument often includes the recognition that the impact of devastating natural disasters is often greatest on poor or disadvantaged populations, which are the least capable of coping without public intervention.

The basic right of personal protection from disasters leaves undecided the status of the protection of property. While questions such as the protection of property, the prevention of economic displacement, and the preservation of lifestyle are necessarily critical issues to be factored into risk calculations, policy decisions, preparedness planning, and mitigation, their status as basic rights might be disputable and are not clearly covered by the basic rights argument.<sup>2,3,8</sup> But the concept of Life is a foundation that supports the development of prevention of harm or prohibited risk standards.

Beginning with the agreement that a basic right of individuals and the basic function of emergency management is connected to the right of personal safety, the premise of prohibited risk is that the preservation of life and the prevention of harm figures into every moral calculation of risk. Risks are defined along the following lines: the potential harm is physical and life-threatening; the potential harm is possibly fatal, and the harm is not reversible (i.e., its consequences are permanent). The risk is prohibited when the potential harm is undetectable by potential victims; there is avoidable unpredictability, and policy or emergency management experts are able to predict the risks or harms; and the probability of incurring the harm is, in fact, very high.<sup>3,9</sup> Under the conditions set forth in this argument, the concept of prohibited risk becomes a moral imperative for emergency policymakers and managers because individual citizens or impacted populations cannot perceive or predict a threat to life or safety and pursue their own best interests in a complex disaster scenario.<sup>8</sup>

At its crux, the notion that it is not allowable for one party or parties to inflict risk of damages and loss of life onto others or onto the public at large is commonly accepted in both the Lockean basic right to life

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formulation and in John S. Mill's classic treatise, *On Liberty*. Much emergency management policy and implementation activity, especially with respect to mitigation and prevention, would seem compatible with this justification. As a rationale it has applications under the guise of preventing harm that may relate to protecting people, communities, economies, and structures against the devastation of a natural disaster as a means of preserving life *and* the conditions that support it.

The prevention of harm, or the prevention of prohibited risks that threaten basic rights, or even the utilitarian cost-benefit alternative, all have one thing in common that may be a critical component in any formulation of ethical principles in emergency management: the assumption of knowledge and a central role for it in meeting any professional responsibilities.

Emergency managers and disaster policymakers must know present situations, predict risks and harms, develop appropriate technical and organizational responses, anticipate outcomes, and be capable of reducing risks to human life and safety. The development of knowledge, including predictive or anticipatory knowledge, required for competent performance of their duties, should be perceived by emergency managers as a professional duty. Beyond that, whatever moral criteria might be employed, it is increasingly clear that without the appropriate knowledge base there can be no ethical responsibility.<sup>3,8</sup> In fact, it could be said that (much like the medical profession, for example) knowledge is an imperative for ethical responsibility in the field of emergency management.<sup>10</sup> Whether maximizing social benefits in some utilitarian calculus, identifying and preserving some basic right to personal safety, or preventing a prohibited harm, knowledge would seem to be a requirement that is necessary for the meeting of any of the alternative criteria for ethical action.

Finally, ethical criteria from the literature in public administration may also apply to the emergency manager as a public manager. Ethical analysis in the context of public service,<sup>11,12</sup> in the context of public administration,<sup>13</sup> and in the context of public integrity<sup>14</sup> is certainly applicable to the professional work of the emergency manager. The cultivation of

responsibility for public resources and public well-being, serving the public interest, the improvement of the moral cognitive capacities of public managers, the creation of ethical awareness, and the development of moral responsibility toward public service are all components in what might be called a public service ethic for the emergency manager as public servant.

Having conducted a quick review of ethical criteria for emergency management, one might raise the question of whether any of the alternatives presented have in fact shown up in the ethical codes of the profession. Most state emergency management associations, following the lead of the International Association of Emergency Managers (IAEM) among others, have fashioned fairly similar ethical statements or codes. These reflect some basic statement of principles and general agreement about core values of the profession. They follow a format that utilizes an agreed upon formula, which presents a fairly unified statement of professional ethical principles. Insofar as they go, these codes do embody some of the alternatives we have reviewed, but they also seem to be lacking something. We shall discuss what it is that is lacking in these codes and propose a slightly more focused statement of ethical principles for emergency managers.

#### CURRENT ETHICAL STANDARDS

Existing codes of ethics developed and adopted by the IAEM and many state emergency management associations adhere to the core values of respect, commitment, and professionalism. These core values are presented in a code of ethics that "reflects the spirit and proper conduct dictated by the conscience of society and commitment to the well-being of all."<sup>15</sup> They are said to constitute the standards for ethical and professional conduct. What follows is a representation of these values in the Alabama Emergency Management Association's (AAEM) code of ethics:

- **Respect.** Respect for supervising officials, colleagues, associates, and most importantly, for the people we serve is the standard for AAEM members. We comply with all laws and regulations applicable to our

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purpose and position, and responsibly and impartially apply them to all concerned. We respect fiscal resources by evaluating organizational decisions to provide the best service or product at a minimal cost without sacrificing quality.

- **Commitment.** AAEM members commit themselves to promoting decisions that engender trust for those we serve. We commit to continuous improvement by fairly administering the affairs of our positions, by fostering honest and trustworthy relationships, and by striving for impeccable accuracy and clarity in what we say or write. We commit to enhancing stewardship of resources and the caliber of service we deliver, while striving to improve the quality of life in the community we serve.
- **Professionalism.** AAEM is an organization that actively promotes professionalism to ensure public confidence in emergency management. Our reputation is built on the faithful discharge of our duties. Our professionalism is founded on education, safety, and the protection of life and property.<sup>15</sup>

Each state utilizes pretty much the same language in articulating these principles in their code of ethics. Let us briefly examine this language in relation to the alternative criteria we have discussed for ethical standards in emergency management.

The value of *respect* includes the sort of language that may be associated with some of the *public service* criteria (public integrity) and emphasizes the conduct requirements for public servants who interact with other public individuals and organizations, who manage public resources, and who must be responsible to the public. The language about the best service (high quality at minimal cost, etc.) is ripe for the application of the *utilitarian* criteria to maximize social value, etc.

The value of *commitment* emphasizes *public service* concerns (trust, honesty, stewardship, etc.) but

can also be said to introduce a *knowledge*-based criteria (impeccable accuracy and clarity). Nevertheless, the primary emphasis is on the professional, administrative, and public service component.

It is the value of professionalism, with its added emphasis on safety, protection, and protection of life and property, that connects to the *basic rights* criteria and the *personal safety or protection* rights. Once again, and this time more directly, education is mentioned and *knowledge* is alluded to as a criterion.

Naturally, the connections noted between existing codes and the alternative ethical criteria we have discussed are not explicitly detailed, and certainly it would be a stretch to suggest that there was a clear agreement on what the exact criteria is for ethical responsibility. The agreed upon principles (respect, commitment, and professionalism) undoubtedly stem from these criteria, but the relationship is almost too general (or implicit) to provide the emergency management professional much practical guidance; this is to say that, as general statements, these ethical codes are okay as far as they go. As more explicit guides to professional and ethical conduct, they are lacking.

#### PROPOSED REFINEMENTS OF ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

As the emergency management profession continues to develop, more attention and scholarship must be directed to the establishment of a more concrete, agreed upon, and clearly articulated set of ethical principles for emergency managers. This work must include a more elaborate assessment of, and clearer choices made from, the alternative moral criteria available and applicable to emergency management. It would also be desirable for the articulated ethical principles to be correlated with the four major components of the emergency management function (mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery). The currently accepted values of respect, commitment, and professionalism need to be seen as a foundation on which to build as opposed to the finished structure for ethical codes.

Ideally, a more complete statement of ethical principles would include several other components. These would include the public service ethic and the building of relationships based on integrity. They

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should include some notion of the public and/or individual right to safety. They should probably also indicate that those who are disadvantaged or poor are almost always disproportionately impacted by natural disasters and other hazards and, thus, because of their greater vulnerability, create a special responsibility for the emergency manager. The ethical principles should include some direct language on responsibilities related to preparedness, response, recovery, and especially mitigation. The development of each component would derive from some basic analysis and choices made from among the moral criteria thought to be relevant and would be compatible with the already commonly accepted values (respect, commitment, and professionalism).

Above all else, given the technical and the human dimensions of the function, any statement of ethical principles for emergency managers must emphasize knowledge as an ethical imperative. Given the nature and scope of emergency management, its ethical context moves well beyond direct and immediate dealings with people and organizations. It involves decisions and actions that have an impact on or causal reach into the future. This being the case, knowledge, the ability to predict or anticipate, and understanding the long-term consequences of action or inaction must be included in any articulation of ethical responsibility in the field of emergency management. This may be especially true in relation to the hazard mitigation function.

The centrality of mitigation as a strategy for the prevention of harm or the reduction of the effects of hazards on people and communities requires the application of predictive and anticipatory knowledge. Given the economic and human costs associated with hazardous events, mitigation becomes both a practical (utilitarian ethic) and human (prevention of harm criteria) necessity. Indeed, a deeper analysis could well suggest that the core of the emergency manager's ethical responsibilities is most directly connected to the task of hazard mitigation.

Based on the principles agreed to (respect, commitment, and professionalism) and the general discussion of moral criteria herein, one can begin to imagine what a more comprehensive and informative statement of ethical principles might look like. I

suggest the following as an illustration worthy of discussion and analysis:

■ **Principles of ethics for emergency managers.** Emergency managers assume specific ethical obligations that arise out of the special features of professional emergency management practice. The principles listed below express fundamental moral responsibilities of emergency managers as professionals and as public servants.

■ **Emergency managers shall:**

1. embrace the public welfare as their primary responsibility;
2. strive in all professional activities to protect the best interests of all in their communities, but particularly those most vulnerable and unable to cope with the impact of a disaster or hazard;
3. deal fairly and honestly with colleagues, other organizations (governmental and nongovernmental), and the public while promoting professional competence, informed policy, and sound practices;
4. act as responsible stewards of the public resources entrusted to them;
5. respond promptly, expertly, and without prejudice or partiality to all community needs associated with a disaster or hazardous incident;
6. promote the development of hazard resilient and sustainable communities;
7. foster hazard mitigation efforts that contribute to sustainability, including those linked to the natural resource environment that will maintain or enhance its protective features;

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8. work cooperatively with other community leaders to insure that emergency planning is effective and that community development planning does not shift potential disaster risks to other communities, to at risk or vulnerable populations within the community, or to future generations;

9. support and provide leadership as appropriate for all efforts to build a consensus among all people and groups having a stake in the outcome of all hazard mitigation, planning, response, and recovery operations; and

10. engage in continuing study and education to maintain and/or enhance the knowledge and skills necessary to provide high quality emergency management services.

While perhaps not a perfect statement of ethical principles for emergency managers, the 10 principles listed above contain the possibility of directing discussion and analysis to clarify moral criteria for the emergency management profession. The public service criteria are implicated in most of these principles (1 to 9) I've listed. Certainly, utilitarian criteria are included for consideration (4), the prevention of harm (6 to 8), knowledge (3, 5, and 10), and the basic right to personal security (2, 3, 5, and 8) are all available for analysis and clarification in the principles presented. More importantly, a statement of principles in this fashion seems to touch more directly upon the activities and responsibilities of the emergency manager. Finally, these principles are compatible with the values of respect, commitment, and professionalism. In fact, they are illustrated quite nicely in the form of more specific job related responsibilities.

Perhaps the emphasis on hazard mitigation and sustainability<sup>6,7</sup> and the concept of responsibilities spanning generations and communities<sup>8</sup> are the themes that will generate much discussion and disagreement, but they are among the more compelling

concerns in the profession today and are particularly ripe for analysis and consideration in the ethical context.

### CONCLUSION

We have briefly discussed some of the moral criteria that *may* be considered relevant for emergency managers and examined the code of ethics that is, more or less, the current standard for the profession. But it is clear that additional scholarship and refinement are necessary to resolve the need for greater clarity and precision in the selection and application of criteria, and to inform the construction of a more precise set of ethical principles for the emergency management professional. The proposed statement of principles with which this discussion has concluded is but an attempt to suggest what a more comprehensive, informative, and functional statement of ethical principles might look like. But this proposed formulation assumes the need for more effort at defining the moral criteria that will give these principles their ultimate meaning.

The premise that the ethical dimension of the emergency management profession is unique would be incorrect. All professions and all social organizations ascribe to a set of beliefs and values. Doctors and lawyers sign an oath and commit to upholding the ethical rules of their profession. All professions have a unified commitment to develop the most professional organizations possible. A part of that development, especially in professions impacting lives, health, safety, and the public welfare requires a well-constructed and universally-implemented set of ethical principles that establish the standards for performance and define the responsibilities to be met.

The existing codes of ethics are a sign of progress, a sign that emergency management is becoming a profession. The building of a more precise set of principles, the effort to clearly connect these principles to the work of the profession and to the training and development of its practitioners, requires that analysis and discourse continue. In fact, the ongoing analysis and discourse will be more important than any proposed set of ethical principles that may evolve. It is the struggle to define the moral criteria by which

its work may be judged and to understand more precisely the scope of its responsibility that defines the profession of emergency management.

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