



COLORADO

Division of Homeland Security & Emergency Management

Department of Public Safety

January 1, 2019

Dear Colorado Emergency Managers:

2018 was quite a year for Colorado emergency management. From ransomware and state-wide bomb threats to fires, severe weather and a propane shortage, I have certainly learned a lot in my first full year as our State's director. What I value most from 2018 is the opportunities I've had to work with so many of you throughout the year.

I am excited about 2019. Incidents in Colorado allow us to study ourselves and we have had the chance to observe important lessons as other states faced catastrophic disasters. The Colorado Homeland Security and All-Hazards Senior Advisory Committee approved our Colorado Homeland Security Strategy which gives us all great direction for the new year. Now the stage is set for Colorado emergency management professionals to make important strides as we work to protect our communities. It is not a task to take lightly. Our communities face a wide variety of natural, technological, and human-caused threats and the complexities of our physical, virtual and governmental environments present significant challenges.

With that in mind, I intend to focus on three overarching areas, each of which is consistent with the Homeland Security Strategy: 1) Alert and warning, 2) Mitigation, 3) Exercises.

Alert and warning. Over the last two years, we have seen the devastating effects of the failure to alert and warn communities in other states. Communities across Colorado face nearly identical threats from fast moving wildfires. Fuels in Colorado are dangerously high again this year and 2.9 million people now live in our wildland-urban interface. That's nearly half of Colorado's population. Like Paradise California, many of these people live in communities with limited road networks that create choke points for both evacuations and responder access. The stage is set for catastrophe in 2019, yet less than 20% of our community members have registered for their local community alert and notification system and fewer than half of Colorado counties are approved to use the Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS). Redundant, multi-system alert and warning capability is the exception in Colorado. Most counties haven't rigorously tested their alert and warning plans and too many don't even have plans. We have to do better.

Mitigation. We know disasters are going to happen in Colorado. In fact, many of our risks can be predicted. If we can predict them, we can take steps to reduce the impacts these disasters have on our communities. The OEM Mitigation Team's motto is "we make nothing happen." Perhaps that is a stretch goal, but mitigation projects do make a difference. The return on investment for mitigation projects range from 3:1 to 6:1 over recovery costs and help communities bounce back sooner after disasters. This year, the Federal Emergency

Management Agency (FEMA) will significantly increase federal funding available for mitigation projects. To take advantage of this funding, we have to do two things. First, we have to prepare and submit highly competitive projects to FEMA. Second, we have to find ways to meet the 25% funding match that mitigation projects require. This won't be easy, but resilient Colorado communities will be worth it.

Exercises. Robust, rigorous exercises are how we test the limits of ourselves and our plans. It's how we identify gaps in both and improve both. At every opportunity, we should conduct multi-functional exercises that compel us to work with our partners including mass care, firefighting, law enforcement, agriculture and others. Our exercises must make us uncomfortable and stretch us beyond our current limits. They should find our point of failure – and push us just a little further. Remember, failures in exercises lead to successes in disasters. It's how we get better.

It is a great privilege to serve you and the people of Colorado. My team and I look forward to working with you in 2019 on these and other important emergency management objectives. I encourage you to read the Colorado Homeland Security Strategy to see where we are heading.

We'll see you out there.

Mike

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of the letters 'MJW' in a cursive, stylized font.

Michael Willis
Director, Colorado Office of Emergency Management
Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management