To the editor:

Why don’t governments see the “Profession” in Professional Emergency Manager? Can you imagine hiring someone with no firefighter experience as director of a state fire safety office? How about naming someone with no law enforcement experience as chief of a major police force? Unthinkable, right? How can someone run a fire or cop shop without having been a firefighter or cop? It simply isn’t done!

There have been degrees in emergency management (EM) for decades, and such degrees in various forms are everywhere nowadays. The Federal Emergency Management Agency delivered the Professional Development and successor courses for emergency managers since the 1980s. For the last decade plus, EM publications, conferences, textbooks, and courses have touted the Profession of Emergency Management. State and federal organizations are certifying emergency managers.

Where does all that focus go when appointing top leadership? Why are people who never spent a day as an emergency manager, routinely named to head EM agencies? Certainly, they often have backgrounds as EMTs, firefighters, law enforcement, or military officers, and may have taken EM courses or served in large-scale disasters as volunteers. What they frequently don’t have is years of professional education and experience in EM. Is that enough?

Would the State Police appoint someone as Superintendent who had experience as a firefighter, emergency manager, and served 2 years in a sheriff’s posse? Would someone with 20 years as an artillery officer, 5 years as a state trooper, and 15 months volunteer fire department service be appointed Fire Commissioner? Probably not. Why? Because there is a widespread, accepted perspective that experience, training, and leadership as a cop or firefighter is needed to lead those agencies.

Why is it then acceptable to appoint someone with only military, fire, or law enforcement experience as head of a major EM agency? Maybe because, as much as we talk about, become educated for, train in, and experience it; EM is not yet accepted as a true profession by the people who count—the politicians and civil servants who appoint emergency managers. Unless perspectives about public safety agencies are wrong, we may be handicapping our EM agencies, denying them the same grade and quality of experience and leadership.

What do we do about it? Continue education regarding the level and nature of the EM profession. Take every opportunity to communicate with the public and media. Most important, reinforce that in every contact with government CEOs, legislative bodies, administrators, and especially with human resources personnel. When planning to hire directors, emphasize the need for “hands-on” EM experience and training. Don’t accept “equivalent qualifications” that really aren’t. “Public safety experience”, in isolation, no more prepares someone to head an EM agency than it might to lead a fire or police organization.

When a leadership position is opening, facilitate the selection process and require a real demonstration of EM experience. Draft exams that measure actual knowledge of the four/five phases of EM. Assure that the candidates understand consequence management, not just crisis management. Help craft qualification requirements and examinations that measure the ability to manage long-term recovery and mitigation, not just emergency response. Demand Certification as an Emergency Manager where appropriate. Make certain that the decision-makers understand the value of in-depth ability to use training and exercises to improve preparedness. Share with them the public’s intense concern about getting back to their crops, livestock, and pets.
There may be some highly qualified emergency managers who have spent most of their career as cops or firefighters. . . . JUST as there are likely some highly qualified cops and firefighters who have spent most of their careers as emergency managers. But let’s not ignore what we have preached for 20 years about professional emergency managers. Let’s not assume other professions have those qualifications . . . let’s look, test, and interview for, and then, hire the best professional emergency managers, even if they have never worn a uniform.

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