

To Jerry Hauer, who made emergencies manageable

The emergency management community lost a legend last week with the passing of Jerome Hauer, the founder and organizer of New York City's modern-day emergency management structure.

I met Jerry nearly 30 years ago, when he was named director of the newly formed Mayor's Office of Emergency Management in New York.

Hauer brought a vision of local emergency management with him when he was recruited from Indiana, where he was director of the Indiana department of emergency management. It was here in New York City that he was given the resources and the authority to build that vision.

Hauer brought an energy to the role, molding a team of a dozen cops, EMTs and firefighters into an elite group of crisis managers. He reported directly to the mayor and quickly became an integral part of his inner circle of advisers.

OEM came with a communications center called Watch Command. Watch Command's job was to watch and listen, around the clock and around the world, for any sign of approaching hazards. Watch Command was connected, through communications channels like emergency services frequencies, alert systems, breaking news, live video feeds from New York

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BY JOELHOTA

Harbor and the city's streets and other watch centers around the state and the nation.

While Watch Command was the city's eyes and ears on the world, OEM was its eyes and ears on the street. Hauer's team, wearing two cell phones and three pagers on their belts, became fixtures at all manner of emergencies, from helicopter crashes, subway fires, building collapses and water main breaks. At the same time, Hauer took a leadership role in the city's response to major emergencies, like the West Nile virus outbreak and Y2K.

Hauer's OEM knew how to bring all of the big pieces of government together immediately and seamlessly in the aftermath of disaster, by forging a real-time connection from the executives at City Hall, where big decisions get made, to the boots on the ground, where the work gets done. This is the key to crisis management and Hauer's was the world's first modern emergency management department.

Jerry understood the critical issue of coordination. Most people think that coordination is something that just happens organically, and that governments have

some innate ability to self-organize in the aftermath of disasters. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Governments are slow moving creatures of habit, ill-suited to the quick-thinking and widespread action required in the early minutes after a major disaster. Emergency management is the key to solving this problem, the secret sauce that supercharges the government led response.

Even though most local governments – townships, cities and counties – have a department called emergency management, chances are it is not doing all of these things. That is because it rarely has the resources needed to connect to its most vulnerable citizens during disasters. We are seeing the consequences of this now, in the aftermath of the devastating tragedy on the Hawaiian island of Maui.

Our fractured national disaster system is not built for these incidents, those rare occasions when the job gets too big, too fast, as it did on Aug. 8, when brush fires stoked by a combination of low humidity and strong mountain winds brought by Hurricane Dora, roared into the historic town of Lahaina. At that moment of truth there was an urgent need to execute a multitude of complex response operations simultaneously.

Maui faced the hardest job in the world. As that terrible Tuesday afternoon turned into Tuesday night, it was not enough for them to do a lot of things very quickly, they were forced to try and do everything all at once. The weaknesses of our current system are thus laid bare, as are the results: widespread chaos, fear and confusion; people getting hurt and killed by wildfires.

After every catastrophe, presidents and governors tell us that the local government "owns" the job and that they are leaning forward to support them with anything they might need. The reality is that, beyond the big cities like New York, Los Angeles and Houston, few can come close to doing what is needed. We will never see the kind of organized, compassionate outcomes disaster victims deserve until we invest in that robust coordination element, the point of the spear, the local emergency manager.

Thanks to Jerry Hauer, New York City shows us what this should look like; a world-class emergency management team that can lead the way to resilience in these dangerous times, one that holds enormous promise and opportunity for our polycrisis world.

Lhota was a New York City deputy mayor from 1995 to 2001.