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Giving Thanks for the Planners

By Catherine L. Feinman

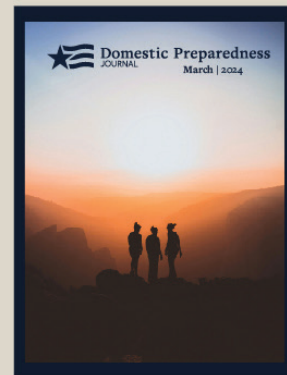
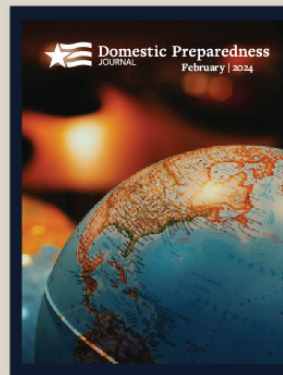
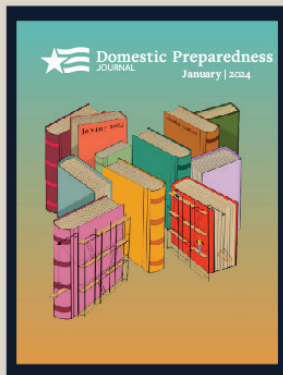
In the United States, the fourth Thursday of November is a time for families and friends to get together for their annual Thanksgiving Day celebrations. Some celebrate in small groups, while others gather en masse for parades, football games, and other events. While most people enjoy a day or more off work, these events require dedicated professionals and volunteers to ensure the safety of the participants before, during, and after festivities.

The Macy's Day parade in New York is one iconic celebration that requires extensive planning and security as it attracted over 3 million attendees in 2023. Preparedness professionals know that, when events like this go as planned, a lot of work went into the planning.

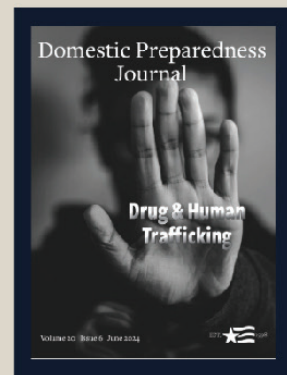
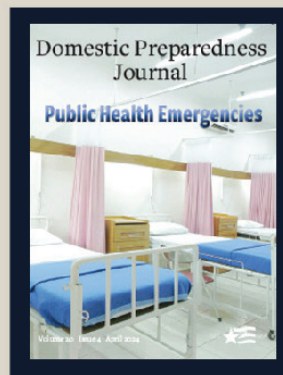
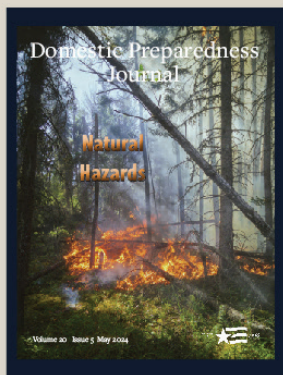
In this November edition of the *Domestic Preparedness Journal*, get a glimpse into securing New York City's largest events. In addition, this month's authors clarify misconceptions and realities of human trafficking, explain why messaging matters, share about self-care during deployments, and warn of threats that communities across the country may encounter.

This Thanksgiving, whether you are one of the millions of people who will be attending an event or one of the 30+ million who will be watching parades and football games at home, remember to give thanks for all those who are working behind the scenes to make these events safe and enjoyable. If you are one of the people who will be postponing your turkey dinner to keep others safe, your efforts are greatly appreciated!

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Photo courtesy New York City Office of Emergency Management.

A Look Behind Security Management at Two Iconic U.S. Holiday Celebrations

By Inés Bebea

For the past 10 years, McCharles Bouzy has started Thanksgiving Day at 3 a.m. outside Central Park in New York City (NYC). Each year, as the director of field response for New York City Emergency Management (NYCEM), Bouzy and a team of 25 citywide incident coordinators (CICs) join the event operations team comprised of members from the New York City Police Department (NYPD), NYC Department of Sanitation, and NYC Department of Transportation to walk the parade route one last time.

Thanksgiving Tradition of Event Security

The annual Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade attracts visitors worldwide to mark the beginning of the holiday season, where parade-goers cheer for and dance along floats, giant balloons of beloved characters, and musical acts. With over three million people in attendance in 2023, according to totals provided by NYPD Operations, the parade is one of the most significant planned events in New York City (see Table 1).

As a planned event, the parade requires coordination among agencies to prepare for the potential impacts of winter weather, the threat of a terrorist attack, protests, or other incidents. Using the Citywide Incident Management System as a blueprint for events and responses, NYCEM assists partner agencies and public and private companies to host public events. While preparing for upcoming planned events, Bouzy made the following observation:

We are a second set of eyes from the planning months prior to the execution the day of for any issues that may occur. Every agency sees the assignment only through their perspective and what their scope is. Through our preparation and collaboration, we have a broader picture of the events, a bird's eye view of the situation. We know the pros and cons, and as the coordinator agency, we can organize the resources necessary in the event of an incident.

NYC Event Attendance 2018 - 2023

	2018	2019	2021	2022	2023
Macy's Parade	1.9 million	2.2 million	1.2 million	1.6 million	3.2 million
Balloon Inflation	N/A	N/A	75,000	300,000	300,000
New Year's Eve	700,000	1.7 million	15,000	1.2 million	1.5 million

Table 1. Holiday Event Attendance in New York City (Source: New York Police Department).

The 2023 parade stands out for Bouzy because two incidents briefly disrupted the parade. The first – near 59th Street and 5th Avenue – was a group of pro-Palestinian supporters who jumped over the barricades and glued themselves to the street. Later that day, another group of protesters jumped over the barricades to protest the Israel-Gaza war. Bouzy reported:

As the advance team along the route, we notified the police department, and they responded very quickly. We prepare for all types of disturbances. During the incidents,

the floats were slowed down as the police removed the protesters from the street.

Lessons Learned

For large-scale events like the Thanksgiving Day Parade, New Year's Eve, and the Macy's 4th of July Fireworks, NYCEM builds contingency and multi-agency plans based on the previous year's events and lessons learned from a significant incident. For example, after incidents during the 1997 and 2005 parades, two mayoral task forces were created to review accidents and injuries. In 1997, the Cat in the Hat balloon hit a streetlamp, toppling it and injuring several spectators. Then,

in 2005, the M&M balloon became unstable along the route, with its ropes snagging a streetlamp, causing it to fall to the ground and injuring two spectators.

Kevin Clark, deputy director of the Response Support Unit/Public Safety for NYCEM, discussed preparations for the Thanksgiving Day Parade in a 2024 interview:

Even though we do this event every year, there is always an opportunity to learn something new.



Photo courtesy New York City Office of Emergency Management. (Left to right) New York City Emergency Management staff Executive Security John Saul; Special Events Coordinator Antonino Costas; Director of Field Response McCharles Bouzy; Commissioner Zach Iscol, Chief of Security Alex Lam during Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade.

For the last 15 years, we have applied [our] Citywide Incident Management System and the National Incident Management System (NIMS) to have a successful event. The key to success has three elements: interagency coordination, creating a plan, and executing the plan.

Crowd Communication

Just as important as having an emergency plan before an incident, communicating with the public before and during a planned event also plays a major role in its success. Ahead of the Thanksgiving Day Parade, NYCEM creates a Nixle code for parade-goers to receive free information about the event on their cell phones, including weather and mass transit disruptions. That information also includes the best locations to see balloon inflations, another large-scale event the night before the parade near the American Museum of Natural History. In 2023, according to NYPD Operations, over 300,000 visitors watched as new and old balloons had their last rehearsal.

Nixle is a messaging tool for large-scale events like the parade or New Year's Eve. With this tool, anyone can text 692-692 – or NYC NYC – to receive information about an event. The Nixle message is also available in Spanish. Nick Narine, director of public warning with NYCEM, described the messaging process in an interview ahead of the 2024 holiday season:

For the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, we start working with their production team about a month before. Our messages for the event start about 24 hours prior, to let people know how to gain access, what items not to bring, transportation, and weather information.

Weather is always a factor for large-scale events, especially for the Thanksgiving Day Parade and New Year's Eve, during which wind or cold temperatures can impact the event for planners and spectators. Wind in the forecast during the Thanksgiving Day Parade affects



Photos courtesy New York City Office of Emergency Management. 2023 Thanksgiving Day Parade floats traveling close to the ground due to high winds

how high or low the balloons are flown, as each balloon has different metrics for its required height and weight along the route. A windy day can impact how low a balloon can float without becoming a potential danger to spectators. To ensure the safety of spectators and other floats, each balloon team is assigned an NYPD officer to report any issues along the route.

Messaging for New Year's Eve can help visitors make informed wardrobe decisions, as many will arrive at Times Square in the middle of the afternoon for a very long winter



Photo courtesy New York City Office of Emergency Management. Ryan Seacrest hosting New Year's Eve in Times Square 2023

day outdoors. A public warning specialist is assigned to the incident command vehicle to assist with messaging in an emergency during all events. By being on the scene, Narine said the specialist could be part of the conversation with the other agencies represented, enabling them to send pre-drafted messages within minutes. Tom Harris, president of the Times Square Alliance, further stated in an October 2024 interview regarding the collaboration with NYCEM for New Year's Eve:

Each year, hundreds of thousands of revelers descend on the Crossroads of the World to celebrate New Year's Eve in Times Square. The success of this and any large-scale events is only possible with coordination, communication, cooperation, and collaboration between the city agencies, the community, and those attending the event. NYC Emergency Management plays a key role in all those elements.

The Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade and New Year's Eve are two large-scale events during the holiday season. Although not every event receives its own Nixle code, another messaging

option exists. Narine said visitors can sign up to [Notify NYC](#) while in New York City to receive alerts about weather, transportation, or any other potential impacts on their event. Notify NYC is New York City's free emergency alert system, available in 14 languages, including American Sign Language.

Many of the messages issued by NYCEM are initiated from the coordination between its Watch Command Unit and the CICs. Watch Command is the agency's 24/7 team that continuously monitors radio, television, social media, and scanners for any incident that could require a large response. During planned events, reports from the CICs provide situational awareness and what resources may be needed during an incident. In an interview a month before the parade, Watch Command Director Stacey Martinez said, "A successful Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade is great weather, having people go out to enjoy it, showing up with a sense of safety, and getting home safely to their loved ones."

Different Scale, Same Planning and Execution

For John Grimm, former assistant commissioner and deputy commissioner of operations with NYCEM and current deputy commissioner for logistics, events like New Year's Eve in Times Square are not just about the 1.5 million spectators who attended in 2023, according to NYPD. The event also has a stage for performers, with multiple national and international broadcasts simultaneously. The footprint may be smaller than the Thanksgiving parade, but it is managed with the same coordination, planning, and execution. Grimm observed ahead of 2024's holiday events that:

the New York City Police Department has different perimeters to control access so that people do not bring contraband or weapons, making it a safe day for everyone, from the performers to the live broadcast and the spectators.

Grimm said that contraband in the past was personal drones, which people attempted to fly above the crowds during the Thanksgiving Day Parade. Through a collaboration between NYCEM, NYPD, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the response teams monitored the skies for any drones near the area and any potential dangers they may cause. "Private drones can injure people if they were designed to do bad things and fly over an area where there are a lot of people," added Grimm.



Inés Bebea is the deputy press secretary for the New York City Emergency Management Department (NYCEM). NYCEM helps New Yorkers prepare, respond to, and recover from emergencies. Prior to joining the agency, Ines worked in a public information role with the Kings County District Attorney's Office and held various reporting and editing positions with NBC, France 24, and The Network Journal. Ines was born and raised in Madrid, Spain.

With New Year's Eve also on his work schedule for 2024, Bouzy is hoping that, unlike 2023, spectators will not enter the "frozen zone" where emergency vehicles are parked during planned events. The frozen zone extends from 42nd to 49th Streets and 5th to 8th Avenues. Just as the Times Square event ended in 2023, a large group removed barricades and flooded an area of the frozen zone. In an emergency, the crowd could have made response times much longer. He concluded:

We really try to plan for every possible incident during an event. What's fun about planned events is that, after months of planning, everything comes together. We start planning shortly after it finishes, and the public doesn't realize how many moving parts there are. If the public doesn't see us, it's a good thing.

Participants can contribute to event success with their own emergency plan:

- Speak with a loved one about knowing what to do in the event of an emergency.
- Discuss a meeting location with a fellow attendee in the event of separation.
- Always have a fully charged cell phone.

As New Yorkers and holiday revelers around the world prepare to enjoy outdoor festivities during the holiday season, an emergency plan is essential to event success. When the public doesn't notice emergency management's moving parts during an event, it's been a success.



Source: [LeArchitecto](#)/Adobe Stock

The Nexus Between Major Events and Human Trafficking

By Madeline Mann and Lindsey Lane

Human trafficking a crime involving the “use of force, fraud, or coercion to compel an individual to work or to engage in a commercial sex act.” Human trafficking is the world’s second-largest criminal industry, with an estimated annual revenue of more than \$246 billion. For years, human trafficking has been associated with major events like the Super Bowl or Comic Con. While there is no data firmly supporting a nexus between major events and an increase in human trafficking, the full scope of the problem is largely unknown. This article examines why major events are linked to human trafficking and suggests best practices for communities to combat it during and after such events.

Examining Increased Demand

The National Football League (NFL) is arguably America’s favorite sports league, with viewership significantly higher than any other sports league in the country. Over 20 million people tuned in to watch the first game of the 2024 NFL season, and in-person attendance last season exceeded 90,000 at a single game. Although there is no evidence to suggest the number of victims of human

trafficking increases during major events like the Super Bowl, large crowds at such events are often linked to an increase in demand for commercial sex.

Similar to other industries, the crime of human trafficking – particularly commercial sex trafficking – is driven by supply and demand. Studies indicate that demand for commercial sex is primarily driven by male buyers with incomes exceeding \$100,000 per year. While Super Bowl attendees may fit this demographic, data linking major events directly to an increased demand for commercial sex remains inconclusive.

A team of researchers from Carnegie Mellon University, acknowledging the challenge in accurately measuring the impact of a large event on human trafficking, analyzed fluctuations in online sex advertisements with the assumption such advertisements are directly related to fluctuations in sex trafficking (i.e., when more advertisements are posted, more trafficking occurs). The researchers assessed over 30 large-scale public events – chosen for attendance levels comparable to the Super Bowl – and reviewed the volume of online escort or sex advertisements targeting

the respective areas where the events took place between 2011 and 2016. They determined that most of the large-scale events assessed were not associated with a significant increase in posted sex-work advertising.

In a more recent study, researchers reviewed trends in online sex advertisements, specifically in [Florida](#), during the 2020 and 2021 Super Bowls. In addition to hosting [more](#) Super Bowls than any other state, Florida has reported the third largest number of calls to the [National Human Trafficking Hotline](#) since 2013. Like the study described above, researchers reviewed the fluctuation of online sex advertisements with the assumption that such advertisements are directly related to trafficking. The study [concluded](#) that there was a “significant uptick” in online sex advertisements around the 2020 and 2021 Super Bowls. While the study confirms an uptick in ads, it also notes that it does not clearly establish a direct connection between the Super Bowl and increased trafficking because of the “[unquantifiable number of fake ads](#) that are commonly placed by law enforcement officials and anti-trafficking organizations to derail criminal activity.”

Providing a Spotlight on the Issue

Given the large number of fans who watch and attend the Super Bowl and other major events, the NFL and other organizations provide a great opportunity to raise awareness about human trafficking.

As indicated by recent reports from [It’s a Penalty](#), an organization that runs human trafficking awareness campaigns around major events, “public education and awareness campaigns play a vital role in increasing public understanding of child safeguarding and protection from abuse and exploitation.” For the Las Vegas Super Bowl last year, It’s a Penalty launched a survivor-focused campaign

aiming to combat human trafficking and exploitation. The campaign rolled out around Las Vegas ahead of the Super Bowl, and 73% of people surveyed indicated the campaign raised their awareness of how to report suspected human trafficking and sexual exploitation.

Shining a spotlight on human trafficking raises awareness not only during major events but also in everyday life. Greater awareness increases the likelihood of communities actively responding to the crime.

Everyday Best Practices for Combating Human Trafficking

It is still unknown whether large events cause an increase in human trafficking. However, one thing is certain: Human trafficking is a pervasive issue that occurs daily in communities across the United States. Awareness campaigns and enforcement efforts surrounding major events help provide a spotlight on the issue. Organizations and individuals can use this momentum to implement best practices to combat trafficking within their communities every day.

The first step is education. While many agencies offer human trafficking training – some of which is [mandated by state law](#) – recent studies show that training for [law enforcement](#) is uneven and, in some areas, nonexistent. Additionally, [less than half](#) of emergency medical services (EMS) workers surveyed have received training on the topic. Through education, communities can better understand how vulnerable populations are targeted by traffickers and recognize what factors, such as major events, can lead to the exploitation of those populations.

Based on available information from [federal criminal human trafficking cases](#) filed in 2023, the primary vulnerabilities for minor victims of trafficking are being a runaway (51.5%), in foster care (21%), a previous victim (18%),

or financially insecure (15%). For adults, vulnerabilities include drug or substance abuse (51.6%), undocumented status (34%), financial insecurity (34%), being a runaway or homeless (25%), or previous victimization (23%). It is important to keep in mind that a victim may be vulnerable to trafficking for more than one reason, and their vulnerabilities may not be easily identifiable.

Adequate training and education empower communities to proactively combat trafficking daily. If not already established, communities should implement anti-trafficking training for frontline workers that emphasizes:

- Legal definitions of human trafficking
- The signs and indicators of human trafficking
- Local trafficking statistics
- At-risk population(s)
- Methods of recruitment, control, and coercion
- Common trafficking settings
- Proper communication techniques with potential victims

Communities should also develop and implement daily processes and procedures for reporting and responding to human trafficking. Simply identifying the problem without establishing proper response protocols is not only ineffective but can also exacerbate the issue. Frontline workers and those working with vulnerable populations, as described above, should know how to report suspected trafficking – either through the [National Human Trafficking Hotline](#) or by calling 911 to reach local law enforcement. Additionally, communities should ensure that frontline workers and practitioners are

familiar with [local service providers](#) to address the needs of victims once identified. As with other emergency situations, well-established processes and procedures are essential for an effective response to trafficking. There are several action steps communities can take to proactively combat trafficking:

Communities can develop [toolkits](#) with targeted outreach materials, policies, and contact information tailored to the specific needs of the community. These toolkits can help ensure that frontline workers know how



Source: [Siam](#)/Adobe Stock

to recognize signs of trafficking and steps to take in response.

Promote public awareness campaigns not only during major events but year-round, including [common phrases](#) or tactics used by traffickers. These campaigns can target events or timeframes that present increased risks to vulnerable populations, such as [before and during disasters](#). This information should be posted in hotels, motels, and

relevant event spaces to ensure it reaches the at-risk population.

Increase enforcement of human-trafficking laws to stop traffickers, protect victims, and deter future instances of trafficking in the community. Enforcement efforts may include operations to identify and recover potential victims, or to arrest and prosecute traffickers. Effective law enforcement action is an indispensable element of government efforts to fight human trafficking. When the risk to participating in crime is increased, the willingness to engage in criminal activity declines.

Conclusion

While the nexus between major events and an increase in human trafficking remains

inconclusive, the issue itself is undeniable. Human trafficking is a pervasive crime that affects millions of individuals across the United States every day. The visibility of major events, such as the Super Bowl, provides a unique opportunity to raise awareness and mobilize communities in the fight against trafficking. By prioritizing education, establishing effective response protocols, and promoting year-round awareness campaigns, communities can better protect vulnerable populations and combat trafficking in all its forms. The efforts made during these major events should serve as a catalyst for ongoing vigilance and proactive action to address human trafficking every day.



Madeline Mann is a third-year law student at University of Missouri – Kansas City School of Law. Prior to law school, Madeline had an impactful career in public safety as a firefighter, paramedic, and arson investigator with Gwinnett County Fire and Emergency Services in Georgia. Her experiences in this field fueled her passion for criminal justice, ultimately leading her to pursue a legal education. During her time in law school, Madeline has gained significant experience as a legal intern at the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the District of Kansas, where she worked on a variety of criminal cases and presented at the annual District of Kansas Conference. Madeline began working at the Platte County Prosecuting Attorney’s Office in her second year and continues to manage bench trials and assist with felony jury trials. This past summer, Madeline worked as a summer associate for Armstrong Teasdale in their Litigation Practice Group. Madeline’s passion for combating human trafficking was sparked by her frontline experiences in public safety, where she now recognizes missed opportunities to assist trafficking victims.



As director of strategic engagement, Lindsey Lane leads the Human Trafficking Institute’s Strategic Engagement program, including authorship of the Federal Human Trafficking Report (FHTR), strategic training, and the Frederick Douglass Fellowship. As the lead author and architect of FHTR, Lindsey oversees the collection and analysis of data extracted from federal human trafficking cases filed in the federal court system each year, and briefs government agencies and key stakeholders on the findings and emerging trends to help improve the federal response to human trafficking. Using her extensive experience as a former prosecutor, Lindsey harnesses the power of data to train law enforcement officers, prosecutors, and key stakeholders to effectively investigate and prosecute human trafficking cases. Lindsey has dual bachelor’s degrees in international relations and history from Salem Women’s College and a juris doctorate from Liberty University School of Law.



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Photo courtesy of Sutherlin (February 2020).

Why Messaging Matters: A Regionalized Approach to Alerts and Warnings

By Soraya Sutherlin

On February 18, 2015, an explosion at the ExxonMobil Refinery in Torrance, California, released toxic catalytic dust into the atmosphere, exposing 250,000 residents or more during peak daytime hours. Flying debris narrowly avoided hitting a tank that contained tens of thousands of pounds of highly toxic modified hydrofluoric acid (MHF). The explosion registered 1.6 on the Richter scale, and many residents initially mistook the explosion for an earthquake. The U.S. Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board later classified the incident as a “near miss” due to the potential catastrophe an MHF release could have caused.

The confluence of federal, state, and local agencies complicated the response as questions about radioactive material

and a potential terrorism nexus were left unaddressed without agency coordination. The city’s police and fire departments struggled to establish unified command, issuing alerts independently. In January 2015, the Office of Emergency Services began the conversion and implementation of a new alerting software onto a different platform. The system had not been fully integrated at the time of the explosion, and different departments defaulted to past practices. An internal alert was sent using the new system out of the city manager’s office at 9:11 a.m. that an incident had occurred at the refinery, then again at 9:30 a.m. The first was an alert that an incident had occurred, and the second was a shelter-in-place advisory to employees through the new system. This was the new protocol for initial alerts. However, what transpired was contradictory messaging

when the police department issued a NIXLE alert to the public at 9:47 a.m., informing the community of no air quality issues. This was largely because the watch commander had responded to the refinery and was interacting directly with the incident commander, not the emergency management staff responsible for issuing the alerts. At this time, NIXLE was not fully integrated into the new alerting platform.

First responders made personal calls to the nearby school district advising them to keep kids inside for physical education out of an abundance of caution. The uncertain situation worsened as ash began to fall from the sky. A fog of confusion blanketed the city, and Torrance's Office of Emergency Services discovered critical flaws in its emergency communication and alert systems.

A shelter-in-place order was issued in response to the indisputability of a developing situation. Widespread winds spread the ash – later identified as toxic catalytic dust – across city lines and into several neighboring cities in the South Bay region. The shelter-in-place order issued to Torrance residents was largely ineffective due to three main issues:

1. No clear lines of authority were established for the approval of messaging within a unified command structure;
2. The outdated telecommunications infrastructure that supports landlines was outdated and unable to handle the sheer volume of calls being pushed in the area, which hindered

the city's ability to deliver timely notifications; and

3. The city's alert system could not reach residents beyond its jurisdiction, so interoperability became a central concern.

In addition, the public was confused about what shelter-in-place means, as the Torrance Office of Emergency Services witnessed by phone calls and in-person comments at city council meetings. Following a 1989 explosion at a Torrance refinery that caused significant loss of life, a court-mandated alert and warning initiative was implemented to inform residents about refinery incidents, including public education on the meaning of these alerts. Even with the implementation of local public education initiatives, widespread confusion plagues the public due to inconsistent use of terms like “shelter-in-place” and “lockdown,” which are often used interchangeably but have distinct meanings. Common terminology in emergency communications is necessary, and public education should mirror this terminology nationwide.

The fragmented nature of local alert systems highlighted during this event is still a pressing public safety issue today. Disasters do not respect borders, and communication must be able to transcend them. That event profoundly shifted the city's perspective on needing a more integrated approach to alerts and warnings. In the aftermath of the disaster, the limitations of existing emergency alert systems became clearer. Headlines across the country continue to highlight the difficulties in coordinating timely, clear, and consistent alerts due to

a lack of understanding about alerts and warnings, a lack of policy- and decision-making, and the power dynamics that can happen within government organizations.

Delays, confusion, and lack of clarity often frustrate the public and can cost lives. During the fires in Lahaina, Maui, Hawaii, residents had little to no warning of a fast, wind-driven brushfire, and [102 people died](#). It was not the first time that had happened and, unfortunately, it will not be the last. Furthermore, accountability for these issues often falls on the local emergency manager, who is not always trained, notified, or the one with the ultimate authority to send the message. So, the central question remains: Can a standardized system and operational procedures be developed to ensure that emergency communications reach the right person at the right time with the right message so they know what to do?

Delegation of Authority and Interoperability

The lessons of the 2015 refinery explosion necessitated a reliable, coordinated emergency alert system. The South Bay region of Los Angeles County, home to nearly 900,000 residents and five major [petroleum refineries](#), faces significant risks from natural and human-caused disasters. In response, the [Alert SouthBay](#) system launched in March 2020. This regionalized approach integrates emergency communication across 14 cities, using public messaging platforms to deliver real-time alerts. It enables cross-jurisdictional messaging, delegating the alerting authority to the jurisdiction where the incident unfolds. This allows alerts to reach beyond city boundaries when necessary, under the regional standard operating procedures.

This regional model is built around larger statewide initiatives while addressing South Bay's specific needs for lateral authorities:

- *Challenges* – Everyone must agree to the same platform and funding. An agency must be willing to host a regionalized program or set up a governance. There also must be agreement on operations, how alerts will be issued, the frequency of training, and who will oversee the program.
- *Best Practices*:
 - Know the community when it comes to the relationship they have with their governments.
 - Build trust before incidents occur.
 - Gain buy-in from all the stakeholders.
 - Work with local city council members because they can be good advocates for these programs.
 - Bring councils into the conversation early to build an understanding of how systems work and how they can help amplify the program to the community.
 - Reduce the cost to cities by regionalizing systems, standardize training and marketing, and integrate operational procedures across all agencies. This provides cost savings and consistent messaging.

Under a common operating picture, every city is trained to the same standard for issuing alerts and warnings and has the authority to laterally and cross-jurisdictionally notify residents, regardless of city boundaries. Put

simply, those in the impacted area will be alerted. But this system does not just operate on its own. The program is run by an alert and warning administrator, a task force of all participating cities, and a board of directors. There are quarterly training requirements, testing proficiency requirements, and an off-hours duty officer for multi-jurisdictional alerts. In April 2023, its governance was formalized under a joint powers authority. The joint powers authority provides each city the statute notifying each other's residents, thus creating a streamlined process for message approval, dissemination, and interoperability within the region.

A Regional Alert System Put to the Test

However, two weeks after the Alert SouthBay system's launch, the COVID-19 pandemic forced the entire region into crisis management. The newly established joint information center was instrumental in coordinating public messaging across all 14 cities. During the pandemic, the center issued 56 regional messages, providing a unified voice that addressed public concerns and confusion. Feedback from three regional community-wide surveys administered to all 14 cities confirmed the value of this coordinated approach: It was clear, concise, and consistent. Additionally, this was presented at city council meetings for each city to discuss the program and the survey results and to solicit feedback from community members.

Since the pandemic, the Alert SouthBay system has been used for major events, including the 2022 Super Bowl and Tropical Storm Hilary in 2023, as well as other natural and man-made disasters. In February 2024, the Rancho Palos Verdes Peninsula experienced [extraordinary land movement](#), which was

“part of a [larger complex](#) of ancient landslides [and] ... reactivated in 1956 by Los Angeles County's planned extension.” The region was no stranger to land movement, but a series of heavy storms began shifting the land up to 10 inches a week, severing gas lines, pulling power poles apart, and creating fissures through properties 50 feet deep. As a result, residents were issued an evacuation warning due to the instability of the land. The Alert SouthBay system was utilized to ensure interoperability and one-voice messaging with all the utility providers, government agencies, and private contractors. See Figure 1 for an example of the message.

Effective Communication, Interoperability, Infrastructure Challenges, and Scalability

Despite these advancements, the role of the alerting authority is as important as it has ever been. Every year, disasters make headlines due to the lack of emergency communications and the effects on the community. Managing alerts requires constant attention to timing, clarity, and public reaction. The lessons from the 2015 refinery explosion have reshaped emergency communications at the local and national levels, driving the development of regionalized alert systems like Alert SouthBay.

Effective emergency communication must be more than just the output of information. It must deliver clear, actionable instructions, delivered by multiple modalities. During the 2015 incident, alerts and warnings were distributed using landline phones only. This proved greatly problematic as landline infrastructure could not handle the volume of simultaneous calls. As a result, it took over eight hours to deliver the voice notifications,

hours after the shelter-in-place order had been lifted.

Learning from this mishap, in 2017, the author (Sutherlin) developed the IDA Message Mapping Diagram with a framework to ensure that alerts address three key elements: impact, disruption, and action (IDA). This tool helps emergency managers create precise messages and determine the appropriate scale for alert delivery. Not every alert requires a phone call. The scalability needed to be worked through before pushing the button. The diagram below outlines a simple framework for quick decision-making when determining not just what should be sent and how, but whether the message should be sent at all. For instance, a message may be more appropriate for a social media post rather than a large broadcast to an entire community.

A Look Forward

As emergency management continues to evolve, regionalized and standardized alerting systems are essential to address the growing complexity of disasters. The 2015 refinery explosion revealed critical gaps in alert systems, especially in densely populated, disaster-prone regions like the South Bay.

While significant progress has been made – evidenced by initiatives like Alert SouthBay – many challenges remain. The stakes are high, with larger-scale events like the 2028 Olympics and the increasing frequency of extreme weather and industrial risks on the horizon.

To truly safeguard communities, advancing emergency communications requires more than incremental changes. Effective, timely, and unified communication across jurisdictions is essential to saving lives. The 2015 ExxonMobil refinery explosion and recent strides with the Alert SouthBay system highlight the urgent need for coordinated, cross-jurisdictional alerting. Emergency managers, public safety officials, and policymakers must come together to prioritize a fully integrated alerting system – it is no longer a luxury but a life-and-death necessity. This means rethinking how emergency alerts are structured and delivered, expanding beyond local levels to a national scope. A unified approach is not merely aspirational; it is indispensable for the future of public safety.



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Source: [Alliance](#)/Adobe Stock

Advice for Surviving a Disaster: Be Selfish and Small-Minded

By David C. Williams II

In the base camp of my fifth federally declared disaster deployment this year, I sit surrounded by the sounds of colleagues crawling in and out of bunks in this converted semi-trailer. I find myself reflecting on a friend's recent question: "How can I best help in a disaster?" My answer might be surprising: be selfish and small-minded.

Taking an Inward Focus

That advice might sound counterintuitive. In this line of work, though, emergency responders are here to help communities on the worst days of their lives. It is easy to get so absorbed in the mission that the basics of self-care are forgotten or overlooked. However, without self-care, it is difficult to fully help anyone else. So, "be selfish" really means listening to one's own body and responding to what it needs. When thirsty, get a drink. Hungry? Grab a bite. Tired? Take a break. However, self-care is not just about self; it

is about being in the best possible shape to help others.

By practicing self-care, it becomes easier to expand that "selfishness" to others. For example, if one person is thirsty, chances are others are too. Getting a drink is a reminder to grab drinks for others as well. This simple act of self-care ensures everyone is staying hydrated and energized to tackle the challenges that lie ahead. Modeling self-care actions can help others feel more comfortable taking care of themselves. So, be selfish. Take a moment for self-checks. Then, use that assessment as a reminder to check in with the rest of the team. This process is one of the simplest, most powerful ways to stay effective when the days are long, and the work is hard. The following are ways to practice self-care during a deployment:

- *Bring Comfort Food and Drinks:* Packing familiar snacks and beverages can provide comfort and ease on tough days.

- *Prioritize Quality Sleep:* Bring quality sheets, pillows, earplugs, travel fan, and an eye mask. Rest is crucial, whether sleeping in a car, trailer, or conference room.
- *Communicate Honestly:* When feeling overwhelmed, share feelings with the team. Open communication fosters

Tackling the Small Stuff

Disasters are overwhelming by nature. They create big problems that demand big solutions, which often take time. Paradoxically, being small-minded, or, focusing on the small things, can make all the difference in the motivation of the responders and community members. A recent deployment involved a flood-ravaged community without water, sewer, or power.



Source: [montblanca/Adobe Stock](#)

support and may help others feel the same way.

- *Take a Moment for Reflection:* When appropriate, step away to appreciate the local community. A moment of reflection can provide a fresh perspective and a sense of calm.

These are overwhelming problems and fixing them takes weeks or months.

However, during that deployment, there was one tiny task that could be handled right away. A table had been displaced by the flood, blocking a parking spot. It took two people all of three minutes to move it back. Sure, it did not restore the community's power grid, but

opening that spot removed one small obstacle from the locals' day. At that moment, there was a visible sign of progress, a small step toward normalcy.

Focusing on these “small” tasks creates immediate, tangible wins that provide motivation and help maintain momentum. Seeing these changes and making a difference for the community, even in small ways, motivates all involved. Disasters can be daunting, but focusing on tiny victories can offer responders and those around them the motivation to keep pressing forward. Following are examples of small tasks that have a significant impact:

- *Clean Along the Way:* Sweeping sidewalks or tidying entryways at public buildings can bring a sense of normalcy and hope.
- *Listen to Locals:* Conversations with community members can offer comfort and show solidarity.
- *Clear Debris in Common Areas:* Removing small debris from gathering spots

helps make these spaces feel safe and welcoming again.

- *Restore Simple Amenities:* Fixing minor damages, like broken benches or lights, can greatly improve community spirit and resilience.
- *Replace Damaged Symbols:* Restoring these items, such as flags and signs, can boost community morale and foster a sense of pride.

Making a Difference

In the field during a response, remember to be selfish enough to practice self-care, and think small enough to find and celebrate little wins. Future disasters will keep testing communities and the responders who come to their aid. Staying selfish and thinking small better equips responders to make a big difference when it matters most. After all, there is a good lesson in the saying that the only way to eat an elephant is one bite at a time. Adding to that lesson, do not forget to savor every bite along the way.



David C. Williams II is the Incident Support Task Force disaster finance coordinator of Region 8 at the Texas Division of Emergency Management (TDEM). He holds a bachelor's degree in business management and brings over a decade of experience in finance and disaster management across federal, state, and local government roles. His career began as a contractor with the U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development Voucher Program, where he oversaw the execution of rental assistance across the United States. David served eight years on the Nolanville, Texas, city council after leading as vice chairman and chairman of the Charter Review Committee and the Planning and Zoning Committee, respectively. He was also the first city manager of Kempner, Texas. Currently, he supports local fire departments with reimbursements and teaching T-600

Disaster Accounting Basics 101. David has participated in responses to six federally declared disasters, including fires, floods, hurricanes, and severe weather across the United States. Additionally, he is chairman of the board of directors for Fort Hood Area Habitat for Humanity, where he has served as a dedicated board member for three years. He has completed FEMA's Emergency Management Basic Academy and the Advanced Professional Series, bringing small-town experience and a local government perspective to state- and federal-level disaster recovery efforts.



Source: [Gorodenkoff](#)/Adobe Stock

A Violent Surge: Sovereign Citizens vs. Government Authority

By Anthony “Tony” Mottola and
Richard Schoeberl

Research has indicated that over the past several years, threats posed by extremists have surged in the United States. One concerning extremist movement is the Sovereign Citizens (SovCits), whose ideology often overlaps with other extremist groups. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has classified this movement as a domestic terrorist threat and one of its “top threats,” chiefly because it poses a threat to law enforcement agencies, due to a history of violence and illegal activities.

Basics of the SovCits Movement

Originating in the U.S., the SovCits movement encompasses a diverse anti-government worldview. Outside of the U.S., they have been tracked in Canada, the United Kingdom, Scotland, the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, New Zealand, and South Africa. The conviction of adherents is that they are subject to illegitimate control by the U.S. government. They operate under the supposition that, since they proclaimed themselves “sovereign,” they are exempt from following U.S. law or

paying taxes. According to the FBI, the SovCits threat will likely only grow as the nationwide movement continues to be powered by the internet and the economic downturn.

Although this ideology has taken many different forms, modern interpretations usually associate it with extreme and conspiratorial ideologies. In the current era of widespread conspiracy-mongering, this once-dismissed outlying movement has found an expanding following. Some noteworthy social and psychological factors, such as stress, life-altering events, isolation, anger, hostility, and depression, are causing Americans to become more prone to embrace extremist ideologies like this movement.

One key factor appears to be a strong sense of uncertainty in today’s climate. Social media has exacerbated feelings of uncertainty, partially since ideas can now be shared instantly with minimum effort, which can be destabilizing. Moreover, the human brain does not generally like uncertainty, which can cause individuals to seek a pathway to feeling more certain and

assured by any means possible. Conspiracy theories can counter that uncertainty, and more people are [gravitating](#) toward them.

SovCits do not acknowledge federal, state, or municipal laws, rules, or governmental restrictions and instead view the government as operating outside their jurisdiction. SovCits' beliefs have [become more popular](#) in national contexts in recent years post-9/11. Rapid changes in technology, major swings in the job market, the economy, the COVID-19 [pandemic](#), and more have caused many Americans to feel unanchored. Anti-government feelings were further strengthened with the [COVID-19](#) enforcement and the government's response to civil protests. The recent developments concerning immigration and anti-gun legislation have sparked [renewed vigor](#) within the movement, as have the events of January 6, 2021. An increasing number of QAnon adherents are [adopting](#) the SovCits' beliefs as well.

SovCits are not [mentally ill, confused, or misled](#). They are convinced of their beliefs. This conviction creates a situation where extremism can flourish. To distinguish differences between ideological groups, the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism ([START](#)) analyzed "a database of 2,226 Islamist, far-left, far-right, and single-issue extremists who have radicalized to violent and non-violent extremism in the United States from 1948 through 2018." According to that research, almost 30% of all far-right extremists are estimated to be either current or former members of the SovCits movement, anti-government groups, or militia, or have expressed strong anti-government views. SovCits tend not

to operate as a group or even have an established leadership hierarchy. [SovCits](#) act independently or in loosely connected factions that organize for training, assist with paperwork, and socialize based on the SovCits ideology. Much akin to other extremist groups today, because SovCits are [decentralized](#) and have "no identifiable leaders, no existing organization and no infrastructure to disrupt," identification and prevention are a formidable task for law enforcement.

Historical Background

The origins of the SovCits philosophy can be traced to the white supremacist organization "[Posse Comitatus](#)" (power of the country) in the early 1970s. The anti-government group was founded by racist and antisemitic political militia who believed that government agencies were violating the civil rights of white people. Members of the group held the view that American counties and their sheriffs constituted the supreme power in the country and were in charge of shielding the populace from the federal government. SovCits believed that the only real legislative code for the people of the United States was "[common law](#)," which is often derived from [religious readings](#) rather than government legislation. Furthermore, they [deem](#) the Uniform Commercial Code (UCC), which governs commercial transactions in the U.S. and interstate standards, will protect them while operating a vehicle without registration and without a valid driver's license.

Precise [numbers](#) of SovCits can be challenging to obtain. However, estimates suggest there are between 100,000 and 300,000 SovCits in the U.S. alone. One of the fastest-growing SovCits groups since the 1990s is the [Moorish](#) (also

known as Moors or Muurs) organization. The Moorish Science Temple of America (MSTA), a religious faction, was established in 1913 and has certain sovereign beliefs through self-governing based on indigenous rights. The leaders of MSTA have attempted to separate themselves from those claiming to be SovCits Moors who have committed violent crimes. There are anywhere between 3,000 and 6,200 [Moorish](#) SovCits, but likely more, in the U.S.

Beliefs

The theory of sovereign citizenship is based on the claim that the U.S. government is not legally in charge of U.S. citizens. Although some SovCits disagree, the majority believe that admiralty law (law of the sea and international commerce) superseded the common law legal system established by the founding fathers. Depending on the SovCits group, these changes supposedly occurred either in 1933 when the United States abandoned the gold standard ([Redemption Theory](#)) or during the American Civil War (1861-1865). Moorish SovCits, however, believe they are immune from the law, as they were the first to settle in the U.S.

They adhere to one of the [most commonly accepted](#) beliefs that an evil plot replaced the original lawful government with an illegitimate, despotic, de facto government more than a century ago. They might identify as “constitutionalists” or “[freemen](#),” which does not necessarily imply membership in a particular organization but rather denotes their independence from governmental authority.

Another ideology of the movement is to adopt a fake identity known as a “[straw man](#),” which is essentially a pseudo-legal name that is used for court filing and fraudulent

documents. Once individuals are schooled in this belief, they take action to separate from the “illegitimate” government and become SovCits. The illegitimate government no longer has any authority over them, and the U.S. government’s laws, rules, regulations, taxes, and courts are effectively nullified. As a result, a lot of SovCits’ document identifiers serve to prove the person’s sovereignty and to put them at odds with the government they believe to be unjust. The documentary identifiers are consequently related to establishing the person as a sovereign and creating separation between them and the government.

Activities of SovCits

SovCits have been identified in several different religious and ethnic organizations, such as [Montana Freeman](#), [Embassy of Heaven](#), [Moorish Nation](#), and [Washitaw Nation](#), to name a few. However, many believe in the SovCits ideology but are not affiliated with any particular group. Although autonomous in their activities, they maintain the same views as the formal organizations: that the U.S. government, courts, and law enforcement are illegitimate. Those individuals also retain a common-law identity, exempting them from the authority of those fraudulent government institutions.

Tactics

SovCits typically engage in the act of filing or providing frivolous pseudo-legal claims and documents, known as “[paper terrorism](#).” This tactic impacts governments and public agencies, but also the private industry (e.g., banks and corporations). They can harm these agencies by inundating their opponents with litigation and legal claims in the form of copious amounts of paperwork. A volume of frivolous legal filings soon follows if

government agencies confront them through summons, fines, and arrests.

False liens on property are frequently filed by SovCits against public servants, unsuspecting landlords, and homeowners to cause financial harm. Paper terrorism, which includes frivolous litigation or filings and false liens, is intended to consume costly time for agencies and as a scare tactic so they will succumb to SovCits' demands. SovCits will attempt to control a traffic stop by compelling law enforcement officers to release them from legal jargon, or public and private agencies to heed their demands with an immediate resolution or plea bargain. Although they are not often victorious in state criminal court, they will try to clog the court dates with their pointless legal filings.

Violence

In addition to challenging authority and government employees, SovCits have used [violence against law enforcement](#), public authorities, and other government figures. They may use violence to defend their beliefs, especially when confronted for identification at traffic stops, law enforcement stations, and courthouses. According to [research](#), their views, extreme in nature, are fundamentally not indicative of disordered thought. Some SovCits are motivated to commit violence for various reasons, although evidence suggests that most are not mentally ill or delusional.

In 2024, between the months of March and August, six officers (one killed and five injured) were [shot](#) by SovCits. On August 30, 2024, a Dallas [police officer was assassinated](#) while sitting in his patrol car by someone later identified as a member of the SovCits movement. The subject also shot at two

responding officers with a shotgun, [blinding](#) one officer and injuring the other in the leg. Responding officers later shot and killed the subject after a police pursuit.

Key Indicators

These shootings demonstrate the kind of violence people involved in this movement can exhibit, and the pattern of behavior underlines the deep challenges and inherent dangers officers face when engaging with SovCits. Law enforcement agencies need to develop department guidelines for frontline supervisors and patrol officers when confronted with a SovCits incident (e.g., traffic stop, inside a government building, or squatting situation).

It is important to realize SovCits' tactics to intimidate and even harass law enforcement, the courts, and other government officials. There are several [indicators](#) law enforcement may observe when making contact with someone from the SovCits movement:

- Vehicle license plates are completely and visibly fraudulent. Often, they refer to the “republic” of a given state or have the word “sovereign” on the plate itself.
- The individual stopped will present massive paperwork when prompted for a license request, often unrelated to the identification request. Documents are designed to frustrate, confuse, and, most dangerously, distract law enforcement.
- The individual will not refer to their vehicle as a “vehicle,” often referring to it as their “conveyance.” There are no legal requirements for a conveyance. This is often used to subvert the vehicle code restrictions and attempt to avoid

responsibility in the given state's vehicle code.

- The individual will often refer to the 14th Amendment (or the UCC) during a traffic stop, as they believe the amendment transitioned SovCits to federal citizens. They believe that once the U.S. adopted the 14th Amendment, it became a corporation.
- Law enforcement may receive a bill for the time they have spent with the individual, or they may discover liens on their homes, unknown until they attempt to sell, having fallen victim to “paper terrorism.”

Best Practices for First Responders

For most police officers, the traffic stop will be the most likely way they encounter someone from this movement. Traffic stops can be particularly dangerous for law enforcement because SovCits often will not comply with law enforcements' basic commands. On occasion, this can lead to violence. These encounters are far from routine due to the distinctive ideology of the movement. SovCits are often offended and become agitated and angry when stopped by law enforcement, as they deem the stop to be illegal and a waste of their time.

The following are best-practice recommendations for departmental guidelines when engaging with SovCits:

- Immediately call for backup. SovCits can become argumentative, combative, and non-cooperative, and they have a propensity for violence.
- Notify the supervisor even if it is just suspected that a traffic stop or pedestrian encounter involves a SovCit.
- When a traffic stop is initiated, avoid handling unnecessary documents to keep hands free.
- Avoid political or legal arguments.
- Focus on informing people about the violation and its progression to criminal actions.
- Know that SovCits will demand officers prove jurisdiction and will refuse to answer questions.
- Be vigilant, as they record or live-stream traffic and pedestrian stops.
- Be aware that SovCits often film their law enforcement encounters, and they are well-versed in laws of filming in public and private areas. They also could alert additional SovCits individuals through a “calling tree” (quick spread of information through transmission).
- Maintain professional control of the traffic stop (regardless of the subject's behavior). SovCits will insist they “do not consent” to the actions of law enforcement.

Although contact with this movement does not always lead to violence, it is important to remember that the movement's illegal activities and violent history against law enforcement demand caution and shrewdness. It is imperative that law enforcement is mindful of the movement's tactics so that agencies can warn the public of their possible scams, identify illegal activity, and comprehend its potential severity.

To prepare law enforcement officials for the risks associated with extremist groups, like members of the SovCits movement, agencies need to review and likely revise

policies, procedures, and training to more effectively handle encounters with SovCits. Given law enforcement's routine contact with SovCits and the inherent danger posed by the movement, the lack of mandated training programs is problematic. Most officers have not had training about this movement, and understanding their ideology and behavior is critical to ensure the safety of law enforcement, especially during traffic stops.

Few agencies offer optional SovCits training to officers, and what known [training](#) exists is minimal. However, this type of training

should be mandatory. Required training could save lives by teaching law enforcement how to identify SovCits and their tactics. This risk is not limited just to law enforcement and court officials, but also to medical first responders. [Medical personnel](#) may have contact with SovCits during domestic violence, child welfare, and other medical aide calls. Therefore, training should be made available to medical personnel to identify SovCits, should they encounter them on emergency calls. Antigovernment extremists claim to be above the law, and they risk the well-being of all public officials.



Anthony (Tony) Mottola, Ph.D., has over 35 years of law enforcement and security experience, including the New York City Police Department (NYPD), United States Air Force, and the National Basketball Association. He retired as a sergeant detective after 25 years as a member of NYPD. He served as executive officer for the NYPD Intelligence Bureau's Strategic Unit, which is a covert counterterrorism initiative, and as director of the Domestic Liaison Program. He represented the intelligence bureau in numerous investigations, including the Boston Bombing, civil unrest, mass shootings, and large-scale incidents outside New York City. During his tenure with NYPD, he worked additional assignments in Counter Terrorism, Gang Intelligence, Detective Bureau, Task Force, Street Narcotics Enforcement Unit, anti-gang/graffiti units, and patrol. He was a first responder/search leader for recovery efforts

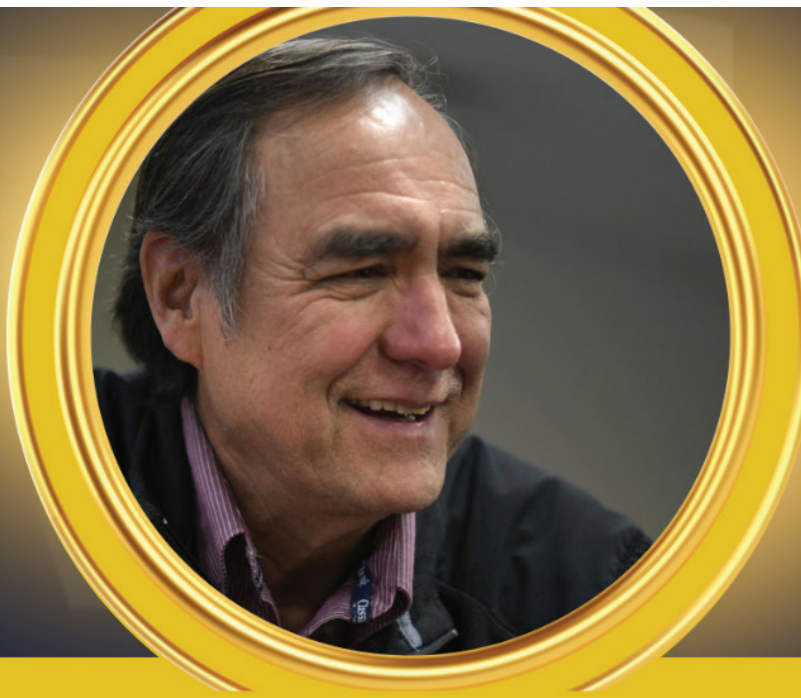
and supervisor of security details in the immediate aftermath of the World Trade Center attacks. Dr. Mottola has conducted extensive research into human trafficking, labor trafficking, border operations, transnational organized crime, extremism, and the Sovereign Citizen movement. He is currently an assistant professor of criminology and homeland security at the University of Tennessee – Southern and in conjunction with the University of Tennessee Law Enforcement Innovation Center, and he instructs agencies on engaging and investigating the Sovereign Citizens movement.



Richard Schoeberl, Ph.D., is a current advisor to the Domestic Preparedness Journal who possesses over 30 years of law enforcement experience, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC). He has served in a variety of positions throughout his career, ranging from a supervisory special agent at the FBI's headquarters in Washington, D.C., to unit chief of the International Terrorism Operations Section at the NCTC's headquarters in Langley, Virginia. Before these organizations, he worked as a special agent investigating violent crime, human trafficking, international terrorism, and organized crime. Additionally, he has authored numerous scholarly articles, serves as a peer mentor with the Police Executive Research Forum, is currently a professor of criminology and homeland security at the University of Tennessee –

Southern, and works with Hope for Justice – a global nonprofit combating human trafficking. In conjunction with the University of Tennessee Law Enforcement Innovation Center, he also instructs agencies on engaging and investigating the Sovereign Citizens movement.

ADVISOR SPOTLIGHT



Advisor Spotlight: Interview With Robert DesRosier Sr.

Robert DesRosier Sr., former director of Blackfeet Tribal Emergency Management and Homeland Security, discussed his journey into emergency management with *Domestic Preparedness Journal* editor Catherine Feinman. Beginning with his career as a first responder and his role in the Blackfeet Nation, he highlighted the importance of domestic preparedness and its opportunities and challenges, including necessary collaboration with other Tribes and law enforcement agencies. He advised new professionals to prioritize self-preservation and to fully commit to the rewarding yet demanding field of emergency management.

Catherine:

Hello, I'm here with Robert DesRosier, the past director of Blackfeet Tribal Emergency Management and Homeland Security. Robert, could you please tell us what inspired you to join the Domestic Preparedness board?

Robert:

I think it was you who asked if I'd be interested, and I certainly was. My interest stems from always being concerned with what's happening in the nation. My job with Homeland Security led me in the right direction of protecting America, so domestic preparedness has always been very important

to me. I'm more than happy to do my part in looking at what we're doing as a nation.

Catherine:

Please share a little about your background with the Blackfeet Nation and how it ties into emergency preparedness.

Robert:

Well, I've been a first responder my entire adult life. I started with the fire department, moved into law enforcement, and later became an EMT [emergency medical technician]. I've been responding to incidents throughout my career, now spanning 53 years. I started working for the Blackfeet Tribe in 1999 as a utilities manager, handling drinking water and wastewater. Due to my background in law enforcement, I was asked to become the deputy disaster manager. I gladly accepted, and then 9/11 happened, which opened many opportunities. We realized how vulnerable we were as a Tribe and as part of the United States. This realization led to the creation of our Homeland Security and Emergency Management program. By around 2023, our Tribe created the program by resolution, taking a serious look at our northern borders since we share an international boundary.

Catherine:

During your years in emergency management and homeland security, what were the biggest challenges and opportunities you encountered?

Robert:

There were certainly many opportunities to build bridges with other Tribes around Montana and to discuss shared threats. Many opportunities came from working together with other law enforcement agencies, like Border Patrol and Customs, who are all concerned about our northern border. One

big opportunity for Tribes was around 2006 to 2007, when we became eligible to apply for grants under the Tribal Homeland Security Grant Program. We took full advantage of that.

Catherine:

What are the key takeaways you'd like to share with the readers?

Robert:

For me, it's crucial that we work together and learn to communicate openly. Sharing information is probably the biggest mission. I've seen too many cases where programs – whether medical, law enforcement, or fire – keep their information to themselves, which is our downfall. We need to talk, share insights, and understand who we are. Let's bring back drills and practice exercises so we're not meeting as strangers when incidents occur.

Catherine:

How have relationships between Tribes and non-Tribal communities changed over the years?

Robert:

I remember when there was very little interaction between Tribes and outside agencies. But over the years, that relationship has improved greatly. People now recognize that we share the same land, the same country, and, ultimately, the same mission. We all want America to be safe and to protect both Tribal and state communities.

Catherine:

What advice do you have for someone new to this field?

Robert:

Oh, my gosh. If I could go back and talk to someone new in emergency management, I'd

remind them that self-preservation is number one. Expect the worst and be ready to handle what comes. It takes a toll, mentally and physically, so you need to be prepared for that.

Catherine:

Do you have any advice for the next generation on how to get more involved?

Robert:

My advice is simple: if you're going to do it, just do it. Jump in 100%. It's very rewarding. If I could redo my 53 years as a first responder, I'd do it all over again. It's our mission to serve

one another. So, get all the training you can and keep going.

Catherine:

Thank you so much for your service. Do you have any final thoughts you'd like to share?

Robert:

I don't have much more to add. It's just been a pleasure talking to you. Thank you.

Catherine:

Thank you.



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