

**Richard Anthony Sacca II, Emergency Manager,  
Flathead County Montana, Office of Emergency Management**

**Challenges of Gateway Communities of National Parks**

Flathead County Montana is considered as the major gateway community to Glacier National Park with an estimated 70 percent of all visitors to the park traveling through our county. This volume of visitors presents unique and substantial challenges to our county emergency services organizations. These include increased traffic, parking shortages, increased ambulance/medical service calls, increased fire department calls, increased number of urgent care and emergency department visits, and increased human-caused wildfires.

The local emergency response agencies of Flathead County are primarily funded through resident property tax levies. Most of the Fire and EMS agencies in Flathead County are all-volunteer or part volunteer/part paid departments. The jurisdictions that border Glacier National Park are all small, rural, all-volunteer departments. The seasonal influx of visitors places a burden upon these agencies, stretching them to the limit of staffing and equipment. These include organizations and challenges include:

- Fire and Emergency Medical Services (EMS)
- Law Enforcement
- Wildland Fire Response: The beginning of northwest Montana's wildland fire season coincides with the height of tourism at Glacier
- All-Hazards Incident Management

**Successes Found through Partnership with Glacier National Park and Flathead County**

Numerous examples of successes of these partnerships exist and including:

- Excellent professional working relationships are maintained between the Park's Chief Ranger, Chief of Ranger Operations, Structural Fire Coordinator, Wildland Fire Management Officer, District Rangers, and Public Information Officer with Flathead County Sheriff, Emergency Manager, Fire Warden/Fire Service Area Manager, Emergency Services Manager, and the Fire Chiefs of the 5 closest mutual aid fire departments. These relationships are supported by the senior elected officials of the county as well as the Park Superintendent and leadership team.
- Participation of the Park in the Interagency Type 3 Incident Management Team. The Park is an equal member of the team along with the US Forest Service, Montana Department of Natural Resources & Conservation, and Flathead County. Joint training is conducted and the team stands ready all summer to respond to all types of hazards, with a focus on wildland fires.
- Joint development of response plans for the 911 system which now allows for pre-determined automatic notification and dispatch of emergency services to and from the Park and the gateway community. This creates expedient emergency responses by the Park to adjacent remote highways, and also brings multiple fire agencies automatically to the park when an emergency occurs.
- Coordinated, regular information sharing with our press partners, local communities, and visitors. Partnerships between the US Forest Service, Glacier National Park, Montana Department of Natural Resources & Conservation, Montana Fish Wildlife & Parks, and Flathead County are evident through the daily Interagency Fire Season Information Fact Sheet. This helps to ensure timely, accurate and consistent messaging to the public.

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- Cooperative relationships with the Park, Flathead County Office of Emergency Services and Flathead Emergency Communications Center improved public emergency notification and warning processes. This gives the Park access to the County-Administered Emergency Alert System to notify the public via cell phone, land-line telephone, television and radio.
- The Park's membership in the Flathead County Fire & EMS Chiefs Association fosters camaraderie and a teamwork approach to joint fire response and EMS services.
- Wildland Fire Response: The beginning of northwest Montana's wildland fire season coincides with the height of tourism at Glacier National, and the highest national preparedness levels (and shortages of firefighting resources nationwide). This strains the local fire departments which are dealing with the increased number of motor vehicle accidents and EMS cases. Due to the preexisting relationships that the Federal, State, and County agencies have, and effective response pre-planning, wildfire firefighting response are still able to be made, despite the strain all departments are faced with. Two recent examples are:
  - 2017 Structural Protection Task Force to protect the Lake McDonald Lodge complex. This team deployed to the Park in 2 hours with 8 emergency apparatus and 21 County responders.
  - 2018 Structural Protection Task Force to protect the Lake McDonald Ranger Cabin Complex and Private In-Holder vacation homes. This team deployed to the Park in 1 hour with 13 emergency apparatus and 25 County responders.
- The Park, partnered with the Office of Emergency Services, Environmental Protection Agency Region VIII Office, and Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF) railroad, jointly conducted extensive inland oil spill training, and a functional exercise, to be best prepared in the event of a train derailment resulting in any oil spill affecting the greater Flathead River basin, the headwaters to the Columbia River.
- The Park, partnered with the Office of Emergency Services, Flathead County Sheriff, Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF) railroad, Montana Highway Patrol, and the Montana Department of Transportation, conduct coordination meetings and a tabletop exercise each year to plan for the avalanches that could disrupt travel and interstate commerce by blocking US Highway 2 or the BNSF rail line. This ensures a safe and timely joint response when these avalanches occur. This has also led to successful review and approval for emergency avalanche mitigation work.
- The Park participates in the Emergency Communication Users Group which helps to ensure that we have a pre-designed emergency radio communications program and plan in place. This allows true interoperability between the Park and our local, County, State, and Federal partners in response to any emergency.
- Coordination with the Office of Emergency Services, Flathead County Sheriff, Flathead Emergency Communications Center, and the Park allows the Park timely access to any of the County assets that the Park does not independently maintain. These include:
  - County aircraft assets including; Advanced Life-support & Emergency Rescue Team (ALERT) helicopter, Two Bear Air rescue helicopter, and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (drones).
  - Search & Rescue assets including; snow rescue, ice rescue, remote rescue, water rescue, underwater rescue & recovery, and two experienced search and rescue organizations.

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- Incident command assets including two mobile command & communication vehicles, portable emergency radio repeater stations, Mass Casualty Incident (MCI) response vehicle, all-hazards incident support vehicle & equipment suite, Emergency Operations Center suite, and the Northwest Montana Type 3 All-Hazards Incident Management Team.
- Law enforcement resources from the Flathead County Sheriff, including a SWAT capability, as well as law enforcement officers from the cities of Kalispell, Columbia Falls and Whitefish.
- Coordination between the Park and the Flathead Emergency Communications Center allow for emergency 911 calls from the park to be answered by the Flathead 911 Center during off-season times at the Park, and in emergency situations.
- Close cooperation with the Office of Emergency Services and the Park help keep the County Senior Elected Officials apprised of our joint emergency preparedness work and response successes. This also ensures direct access to the Montana Disaster and Emergency Services (DES) Division through the County DES Coordinator.
- Partnerships between the Park and the Office of Emergency Services allow for the effective integration of incident management teams, including the regional type 2 teams and the national type 1 teams. Having these relationships in place between the park, the stakeholders and the cooperators allow these teams to seamlessly integrate with the local resources and to address the emergency at hand.

**Threats to the Partnership with Glacier National Park and Flathead County and Solutions**

Several threats to the partnerships with the Park exist including;

- We are fortunate to have a likeminded approach to emergency preparedness and to cooperative relationships. However, personnel turnover could negatively affect these relationships if new personnel arrived and did not share the same long-term vision of emergency management. Senior leadership of all organizations need to recognize, support and encourage maintaining and expanding these relationships.
- Effectiveness emergency preparedness is based on the Park's participation in a continuous cycle of threat evaluation, plan development, training, exercises and evaluation, and plan revision. Failure to continue to engage in and support this preparedness cycle could erode the effectiveness of current relationships, and ultimately hinder response to future emergencies.
- Continuous increases in the demand for emergency services (fire, EMS, and law enforcement) will continue with the ever-increasing number of visitors to Glacier National Park. These visitors will continue to draw upon the local agencies, including the small, rural departments, and are an additional stressor to these all-volunteer departments. With no increases in funding, staffing, or equipment in the near future, the only element that keeps this level of support is the personal relationships that exist between the park and these agencies. These relationships need to be nurtured and further enhanced whenever and wherever possible.

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**Advantages of the Partnership with Glacier National Park and Flathead County**

The effective relationships that exist between Glacier National Park and the Flathead County emergency management agencies have created a process that allows for effective emergency management. This process is applicable to all known and unknown hazards that we may encounter. Cultivating and strengthening these relationships bolsters this process and will produce a high return on the investment we are making for future incidents.

The partnership between the Park and the local response agencies transcends the geographic boundaries of the park and beyond the emergency response function. Not only do we meet and work together at emergency incidents, we see each other throughout our normal lives; at the grocery store, at school and sporting events, in all aspects of our community.

The positive benefits of the currently exceptional relationships between the park and local emergency resources are clearly evident. Leaders at Glacier National Park and Flathead County emergency response agencies are proud of these relationships and the effective emergency services they bring to the residents of this gateway community and to all the visitors of the park. The fact that these relationships were formed and maintained are testament to those involved and should be celebrated!

**Rick Sacca**

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Flathead County, Montana  
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