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Beyond Keifer Sutherland's Designated Survivor, Recovering Washington, D.C.: An Examination of the District of Columbia's Recovery Plan

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ABSTRACT

The popular imagination, as exhibited by the television show Designated Survivor, constructs disaster recovery as a process performed by omnipotent government agents who guide action in ways that are comprehensive, fair, and efficient. However, as the National Disaster Recovery Plan and the District of Columbia Recovery Plan demonstrate, there is little understanding of the processes required to recover from a disaster. This paper examines the Plan for the District of Columbia's Economic Recovery from disaster and proposes recommendations that could more easily streamline the planning and recovery of disaster in Washington, DC.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Kiefer Sutherland stars as Tom Kirkman, an on-the-outs cabinet member in the Department of Housing and Urban Development who is thrust into a high-stakes world of political intrigue when, as the "Designated Survivor," he is the only member of the government to survive catastrophe in Washington, DC. Indeed, a disaster affecting the seat of the federal government of the United States of America makes for good television. However, if we move beyond power-playing politicians, sex scandals and every other form of drama imaginable, recovery managers must ask: how would the District of Columbia's business and economic recovery from disaster be operationalized, and based on the literature, would the District's current documentation be sufficient to meet its stated goals?

This paper reviews FEMA's National Disaster Recovery Framework (2011), which frames disaster recovery in the United States as "providing guidance that enables an effective recovery." Similarly, this paper will interrogate the District Recovery Plan (Homeland Security and Emergency Management Agency, 2014) which seeks to "assist the government, non-governmental organizations and the private sector to more efficiently and effectively organize and operate recovery efforts from events that have impacts on the physical, social, emotional, economic and natural environments."

This paper first introduces the business and economic recovery sections of each recovery plan in broad strokes before discussing the academic literature to recommend improvements. Beyond the content of each document, this paper suggests that innovative advanced technologies like web-based tools and blockchain are required to prepare for a recovery that includes many stakeholders successfully.

2.0 FEMA'S NATIONAL DISASTER RECOVERY FRAMEWORK AND DC'S RECOVERY PLAN

Washington, DC's Recovery Plan, like many in the United States, builds on FEMA's National Disaster Recovery Framework (NDRF). Created to describe what recovery management processes could look like for recovery managers, the NDRF provides definition to different recovery support functions, maps local resources to their counterparts at other levels of government, and notes items that might enable the most effective recovery in a specific domain, business recovery for instance. Although never going so far as becoming a static template of fill-in-the-blanks, each recovery support function has a few pages detailing the overall mission statement, why each component is essential, things to do in the preparedness phase, and items to keep in mind during recovery. Often brief in detail, this may be attributed to the fact that as a new concept, the components of an effective recovery plan are not well understood (Berke et al., 2014). This paper does not try to hold the NDRF and other documents based on it in contempt, but rather to see them as works in progress which will improve over time with the end goal of addressing the root causes of a disaster.

By definition, disasters overwhelm local resources (Drabek, 1986). Perhaps knowing this, the authors of Washington, DC's Recovery Plan (2014) have built on the recovery support functions by including a selection of front matter to help give the unfamiliar recovery manager dropped into this high-priority geography with a little background of a fighting chance. This preamble details the city's key stakeholders, processes for document approvals during regular times, and the hazards facing the District of Columbia. Interestingly, the Plan designates flooding as the most significant hazard, with the Potomac river causing some anxiety. Ironically, the "Human/Adversarial Hazards" section features very little detail, despite American Airlines Flight 77 crashing into the Pentagon on 9/11 and Washington DC being defined in the Plan itself as a potential target for action against the

United States - the central plot point of Designated Survivor.

Much time is spent discussing the sort of recovery-focused work that can begin during the mitigation and preparedness phases, but there is little by way of risk analysis or appropriate interventions. Even something as simple as a decision tree (Kirkwood, 2002) with probabilities and consequence values would allow for recovery managers to begin predicting costs and focus their efforts on the most significant opportunities. Furthermore, the analysis does not need to begin with expensive, difficult, or time-consuming data collection: that can come later. Instead, following Hillier & Liberman's (2001) example, a Monte Carlo simulation using ball-park estimates constructed in a tool as simple as Microsoft Excel could be enough to understand the probabilities of different hazards occurring. Work could then begin on protecting the social features most likely to fail during a disaster, with a foundation that is more comprehensive than the qualitative perceptions of planning officials that are currently listed.

Understanding where things are likely to fail will allow for complete planning, and therefore a quicker recovery. The Washington, DC Recovery Plan (2014) itself notes this on page 16 by saying that there is a need to "balance quick and prompt recovery actions with the need to elicit active community engagement in the recovery process." Achieving this balance is a significant first step, for as Johnson and Hayashi (2012) note, recovery is time-dependent, and some solutions will only be applicable for a short period. However, the current explanation works only as a first step, since there is no action plan to discuss how to achieve this balance outside of a brief mention in FEMA's companion webinar, IS-2900 A: National Disaster Recovery Framework Overview (2018), which spends 30 seconds discussing the pace of recovery after Hurricane Ike in 2008.

3.0   ECONOMIC RECOVERY

FEMA (2011) seeks to integrate the expertise of the Federal Government with local businesses to help sustain and rebuild the economic opportunities that are key to a recovered community. At the same time, the government has historically done a poor job of keeping businesses afloat after a disaster (Corey & Deitch, 2011). Accordingly, the economic recovery support function suggests that some few-strings-attached seed money be made available to energize disaster-struck locales. Further, it singles out pre-disaster planning and mitigation as essential to an effective recovery, including the suggestion that local businesses be invited to exercises that allow them to prepare for a disaster, participate in planning and be ready to recover, though no specific resources are detailed. The coordinating agency that is assigned to oversee these activities is the Department of Commerce who is supported by FEMA, the Department of Labour, the Small Business Administration, Department of the Treasury, and Department of Agriculture.

Washington, DC breaks out six objective categories and sorts them based on time, either intermediate or long term. These objectives include: "buildings and other facilities," "employees and personnel," "supporting infrastructure," "consumers and other clientele services," "supplies and inventory," and "governance." Shorter-term, intermediate objectives include "completing damage assessments," "assisting employers in locating and contacting employees," and making sure that infrastructure services are running to an acceptable degree. In the long term, these objectives become "repair or replace facilities," "assist employers in recruiting and retaining employees," and to keep making sure that there is enough supporting infrastructure to meet their needs.

Many of these objectives sound reasonable. With that said, even the simple and 'easy' tasks must be developed beyond the one-sentence descriptions they are given in these plans. For instance, what does it mean to make sure that there is enough staff? On the surface, the question sounds needlessly academic and arcane, maybe a little silly, since obviously, the Plan says that recovery managers should make sure

that there are enough people to do work. Scratch below the surface, however, and the idea of actually having people to do work begs nuanced questions. What was the size of the business pre-disaster? Large firms and government agencies in the Washington, DC metro area may be able to absorb the shock of having a few people unavailable by shifting the workaround among the remaining employees, but such a strategy might be impossible for smaller organizations (Tierney, 2007). Further, many small businesses are owner-operated (Tierney, 2007) and, therefore, may not have employees available. In these cases, the characteristics of the owner must be taken into account, especially their ethnicity and gender. The research on how much of an impact the features of owner ethnicity and owner gender have on business success is mixed with Webb et al. (2002) finding little significance, while more recent studies by Sydnor (2017) did find statistical differences. Likely, the success or failure of women-owned or minority-owned small businesses in the aftermath of disaster comes down to the local culture, and it is, therefore, crucial for Washington, DC emergency planners to understand these features and plan for them.

4.0 PROPOSED INNOVATION

Even without a much-needed further alignment with the literature surrounding economic and business recoveries, there is much content in FEMA's National Disaster Recovery Framework, and it would be easy for the documents based on their templates to become unwieldy behemoths full of words that are incapable of providing results when they are needed. Accordingly, to operationalize concepts that could be obscured in the frantic pace of disaster recovery, web-based tools that allow multiple entities to interact and share data in an accessible format is critical. The groundwork on these tools has already been set with innovations like www.trackyourrecovery.org by Horney et al. (2018), which allows users to input disaster recovery progress data and represents the much more connected future of disaster recovery. Paired with other new technologies like blockchain that protect information by storing it in a series of other information, thereby making unauthorized edits or

fraud impossible (Gupta, 2018), and the emergency management teams from government agencies, the private sector, and non-profit sector become able to interact in ways that would not have been otherwise possible. Incorporating modern technology is not a 'nice to have' kind of item; it is essential.

Things can quickly become unwieldy in the Washington, DC context, where the recovery plan includes 60 government departments, 29 non-governmental departments, 11 federal agencies, and eight regional organizations. These are in addition to an untold number of private sector businesses that have been identified as playing either a primary or supporting role in tasks ranging from health and human services to critical infrastructure (Homeland Security and Federal Emergency Management Agency, 2014). In reality, it is unfeasible to expect, at current levels of funding and interest, that the emergency management team who staff the District of Columbia's emergency management office can check in with the, for instance, Office of Cable Television to make sure that they can perform their critical infrastructure systems recovery tasks as defined in the document's Recovery Support Function Annex.

5.0 STRENGTHS OF THE CURRENT RECOVERY PLAN AND FUTURE RESEARCH

It would be unfair to characterize the District of Columbia Recovery Plan or the National Disaster Recovery Framework as all bad, and that is not the goal of this paper. Indeed, there is work to be done, but this is an excellent first step. Just in dealing with business recovery, let alone the other seven sections, recovery planners in Washington have begun to peer into the Zone of Uncertainty (Smith & Birkland, 2012) from the perspective of practitioners. A valuable exercise, if currently light on details. Future revisions of these documents should move beyond the emergency manager's office and seek to understand the unique features of the Washington, DC metro area to tailor recommendations and provide specific supports (Smith et al., 2018). As part of this, the National Disaster Recovery Framework should be expanded beyond its current scale as a simple

document to be an entire program. The Emergency Management Institute's three hour IS-2900.A: National Disaster Recovery Framework Overview could be part of this vision if it were expanded. As well, the inclusion of effective recovery plans from other districts that have had to use them, if those exist, would further aid in the quest for understanding and allow practitioners to understand better the direction they should be taking.

6.0 CONCLUSION

It is not just the President (or their Designated Survivor) who need to be kept in mind when planning for disaster recovery in Washington, DC. Businesses and other economic organizations, such as federal government agencies, need a technically innovative approach that uses modern tools to help them prepare, then one day, recover from a disaster. More than simple one-sentence pieces of guidance, this support should be critical and thought-provoking, encouraging planners to ask more profound questions about the nature of organizations in their District. The District Recovery Plan is a significant first step to understanding how organizations in Smith & Birkland's (2012) Zone of Uncertainty might interact with recovery, but as the field of recovery management develops, these ideas should become more nuanced and comprehensive.

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