

Washington Statewide Catastrophic Incident Planning Team

Catastrophic Incident – Definition and Characteristics

A catastrophe is both quantitatively AND qualitatively different from a disaster, be it "major" or otherwise. While we recognize that what is catastrophic to a given tribal nation or local government may not be catastrophic to another, for the purposes of statewide catastrophic incident planning, we define a catastrophe from the *statewide perspective*.

The Statewide Catastrophic Incident Planning Team (SCIPT) adopts the federal definition of a catastrophic incident, with five additional characteristics...

Federal Definition (from the National Response Framework)

"A catastrophic incident is defined as any natural or manmade incident, including terrorism, that results in extraordinary levels of mass casualties, damage, or disruption severely affecting the population, infrastructure, environment, economy, national morale, or government functions."

Typical characteristics of a catastrophic incident

- Most, if not all, of the critical infrastructure and built environment within a given region is severely damaged or otherwise rendered inoperable.
- Many first responders and supporting organizations (including nongovernmental organizations and the private sector) within a given region cannot perform initial incident response activities due to overwhelming losses of personnel, facilities, and/or equipment.
- The scale of response (e.g., amount of survivors needing aid, geographic expanse of affected area, resources required, etc.) for impacted communities greatly exceeds remaining capabilities and existing mutual aid agreements. Further, assistance from neighboring communities is unavailable, as those communities are equally impacted.
- The ability of first responders and emergency managers to maintain a doctrinal span of control is impractical, if not impossible, for the first several operational periods following a catastrophic incident.
- Situational awareness takes several days to acquire. There is little to no information received from regional stakeholders, and initial impact reports from available sources are fragmentary, conflicting, and/or chaotic.

NOTE: *The SCIPT also provides the following six points of additional information for consideration in the "**background/assumptions**" sections of catastrophic incident plans.*

Part of the academic literature distinguishing between different levels of disaster comes from Enrico Quarantelli, a leading researcher in the field of disasters. The SCIPT accepts, in whole, his concept that distinguishes catastrophes. While Quarantelli's entire paper serves as reference material to statewide catastrophic incident planning, summarizations of his six criteria¹ distinguishing catastrophes from other disasters are described below...

1. Critical infrastructure within the impacted area receives heavy damage, and is potentially inoperable for an extended period. This includes the transportation modes (e.g., roads, bridges, etc.) and facilities (e.g., fire stations, hospitals, etc.) needed for emergency response.
2. The capabilities of an impacted jurisdiction are so degraded; they have little or no capacity to manage a comprehensive emergency response. In catastrophic situations, local personnel are often unable to carry out emergency duties for some time, both right after the incident and well into the recovery period. Entities from outside the impacted community(ies) may need to assume now-vacant leadership roles.
3. The catastrophe impacts the whole community as almost all everyday functions are interrupted simultaneously (e.g., schools, work, recreation, religious functions, cultural, and government).
4. The scale of the catastrophe impacts multiple adjacent jurisdictions and exhausts resources throughout the region, making mutual aid unavailable.
5. In order to provide timely assistance, state and federal governments may take proactive measures, based on planning assumptions, to mobilize and deploy resources prior to formal requests for assistance.
6. Media coverage of catastrophes is more intensive, of a much longer duration, and focuses on personal stories even more so than usual.

¹ Dr. E. L. Quarantelli, "Catastrophes are Different from Disasters: Some Implications for Crisis Planning and Managing Drawn from Katrina." Newark: Disaster Research Center, University of Delaware. 2006.