



ON TRACK

CONFERENCE OF DEFENCE ASSOCIATIONS INSTITUTE | L'INSTITUT DE LA CONFÉRENCE DES ASSOCIATIONS DE LA DÉFENSE



**The Future of Domestic Operations:
Rethinking the Role of the CAF in
Emergency Response**

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ON TRACK is the official journal of the CDA Institute. Through its pages, the CDA Institute promotes informed public debate on security and defence issues and the vital role played by the Canadian Armed forces in society. ON TRACK facilitates this educational mandate by featuring a range of articles that explore security, defence, and strategic issues that may have an impact on the Canadian strategic interests and on the safety of its citizens. The views expressed in ON TRACK are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the CDA Institute.

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OVERVIEW

In September 2022, the devastation caused by Hurricane Fiona once again highlighted the vulnerability of Canadian communities to climate change. Other recent events such as the covid-19 pandemic have also underscored the needs of provinces and territories for emergency assistance. During these critical moments, the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) are often called in as reinforcements.

Yet, the Chief of the Defence Staff recently claimed that the CAF should be “a force of last resort” during these events, instead of being systematically called upon. The reasoning is that the main mission of the CAF is to defend Canada against external threats and that, in a context of acute recruitment challenges, our armed forces will have to review their priorities and minimize their involvement in certain types of operations. The CAF, however, has operational expertise (e.g. in air or maritime rescue) and resources that will ensure that it will remain an essential partner in future domestic operations.

This issue of *On Track*, drawing on the “Future of Domestic Operations” webinar held by the CDA Institute on June 22nd, 2023, will address the following questions:

- I. What are the main challenges facing Canadian provinces and territories when responding to emergencies such as pandemics or natural disasters, and how can these be overcome through multi-sector cooperation?
- II. How can the Canadian Armed Forces optimize their involvement in domestic emergency response without compromising their primary mission of defending Canada against external threats?
- III. To what extent can the creation of a multi-sector intervention force improve the coordination and effectiveness of emergency response efforts in Canada?

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The Future of Domestic Operations: Rethinking the Role of the CAF in Emergency Response

Introduction

Adam P. MacDonald, PhD

The risks confronted by the augmenting number, severity, and simultaneity of natural disasters to the environment, economic systems, and communities are becoming a shared lived experience for many across Canada from coast to coast to coast. Such a reality is placing greater strains throughout Canada's Emergency Management System (EMS). Of particular relevance for this special edition volume is the noticeable change in the role of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) in domestic emergency response, specifically its growing use not as a 'force of last resort' but as a first responder in being deployed early and often in these types of operations.

To be clear, assistance to civilian authorities during such emergencies is a clear, long-standing core mission of the CAF, with the military over the past two decades making several organizational,

training, and force changes to meet such requests. The main issue is not whether the CAF should continue to be involved in domestic emergency response, but rather whether it is realistic to expect it can continue to do so *sustainably*. There are three trends which question whether it can. The first is the acceleration of such requests for assistance which requires a growing amount of attention, planning, and resources from the CAF to anticipate and properly position itself to respond timely and effectively. Second, as the CAF's role continues to change into that of a first responder, being an important and integral component throughout the entire EMS, this may change governmental and Canadian expectations about the military in terms of being involved in every emergency, specifically becoming the face of the federal contribution. Third, the CAF faces growing pressures and challenges associated with its other core missions including: developing competencies in new domains (such as cyber, space, and autonomous systems); augmenting deployments to key regions (such as Europe, the Arctic, and the Indo-Pacific region); recapitalizing major capabilities (such as fighter jets, warships,



and NORAD modernization projects) and trying to address serious and systemic issues with regards to culture change, recruitment, and retention.

Several senior military commanders, including the current Chief of the Defence Staff, have openly questioned whether the CAF can continue to maintain such a balance between these competing priorities, with the implied (and sometimes not so implied) suggestion that other elements of

the EMS must be strengthened to allow the CAF to dedicate most of its energies on its other core missions.¹ Such comments signal that the military leaderships feels it cannot figure out how to fulfill all of its commitments, and thus a re-examination of its core missions and the priorities among and between them needs to be done at the political level. This may be a central issue that will be addressed in the Defence Policy Update but given the uncertainty of when

¹ Murray Brewster, “The military can’t be the first line of defence in domestic operations, MPs told,” *CBC News*, October 05, 2022, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/fadden-military-fiona-hurricane-natural-disasters-1.6605961#:~:text=Canada's%20top%20soldier%20raises%20concerns%20about%20military%20readiness&text=Chief%20of%20the%20Defence%20Staff,with%20disaster%20response%20within%20Canada>

(and maybe even whether) it will be published after it was not announced this past summer, it may be some time before we know.

There exists a plethora of views in the literature about if and how much domestic emergency response commitments are affecting the CAF's readiness in achieving its other missions. This includes those that argue the strain is largely overblown, with the military leadership simply having to accept that they already have their marching orders from Ottawa to adapt to such a reality.² Others argue that there is a real strain, but an 'in-house' solution is possible such as a specific-purpose force or command, most likely within the reserve force, to deal with domestic emergencies to ensure this mission does not pull forces and resources focused on other operational commitments.³ Finally, there are those who argue the military should be fundamentally re-organized into a

primarily public safety organization with emergency response its central mission.⁴

In contrast to these views, this volume stems from the assessment that the CAF is being asked to do too much and too often, and that examining alternative ways to augment the abilities of other components of the EMS are needed. Doing so is motivated by two goals. First, to alleviate the pressures on the CAF to be expected to carve out more and more of its capabilities and overall capacity to service a growing number of support requests which are and will continue to affect its ability to simultaneously fulfill its other missions. Second, to ensure that the military's involvement is not simply masking gaps in the civilian elements of Canada's emergency response landscape which need correcting. Addressing these issues will ensure the CAF continues to play an important, niche role, but is not relied upon as a stop gap measure which is inhibiting needed systemic changes and

² For an example of such an argument see Peter Kasurak's comments in this podcast episode: "Strengthening Canada's Climate-Driver Wildfire Defence," *Conference of Defence Associations Institute*, The Expert Series, August 30, 2023, <https://cdainstitute.ca/strengthening-canadas-climate-driven-wildfire-defence/>

³ Christian Leuprecht, "The moral hazard of using the Canadian military as provincial first responders," *The Macdonald-Laurier Institute*, December 08, 2020, <https://macdonaldlaurier.ca/moral-hazard-canadian-armed-forces/#:~:text=In%20a%20new%20MLI%20commentary,armed%20forces%2C%20its%20members%2C%20and>

⁴ Kevin Patterson, "'Defence' doesn't fit the job of Canada's military any more. Let's create a Department of National Safety instead," *The Globe and Mail*, July 17, 2021, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-defence-doesnt-fit-the-job-of-canadas-military-any-more-lets-create-a/>

investments in bringing about a robust and effective EMS. This includes developing more command and control competencies in other parts of the EMS as the CAF currently is the only organization with this expertise and capacity.⁵

Therefore, the focus of this volume is to examine ways to augment other elements of Canada's EMS beyond the CAF. The first part of this project occurred this past June when a webinar was hosted by the CDA Institute titled "The Future of Domestic Operations: Rethinking the Role of the CAF in Emergency Response" that brought together experts from academia, the military, and civil society to examine ways to augment civilian elements of the EMS.⁶ Some of the webinar participants further agreed to contribute to this special-edition volume, being joined by other experts who were approached after the webinar and who, thankfully, agreed to contribute as well.

Our opening article is written by Bill Seymour, a retired Major-General of the CAF and the former Deputy Commander of the Canadian Joint Operations Command

(the command responsible for the deployment of military forces and assets to domestic emergencies), who sets the scene for the entire volume by laying out in detail the role of the CAF in domestic emergencies, how the organization has structured and positioned itself to respond to these demands, and the ways in which the military's assistance is requested. Bill details the challenges associated with growing demands for involvement in domestic emergencies confronting to the CAF, specifically in terms of its overall readiness and the necessity of trade-offs as its capabilities and capacities are stretched ever more to respond to the dynamic and multi-faceted threat environment Canada faces domestically and internationally. He argues the use of the CAF in domestic response, however well intentioned and needed, is masking the gaps in the civilian components of the system, creating a situation that is not viable in the long-term and thus requires examining ways to augment the competencies, collaboration, and capabilities of these other elements.

⁵ During the webinar and the drafting stages of this volume, Josh was working for the Red Cross. He has recently left the Red Cross and now is Vice President of Organizational Excellence at Team Rubicon Canada.

⁶ You can watch the full webinar here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ok2Bt85aICo&t=1s&ab_channel=CDAInstitute

From the portrait of the current landscape presented by Bill, the rest of the articles in this volume are from experts in the humanitarian sector, all of whom believe more work is needed to bolster this element of the EMS. This sentiment is motivated in part by the need to alleviate the strains placed on the CAF, which should be primarily focused on more defence related missions that it is specialized in. More importantly, these authors believe that there are realistic ways to augment the capabilities of many areas of Canada's EMS which are under-utilized and not well resourced and enabled to augment the system's overall resiliency, adaptability, and effectiveness.

Josh Bowen, the former Director of Emergency Planning at the Canadian Red Cross, argues that augmenting the operational effectiveness of Canada's EMS is not a luxury but a necessity at this critical juncture in determining how Canada will prepare itself for an environment increasingly defined by more extreme-weather events and natural disasters. Josh argues that a whole-of-society approach is needed for Canada to meet this challenge, specifically applying the lessons learned of the successful inter-governmental, industry,

and civil society collaboration which occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. He explores three lines of efforts that must be progressed simultaneously to entrench such a system which is active all the time and not simply stood up and secured during each individual emergency as they arise. These are: 1) increased collaboration, including conducting exercises among the main actors in emergency response across Canada to eliminate siloed approaches being taken among them; 2) increased coordination through an events response table which brings all actors together during emergencies to ensure a proper understanding of the challenges at hand, the demands which exists, and the distribution and availability of resources; and 3) augmenting the capacity of the humanitarian sector through initiatives like the Humanitarian Workforce Program, with the eventual goal of having a standing civilian disaster response capacity largely based on volunteer organizations.

Next, Lisa Paul, Director of Community Program for St. John Ambulance Service Canada, argues that Canada's EMS is based on an 'order of failures' where higher levels are called in

when lower ones are unable to deal with local emergencies; a reality becoming a more regular feature with provincial/territorial and federal governments becoming quickly involved in these. This is in part due to the growing severity and simultaneity of such disasters which can affect multiple communities in many regions at once, but also because communities and citizens are the most under-utilized elements in the entire response system. Lisa argues that dedicated efforts to equip and enable communities will build up their resiliency to local disasters and lessen the demand to bring in outside assistance like the military. Residents, furthermore, are the most knowledgeable of their communities and thus should be active and used as resources in disaster response. In strengthening this level, Lisa points to St John Ambulance's establishment of Emergency Response Units throughout Canada to help further train Canadians on a wide variety of first-aid competencies. Like Josh, Lisa emphasizes that programs like the Humanitarian Workforce Program are important first steps in building a more robust humanitarian sector which is largely made up of volunteers.

Finally, Eva Cohen, President of Civil Protection Youth Canada, argues that Canada should look to Germany's Federal Agency for Technical Relief (THW) as a successful whole-of-society, volunteer-based civilian protection organization which has effectively prepared for, responded to, and recovered after major natural disasters. In particular, the THW is organized along local lines and is activated by local authorities, being able to provide specific capabilities based on local needs. Like Josh and Lisa, Eva believes the community level is the most under-appreciated and utilized element in Canada's EMS. While not suggesting everyone needs to be part of the EMS (though with the caveat that every Canadian needs to be prepared at a household level for if and when a disaster affects them), she argues Canada must adopt a volunteer-agency model where the federal government (in conjunction with its provincial counterparts which remain responsible for emergency management in their respective jurisdictions) would help facilitate such a model like the THW in Canada. In particular, she argues investments are needed to construct such an organizational design across the country and as well as

specific, technical capabilities such as water-bombers, excavators, and pumping systems. Doing so would create a more tailored-specific EMS, involving local levels as instrumental actors in the response effort and acquiring specific capabilities rather than relying on the military which usually does not have these but makes do using other assets it possesses which are built for other purposes.

Combined, these articles make a compelling case for the need for further investments into the humanitarian sector of Canada's EMS as well as specific recommendations in terms of how to go about this. No one is arguing that the military should not be involved in domestic emergency response, as it possesses capabilities which no other organization is likely to develop (such as command and control and strategic sea and air lift). However, other elements of the EMS have been undervalued and underdeveloped which threaten to undermine its ability to adapt and respond to this new reality we find ourselves in Canada in terms of natural disasters. Making such investments and changes in these areas, furthermore, will help clarify what the role and contribution of

the CAF should be in terms of specific capabilities and more sustainable in terms of expectations of the types of asks that will be made of it. Such a situation will enable better planning and preparation by the military to be ready to support these operations alongside its other tasks and missions.

Adam P. MacDonald, a former Naval Warfare Officer in the Royal Canadian Navy, recently completed his PhD in political science from Dalhousie University. His research interests include US-China strategic rivalry and its impact on Canadian foreign and defence policy, seapower and naval strategy, Arctic and East Asian geopolitics, and the growing use of the Canadian Armed Forces in domestic emergency response. With respect to the latter issue, Adam has developed several articles, op-eds, podcasts, interviews, and reports examining the political, organizational, and technical aspects and implications of this phenomenon.

The Canadian Armed Forces in Canada's Domestic Emergency Management System: Masking Gaps in Civil Capacity

Major-General (retired) Bill F. Seymour, Former Deputy Commander, Canadian Joint Operations Command

...the military is not a cure-all to the current disaster management gaps in this country, particularly its lack of a disaster workforce.⁷

As Hawaii mourns the loss of more than 115 of its citizens and visitors with hundreds more still missing in the devastating wildfires on Maui, Canadians from across the country have rallied to support one another and face the scourge of forest fires. With more than 211 evacuation

orders issued as of 11 August, and more than 167,000 Canadians forced to temporarily leave their homes and communities to avoid disaster, 2023 will go down as the worst firefighting season ever recorded in Canadian history.⁸

Between widespread fires in the West, unprecedented flooding in the East, and Ottawa now labelled “tornado alley”, the increase in frequency, scale, simultaneity, and complexity of domestic emergencies in the past several years has resulted in greater use of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) to assist provincial authorities under Operation Lentus (OP LENTUS), “broadly doubling every five years since 2010”.⁹ While the CAF’s role in domestic emergencies should be as the ‘force of last resort’, it has been increasingly suggested that the CAF has become the ‘force of **first** resort.’ The 2023-2024 DND/CAF Departmental Plan

⁷ Dr. Peter Kikkert, Assistant Professor, Public Policy and Governance, Brian Mulroney Institute of Government, St. Francis Xavier University, in his appearance before the Standing Committee on National Defence (NDDN) on May 9, 2022. of Commons, Standing Committee on National Defence, “Rising Domestic Operational Deployments and Challenges for the Canadian Armed Forces”, Evidence, Ottawa: House of Commons, Monday, May 9, 2022. <https://www.ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/44-1/NDDN/meeting-21/evidence>

⁸ John Paul Tasker, “Canada reports worst wildfire season on record — and there's more to come this fall”, CBC News, August 11, 2023, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canada-wildfire-season-worst-ever-more-to-come-1.6934284>

⁹ “Operation LENTUS,” [Current Operations and Combined Military Exercises list](https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/operations/military-operations/current-operations/operation-lentus.html), Accessed 10 August 2023, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/operations/military-operations/current-operations/operation-lentus.html>. Leuprecht and Kasurak provide a circa 2020 breakdown of the CAF’s employment in domestic HADR operations including an excellent historical view of its relative prioritization to its warfighting role.

(DP) puts it starkly by pointing out that “[t]he increasing regularity and intensity of natural disasters, combined with limited provincial and territorial investment in disaster and emergency management resources, has contributed to the CAF increasingly becoming a force of first choice in responding to domestic disasters. This is occurring in parallel to the increasing demand for international engagement...”¹⁰ due to a more dangerous geostrategic environment, and a new Indo-Pacific strategy.

With a CAF that is short of some 16,000 people on a total regular and reserve force of some 100,000 people¹¹ due in part to shortfalls in recruiting and training during the COVID-19 pandemic, the CDS has said: “there’s not enough of the CAF to go around.”¹²

The CAF is but one federal resource within Canada’s domestic Emergency Management System (EMS) that includes municipal, provincial, federal, First Nations, and non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) such as the Red Cross, the Salvation Army, and the Search and Rescue Volunteers Association of Canada. The provinces have jurisdiction, and they control and manage their own emergency management capacity. With the CAF focused primarily on response, the collective efforts of the various players combine to address a spectrum of activity across emergency management’s four phases - mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery.¹³

The prominence of the CAF’s employment in domestic emergencies can obscure the activities and capacities of the range of first responders, as well as the gaps. Consider that Canada has already deployed

¹⁰ Government of Canada, Department of National Defence, “Department of National Defence and Canadian Armed Forces 2023-24 Departmental Plan”, Ottawa: Minister of National Defence, 2023, p. 3. <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/dnd-mdn/documents/departmental-results-report/2023-2024/2023-24-Departmental-Plan-EN.pdf>.

¹¹ Dylan Dyson, “Canadian Armed Forces facing member shortage 'crisis'”, CTV News, April 5, 2023, <https://ottawa.ctvnews.ca/canadian-armed-forces-facing-member-shortage-crisis-1.6344761>

¹² Murray Brewster, “As 2023 dawns, Canada's top soldier confronts a long list of worst-case scenarios”, CBC News, January 03, 2023, Updated: January 4, 2023, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/wayne-eyre-year-end-interview-1.6695469>

¹³ Government of Canada, Public Safety Canada, “An Emergency Management Framework for Canada”, Ottawa: Minister of Public Safety, 2017, p. 7-8, <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/2017-mrgnc-mngmnt-frmwrk/2017-mrgnc-mngmnt-frmwrk-en.pdf>. Canada’s Emergency Management Framework describes each of these as components. In US parlance, FEMA describes them more actively as “phases”. The CAF is also involved in aspects of preparedness, including exercises.

5,821 domestic firefighters and 4,990 international firefighters from 12 countries to battle wildfires across the country.¹⁴ The Canadian Red Cross has thousands of employees and volunteers from coast to coast. The BC Forest Fighting Service has substantial aviation resources, with a fleet of more than 40 aircraft at its disposal and can bring in more (non-CAF) when the need arises.¹⁵ Despite the CAF's supporting role in both domestic and international emergency response, the CAF's national prominence and ready employment during years of domestic disasters and the pandemic has created expectations. Images of CADPAT-wearing troops caring for the elderly in long-term care homes, sandbagging homes and dykes, or Canadian Rangers in red hoodies descending from a C-130 Hercules to support a northern community in distress are powerful and difficult to forget.

Despite the CDS and the Minister of National Defence (MND) confirming that

the CAF will always be there for Canadians¹⁶, the debate surrounding the use of the CAF in domestic emergencies in a zero-sum environment remains. At issue is the need to reform and bolster Canada's EMS in the face of growing demand pressures and to ensure the CAF does not become increasingly relied upon to an extent that it critically affects the military's readiness and ability to achieve its other core missions.

Similar to the role of each speaker and the flow of discussion within the recent CDA Institute webinar "Rethinking the Role of the CAF in Domestic Emergency Response" that gave rise to these papers, this paper aims to describe the process of how the CAF receives, prepares for, and responds to requests for support in domestic emergency operations, the challenges this poses to the organization, and to offer some thoughts about the way forward. While the paper is largely descriptive, it highlights the need to raise the tripwire for CAF

¹⁴ Canadian Press, "Federal officials says 'marathon' wildfire season could extend into fall", Victoria News, August 11, 2023, <https://www.vicnews.com/national-news/federal-officials-says-marathon-wildfire-season-could-extend-into-fall-1685422>.

¹⁵ "Meet the BC Wildfire Service aviation fleet", BC Wildfire Service, July 19, 2022. <https://blog.gov.bc.ca/bcwildfire/meet-the-bc-wildfire-service-aviation-fleet/>

¹⁶ Sarah Ritchie, "Canadians reassured to see military helping during local emergencies, Blair says", CTV News, August 8, 2023. <https://www.ctvnews.ca/climate-and-environment/canadians-reassured-to-see-military-helping-during-local-emergencies-blair-says-1.6510077>

involvement in domestic emergencies by investing in civil capacity.

CAF Missions

As outlined in Canada's Defence Policy, *Strong, Secure and Engaged (SSE)*, the CAF is assigned eight core missions that range from detecting, deterring, and defending against threats to or attacks on Canada and North America, to assisting civil authorities and nongovernmental partners in responding to international and domestic disasters or major emergencies, and conducting Search and Rescue (SAR). As a part of its "Strong at Home" vision, the policy commits to maintaining "a robust capacity to respond to a range of domestic emergencies"¹⁷, and even to "[b]olster its ability to respond to increasingly severe natural disasters at home and abroad."¹⁸

In supporting domestic emergencies, the CAF is not a first responder, excluding SAR and Major Air Disasters (MAJAD). This responsibility falls to the municipalities, provinces, territories, First

Nations communities and NGOs. Mutual support arrangements between provinces can supplement capacity when necessary. The CAF's role is to assist civil authorities¹⁹ when the nature of the emergency exceeds their capacity to respond; when resources cannot be brought to bear in sufficient time, or if the CAF has specialized capabilities that are unavailable elsewhere.

Increasingly, response has become more challenging, as the nature of emergencies has moved beyond scale alone. The simultaneity of multiple events of the same or different types creates challenges for responders. Extreme weather events can magnify and compound the direct threat to human lives and suffering. The atmospheric rivers that flooded much of the Fraser Valley in BC also restricted and threatened to cut off lines of supply to Vancouver and the lower mainland. The forest fires that continue to rage in BC and the NWT have proven incredibly difficult to contain and have forced evacuations of parts of Kelowna, and multiple northern

¹⁷ Government of Canada, Department of National Defence, *Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada's Defence Policy*, Ottawa: Minister of National Defence, 2017, 17. <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/dnd-mdn/documents/reports/2018/strong-secure-engaged/canada-defence-policy-report.pdf>.

¹⁸ Ibid, 14.

¹⁹ Civil authorities also includes other Federal Government departments such as Indigenous Services Canada (ISC).

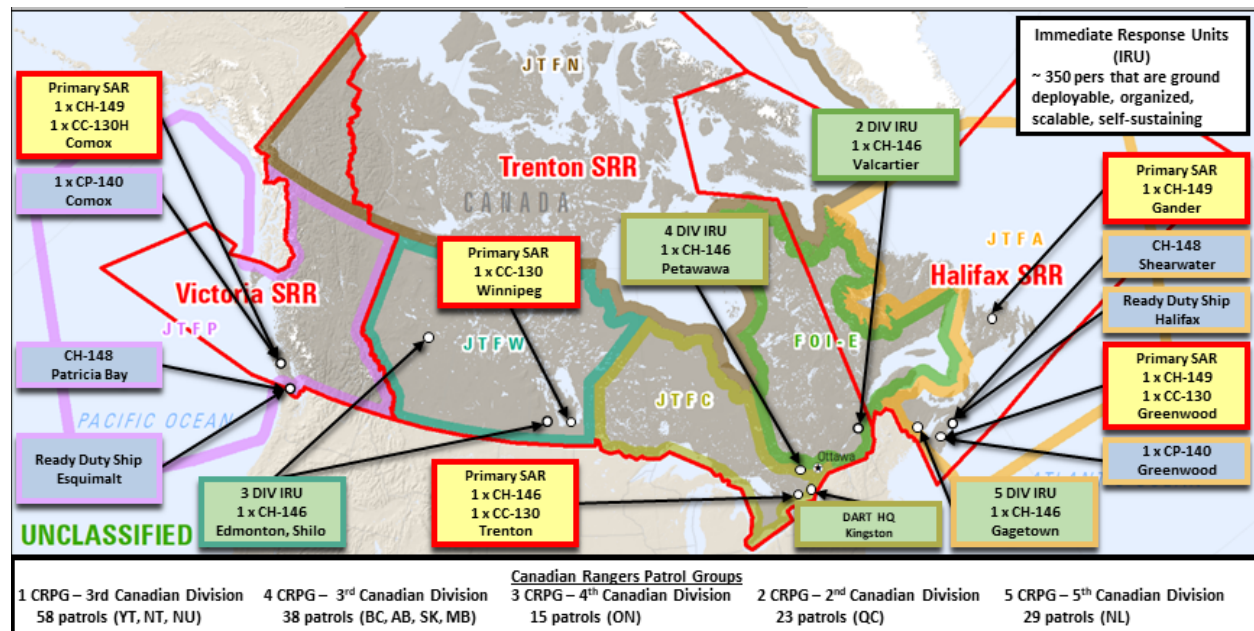
communities including Yellowknife, a territorial capital city. All of this has challenged first responders and has resulted in further use of the CAF.

CAF – A Nationally Dispersed Force

As depicted in the following graphic, the CAF’s ability to respond to disasters is enabled by its geographic dispersion, the assignment of forces on reduced notice to move (NTM), and the ability to quickly move and support them anywhere in Canada. Regular forces, reserve units, and

117 communities across the country.²⁰ Canada’s more than 5,000 Rangers serve in Canada’s north across 220 communities.²¹ This regional and community dispersion also engenders important community connections and relationships that create trust and pay significant dividends during times of crisis.

High readiness forces are within the army, navy and air force and are assigned a reduced notice to move, which can be further shortened in anticipation of an operation. Each Canadian Army division maintains an Immediate Response Unit



Rangers dot the Canadian landscape. Primary Reserve forces are dispersed among

(IRU) of approximately 350 personnel on short notice, which is formed around a self-

²⁰ 2023-24 Departmental Plan, 35.

²¹ “Canadian Rangers”, Canadian Army, Modified March 11, 2021. <https://www.canada.ca/en/army/corporate/canadian-rangers.html>.

contained combat arms grouping that includes engineers and enablers. The Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) HQ located in Kingston provides the nucleus of a scalable high-readiness force drawn from across the CAF and Global Affairs Canada that is primarily employed for international disaster relief operations. The CAF's ability to provide support to domestic emergencies is a by-product of their training to be a multipurpose, combat-capable force. Aside from some basic training and equipping of army troops to assist in forest fire support, the CAF is not trained or specifically equipped for domestic emergency response. The CAF is typically asked to provide troops, airlift/mobility support, logistical supply and support, and command and control, all of which can be mobilized quickly at scale. As Botha describes at length, it is the CAF's human resource, their level of fitness, training, the ability to employ them at scale unimpeded by public sector labour laws and regulations, and the ability to safely employ them in higher risk environments that increases their value and impact in a crisis.

Regional Joint Task Forces and the Emergency Response Network (Provincial Emergency Management Organizations)

The distributed forces function under a Command and Control (C2) structure that guides force generation (FG) and enables and supports force employment (FE) in domestic operations. Six Regional Joint Task Forces (JTF) exist to cover the Pacific, West, Central (Ontario), East (Quebec), Atlantic, and North. The Commanders (Comds) of JTF West (3 Division), Central (4 Division), and East (2 Division) are double hatted as Comds of Army Divisions with FG responsibilities under Army Command. The Comd of 5 Division (Atlantic), is the Deputy Comd of JTF-Atlantic. Each Division force generates an IRU and controls reservist and Ranger employment in domestic emergencies. Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) assets are held centrally under the Air Component Comd (ACC) at 1 Canadian Air Division HQ in Winnipeg and can be tasked to provide support nationally. Similarly, assets from the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) are employed by the Maritime Component Comd (MCC), who also serves as the Comd

JTF Atlantic and Comd Maritime Forces Atlantic.

As with all CAF operations save those conducted by North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) and Canadian Special Operations Forces Command (CANSOF), planning and execution of domestic emergency response operations falls under Comd Canadian Joint Operations Command (CJOC). Operating under orders from the Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS), Comd CJOC will direct the employment of CAF assets once activated. Typically, Comd CJOC will put the regional JTF Comds in charge of emergency operations within their region and support these operations by coordinating additional resources as necessary.

Integration and the Power of Relationships

The CAF is integrated within Canada's EMS in multiple ways at the provincial and federal levels. Each regional JTF has liaison officers (LO) embedded full-time within provincial Emergency Management Organizations (EMOs). These officers play an important role, functioning as an interface between the regional JTF and the EMO, as

well as coordinating with the regional federal and NGO partners operating within the province. As every province is different, the LOs are required to build working relationships and comprehensively understand the provincial landscape and key stakeholders within the provincial EM system and with provincial departments such as health, wildfire, and infrastructure.

The LOs must comprehensively understand the Request for Assistance (RFA) process, the process of how federal resources are requested by the provinces/territories. They must also know their regional federal counterparts given that Public Safety Canada (PSC) coordinates the Federal Government's response, and it is the Minister of Public Safety (MPS) that will ultimately approve the RFA. As such, the CAF LO must have a close professional relationship with the PSC regional lead. When a potential provincial RFA is being considered, the CAF LO needs to be closely aligned with the regional PSC lead to determine the real 'ask', identify alternate options (i.e., not CAF assets), and wargame

options should the CAF be strongly considered to support.²²

When the CAF is called out to support a province or territory, the LO must also facilitate and support the domestic operations transition for the inbound force, conveying details about the operation on the ground, provincial EMO expectations, challenges, and other details. As a new operation begins, additional LOs are often put in place at key nodes throughout the response network, enabling communication and lending support and assistance to the relief effort.

The regional emergency management interface is further bolstered through JTF Comds and staff who develop and maintain relationships with their network of provincial, federal, municipal, NGO, and First Nations counterparts. Depending on the province, this can include key officials, ministers, and Premiers. The Comd CJOC relies upon JTF Comds to serve as an early warning network that can convey the “ground truth” regarding regional disasters, whether or not provincial capacity may be exceeded, and the province’s intent for a

possible request for CAF assistance. JTF Comds and staff also develop an understanding of each province’s EM system, capacities, and limitations, and participate in exercises aimed at improving response and further deepening relationships and trust.

Given the increased focus on domestic emergency response in recent years, Comd CJOC has worked to develop relationships with several provincial ministries and EMOs through in-person regional visits in conjunction with JTF Comds. Through these valuable meetings, they are able to gain an appreciation of provincial capacities, limitations, and lessons learned, determine how the CAF can better assist, and convey an understanding of CAF capacities and limitations.

At the federal level, CJOC has an LO embedded with the Government Operations Centre (GOC) and with the RCMP. There is also strategic level integration through the CAF’s Strategic Joint Staff (SJS) and the continental team at Assistant Deputy Minister (Policy) with interdepartmental

²² Discussion, Maj (Ret’d) Chris Lunney/Bill Seymour, 30 Jul 2023. Chris served as the LO to Manitoba’s EMO, receiving a Meritorious Service Medal for his exceptional work over the course of 14 domestic operations. I am thankful for his considerable insight.

governance mechanisms that manage the federal elements of the EMS.

How the CAF is Requested – The RFA

As noted earlier, in every case the use of the CAF in a domestic emergency requires that an RFA be made by a province or territory to the MPS, which must approve it, in conjunction with the MND. This formal process can be initiated in multiple ways, be it through officials, provincial ministers speaking with their federal counterparts, and Premiers speaking directly with the Prime Minister. All RFAs are processed through the Government Operations Centre (GOC) and staffed through Public Safety, DND and the CAF's SJS.²³

Several principles and guidelines are followed in developing and considering the RFA.²⁴ Fundamentally, the CAF must be considered only as the force of last resort, which means that all other options within the EMS as well as private industry should be exhausted. The CAF cannot be seen as competing with private industry, nor should

it be used as a means of foregoing the cost of contracted solutions. It is increasingly understood, particularly at the federal level, that CAF resources are finite and that their use in domestic operations means that they stop preparing to defend Canada and contribute to global peace and security. For every RFA, the CDS provides professional military advice to the MND that includes an assessment of the risks that would be incurred by employing the CAF in any domestic operation and the implications such as what must the CAF stop doing to provide support. It is also well understood that the CAF is the final backstop in maintaining the Government of Canada's credibility in terms of domestic response.

Almost always, through the relationships and mechanisms noted above, the CAF will receive advance notice of provincial intent to submit an RFA so that preparations can begin for possible deployment. The CAF LO is an active player in the RFA process in order to facilitate the province or territory's request. Normally and ideally, the CAF LO will have

²³ "Requests for Federal Assistance", Public Safety Canada, Modified August 26, 2022. <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/mrgnc-mngmnt/rspndng-mrgnc-vnts/gvrnmnt-prtns-cntr/rqst-fdrl-sstssnc-en.aspx>

²⁴ "Domestic Operations Quick Reference Pamphlet", Comd CJOC, 1 Apr 2023.

an opportunity to assist in preparing the RFA, so that it is both specific and flexible to capture the intent of the provincial ‘ask’ and provide the CAF with flexibility in how the support is provided. RFA wording is heavily scrutinized at multiple levels until endorsement and sign-off by Ministers. The version of the RFA approved by MPS provides the basis for deployment of forces, through orders issued by the CDS and Comd CJOC.

RFA Process - Factors and Challenges

The RFA process exists to bring the right federal support to the right place at the right time. As with any process, several factors and variables can affect how it works, how and when the CAF is employed, and exacerbate some of the challenges facing the CAF. The following are some common examples:

- *Employing the CAF when other resources exist.* Availability of resources can vary by province, as can the speed with which they can be brought to bear. Planning, foresight, and ready contracts can help in this regard.
- *Specifying numbers of personnel and types of equipment.* The RFA should describe the effect or outcome to be achieved, and not include numbers of personnel or types of equipment. The RCAF’s C-17s are a popular item because of their size and strategic communications value, but they are limited to runways of a certain length and capacity, and there are only five in the CAF inventory meaning they are heavily employed.
- *Process truncation – commitments made before the RFA process is complete.* The RFA process can work very quickly. Depending on the urgency of the crisis, it can be the case that the process is activated, commitments are made, and expectations are established using emails between provincial and Federal authorities, with the RFA being written afterwards, with endorsement from Ministers to follow. Depending on the complexity of the problem, this can have multiple impacts, especially where consultations would have led to refinements of the RFA.
- *“Surprise” requests for CAF support.* Despite the CAF’s integration within the

EMS, officials are made aware of an RFA after ministers or premiers have engaged their federal counterparts or made their requests public. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, the Premier of Quebec publicly requested 1,000 troops to assist in long-term care homes.²⁵

- *Regional variations in willingness to request the CAF.* Each province has different capacities, priorities, and organizational structures. The severity of the situation, provincial capacity and resilience, provincial pride, and politics can influence whether or not a province will request CAF support during a domestic emergency.²⁶ In some situations, delays in requesting support can have significant negative implications.

- *Media, social media, and public opinion.* The impact of public opinion, fuelled by media reporting and social media, can influence decisions regarding CAF employment. Decisions are guided by advice from provincial EMOs directly involved with the situation, but provincial public opinion can often be a better indicator of a potential RFA. As Dr. Treherne noted in his appearance before NDDN, “Social media would light up with calls for the deployment of the armed forces, even if they weren't necessarily needed based on the facts on the ground or discussions with the province or territory. Many times, there's pressure in the system to deploy the CAF and for provinces to seek help...”²⁷

²⁵ Annabelle Olivier and Kalina Laframboise, “Quebec requests 1,000 soldiers to help in long-term care homes hit hard by coronavirus pandemic”, Global News, April 22, 2020. Updated July 10, 2023. <https://globalnews.ca/news/6851465/quebec-coronavirus-april-22/>. This very specific public demand and its magnitude were unexpected and sent the Federal Government and the CAF scrambling to source, prepare, and support the troops to fill the demand. It created significant churn and valuable staff effort was expended around counting daily troop numbers (which can vary daily) and reporting them. Conflicting numbers created more friction between Quebec and the Federal Government.

²⁶ Botha, 19. Botha notes that since the provinces bear primary responsibility for disaster response in Canada, Premiers will want to appear to be in control for as long as possible, which is one of the reasons why RFAs requesting the CAF may be delayed.

²⁷ House of Commons, Standing Committee on National Defence, “Rising Domestic Operational Deployments and Challenges for the Canadian Armed Forces”, Evidence, Ottawa: House of Commons, Thursday, October 6, 2022. <https://www.ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/44-1/NDDN/meeting-33/evidence>



- *The political context.* The RFA process functions within a political context and formal requests for CAF support are made, considered, and acted upon within this environment. Decisions are shaped and made by elected officials and political considerations are always a factor and can vary by region and province

Challenges - Implications for the CAF

The increase in the CAF's employment in domestic emergency

response - while it simultaneously works to reconstitute its capacity given its large personnel shortfall and response to dangerous geostrategic threats and trends - poses several key challenges for the organization. While a separate paper could be written on this subject alone, three challenges stand out: readiness, risk, and the implications of "no fail".

Readiness

Military readiness 'one of the things that keeps me awake at night,' says Canada's top soldier ²⁸

²⁸ Ashley Burke, "Military readiness 'one of the things that keeps me awake at night,' says Canada's top soldier", CBC News, March 10, 2022. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canada-military-state-of-readiness-1.6380922>

CBC News Headline, March 10, 2022.

The CDS' concern about readiness stems from the CAF's ability to deliver on the range of missions outlined in SSE, now and into the future. The CDS' insomnia is likely more pronounced for 'fight tonight' type activities, which typically occur "unexpectedly in equally unexpected places"²⁹, with short timelines for response. In its reference to "Ready Forces", the 2023-24 Departmental Plan (DP) describes readiness as the ability of the CAF to "[f]ield combat-ready forces able to succeed in an unpredictable and complex security environment in the conduct of concurrent operations associated with all mandated missions."³⁰ It is the 'combat-ready' mission sets - the primary role of an armed force – that require the highest levels of

individual and collective training that contribute to readiness. The success of high readiness forces can be impacted by key equipment shortfalls, such as the air defence, anti-tank and counter-UAS systems not currently available to Canada's troops in Latvia.

As the Army Comd in 2020, General Eyre warned that calling the military out to more and more natural disasters could hurt the army's ability to train for war.³¹ Dr. Saideman's remarks to the NDDN reinforced this viewpoint, emphasizing that the CAF's increased employment in domestic emergencies puts a strain on the CAF by interrupting training cycles and consuming money and resources that could be applied elsewhere.³² With apologies to Peter Drucker, it could be said that

²⁹ Government of Canada, Department of National Defence, *Canadian Forces Joint Publication (CFJP) 01. Canadian Military Doctrine, Ottawa: Canadian Forces Experimentation Centre, April, 2009, 2-9, https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2010/forces/D2-252-2009-eng.pdf.*

³⁰ 2023-2024 Defence Plan, 27. While an official CAF definition proved elusive, the Congressional Research Service in the US published an excellent study on the Fundamentals of Military Readiness, dated October 02, 2020 and is available at <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46559>. It describes how readiness is branded in the US as "organize, train, and equip." It also provides an example of the methodology adopted by the US Army aimed at a more comprehensive branding using "*Strategic Readiness Tenets*, or SRTs, which include manning, equipping, sustaining, training, leading, maintaining installations, and fostering capacities and capabilities."

³¹ Canadian Press, "Growing natural-disaster response risks dulling Army's fighting edge: Commander", *rdnnewsNow*, January 20, 2020. <https://rdnewsnow.com/2020/01/20/growing-natural-disaster-response-risks-dulling-armys-fighting-edge-commander/>

³²Government of Canada, Standing Committee on National Defence, "*An Interim Report on the Defence of Canada in a Rapidly Changing Threat Environment*", Ottawa: Speaker of the House of Commons, June, 2022, 42. <https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/441/NDDN/Reports/RP11857914/nddnrp01/nddnrp01-e.pdf>.

operations consume readiness for breakfast, lunch and supper.

Risk

The second challenge is that of risk and it is linked to readiness and the CAF's ability to achieve what the Government has asked it to be prepared to do. For simplicity, focusing on 1) risk to mission; and 2) risk to force (or personnel) is sufficient.³³

Risk to Mission. From a mission perspective the CDS is highlighting the risk of not being able or prepared to conduct the full range of core missions the CAF has been assigned. Within a zero-sum space, employment of the CAF in domestic operations when alternatives are available creates a risk that the CAF will not be available, or capacity exhausted should other missions requiring an armed force arise. In a more dangerous world, this risk has become more pronounced. The risk to the mission is magnified by the CAF's current shortfalls of personnel, particularly among mid-level leaders, and expertise within multiple skill areas across each of the environments.

³³ For a good primer on operational and strategic risk considerations, LtGen (US Ret'd) Deptula provides an overview in "Managing Risk in Force Planning", available at <https://www.heritage.org/military-strength/topical-essays/managing-risk-force-planning>.

³⁴ 2023-24 Defence Plan, 12.

Risk to Force/personnel.

Perhaps the most significant risk here is to field a force that is not combat ready, in all the dimensions that contribute to it. In the context of a depleted personnel, leadership and expertise base, and efforts to reconstitute the force, the Departmental Plan highlighted that continued increases in the use of the CAF in domestic emergencies may "aggravate the personnel shortfalls" that led the CAF to implement its reconstitution efforts.³⁴ The over-employment of the CAF in domestic crises may also contribute to personnel challenges in another way. Even though members of the CAF are honoured and eager to support their fellow Canadians in need, the CAF's role as Canada's disaster response force vs. armed force may negatively affect recruiting and retention. It is not what people signed up to do.

Force of Last Resort - No Fail Mindset

Activating the CAF, using the force of last resort, is seen within the CAF as a 'no fail' mission. As the CDS has said many

times, if you use us, “we’re in it to win it”.³⁵ A ‘no fail’ mindset means that all the resources of the CAF (even beyond that envisioned in the RFA) are potentially put in play to ensure the mission is accomplished. This is particularly so when the CAF is used to save lives and reduce the suffering of their fellow Canadians. Unlike international operations, which are generally operations of choice, once initiated, the CAF’s employment in a large-scale emergency at home becomes a one hundred percent commitment. This mindset, this culture, is not well understood by civilians and civilian policymakers and creates a demand for strategic depth in force design and posture.

The Zero-Sum Reality – Considerations

SSE and the MND’s recent comments underscore commitments to the CAF’s supporting role in domestic emergencies. But where does it stop? Where is the line that says, “If we go beyond this point, we won’t be able to do X, or we’ll have to stop doing Y?” How much of the CAF budget, people power, equipment, and

readiness are earmarked for this mission set? Given the predictions about the impact of climate change in Canada, the answer appears to be “a lot more” especially if further action isn’t taken to increase civil capacity. These types of questions are important, particularly as the CAF grapples with its ability to preserve and enhance its combat capability and meet the demands of a future warfighting environment by shifting additional resources to cyber, digital backbones, artificial intelligence, remotely operated vehicles, field fifth generation fighters, new tankers, frigates, and more. It’s a zero-sum space.

Dr. Saideman offers a dose of straight talk by arguing that “...we need to think about how do we balance these things because nobody else is going to show up besides the military. That’s the way it is.”³⁶ In this way of thinking then, the focus is always to deal with the ‘alligator closest to the boat’ while working through how to deal with the next threat downstream. It is folly to suggest that the Government would have thought for a second to keep the CAF in

³⁵ From the author’s personal experience.

³⁶ “The Role of the Canadian military in 2022,” *The Current*, *The Current with Matt Galloway*, CBC Radio, October 4, 2022, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/thecurrent/thursday-october-4-2022-full-transcript-1.6605889>.

reserve while more elderly people died in long-term care homes. It is unimaginable that the CAF would not be a part of a civil-military operation to evacuate the 20,000 residents of Yellowknife, no matter what exercise or international airlift had to be cancelled to support it. That said, the landscape has changed, and the CAF cannot continue doing this over and over again and only ponder that issues will right themselves.

Kerry Buck, the former Canadian Ambassador to NATO, noted that the tendency in Canada is that once the military is deployed, it's:

“...problem solved. But that gets nowhere near civilian preparedness for us in Canada for the increasing number of natural climate-related disasters. It gets nowhere near the preparedness for the increasing number of climate threats internationally. So personally, I think we need a national conversation about what the civilian role is, what the civilian assets should be, and what the responsibility is between them.”³⁷

Illuminating where the gaps are across the EMS and determining how they should be filled should be a national priority, agreeably on a growing list of national priorities. There has been ample opportunity to learn from a myriad of domestic emergencies. The COVID-19 pandemic was the mother of them all, yet there appears to be a national reluctance to identify and apply key lessons to learn and prepare for the next crisis due to largely political concerns surrounding accountability and embarrassment.

Accepting that the future portends an increased demand for all of Canada's disaster responders, the CAF too must prepare for this as it increases its readiness to fulfill its other more demanding core missions. The CAF's integration within the EMS is of net benefit to the entire enterprise and can be leveraged to help in building capacity. Notwithstanding its current limitations, in conjunction with PSC and the provinces, the CAF's assistance in developing plans and planners, supporting exercise development, and training, would also continue to foster the relationships that

³⁷ Ibid.

are the key to trust, cooperation and speed that are so beneficial in times of crisis.

The publication by the PSC of the first National Risk Profile (NRP), a national emergency preparedness and awareness tool, is an important and useful contribution to better understanding the challenge space.³⁸ The first volume focuses on earthquakes, wild land fires, and floods and identifies current disaster risks and capability gaps in today's national EMS. Follow on reports are planned that examine other hazards. The NRPs support Follow On policy and action plan development to address the gaps and issues identified. Similarly, the work of the Hawaii-based *Center for Excellence in Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance (CFE-DM)* and the *Pacific Disaster Center – Global (PDC Global)* provide examples of best practices that not only contribute to understanding disaster risk and preparedness but highlight paths to building resilience and strengthening disaster management.³⁹

During the webinar, Dr. Agrawal suggested that the way forward should involve a series of smaller steps, applying iterative and innovative solutions, and leveraging the capacity and demonstrated performance of NGOs such as the Red Cross. By leveraging research such as the NRP, a fusion of responders, policymakers, academia, and think tanks could work to close gaps by providing quick wins through such things as better use of information and data, sharing planning and response tools among provinces and federal partners, making use of available early warning tools that leverage big data and artificial intelligence, and the like. The need and the opportunities are certainly immense. Solutions require cooperation and strong political will.

The eagerly awaited Defence Policy update would do well to more emphatically propose solutions to balance the challenges posed to the CAF by increased domestic emergency response and the requirement to ensure the CAF's combat capability is

³⁸ Government of Canada, Public Safety Canada, *National Risk Profile. A national emergency preparedness and awareness tool. First Public Report – May 2023*, Ottawa: Minister of Public Safety, 2023. <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/2023-nrp-pnr/2023-npr-pnr-en.pdf>.

³⁹ CFE-DM's website <https://www.cfe-dmha.org/Publications>. PDC Global website <https://www.pdc.org/reports-and-publications/>

suitable to meet the threats that exist within a more dangerous world. It should also cast beyond the silo of Defence to underscore the need to invest in civil capacity to close the gaps identified through significant recent experience and illuminated by reports such as the NRP, to raise the tripwire triggering CAF involvement in domestic emergencies.

Bill Seymour served as CJOC's first two-star Chief of Staff Operations, and then Deputy Commander, for a total of six years. He served as part of the team that directed and oversaw the planning, conduct and, after-action review of multiple domestic emergency operations as well as the CAF's support to the COVID 19 pandemic. Prior to this he was the first Canadian General Officer to serve at United States Indo-Pacific Command and participated in the US and international response to the Philippines Super Typhoon Haiyan, the Nepal Earthquake, and the search for Malaysian Airlines flight 370.

Improving Operational Effectiveness Across Canada's EM Ecosystem

Josh Bowen, Former Senior Director of Emergency Planning, Canadian Red Cross

As of mid-August, this year over 200,000 people across Canada have been evacuated from their homes due to wildfires, doubling the previous record set in 2016.⁴⁰ The extreme heat and record-setting wildfire scale continue, along with more evacuations. Actors from all sectors are responding, but the systems that people rely upon for assistance during these events are challenged as communities deal with ongoing and concurrent climate-related emergencies at an unprecedented scale.

The humanitarian sector, including actors like the Canadian Red Cross, St. Johns Ambulance, Team Rubicon Canada, and many others, are on the ground supporting people and communities in need before these disasters strike. They are there long after the hazards recede and remain there as people begin the long process of

returning to their homes to assess and repair the damage. Public sector actors, including wildland firefighters, first responders, the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), and all orders of government are diligently working to support people impacted, as is the private sector.

Looking at this year's responses reveals a growing systemic reliance on limited resources, a trend that beckons for a holistic strategy that transcends mere short-term fixes. The challenge is that this constant state of response is proving to be ineffective as disasters are largely addressed individually and in a siloed approach. The clarion call is clear: strengthening the operational effectiveness of Canada's emergency management system is not a luxury but a necessity of the highest importance. The foundation of this transformation lies in the intersection of readiness, collaboration, and capacity-building. This rallying call for a true whole-of-society approach comes at a critical juncture as the need for a better-coordinated emergency management ecosystem across Canada has never been more evident.

⁴⁰ Natural Resources Canada. (2020). *Wildland fire evacuations*. <https://natural-resources.canada.ca/climate-change/impacts-adaptations/climate-change-impacts-forests/forest-change-indicators/wildland-fire-evacuations/17787>

A Better Whole-of-Society Approach

The response to the COVID-19 pandemic saw a whole-of-government approach that recognized events transcended departmental mandates. There was increased collaboration and coordination as myriad actors responded to a common crisis that required collective efforts across jurisdictions. This was hugely successful in supporting Canada's response to COVID-19 and remains relevant in recovery. Post-COVID, the humanitarian response sector is seeing a return to a siloed approach to readiness which results in duplication of efforts, inefficiencies, and a lack of a cross-cutting view and coordination. Now is the time to take the lessons from the past few years and improve operational effectiveness across Canada's emergency management ecosystem.

Disaster response actors, including the Canadian Red Cross and the CAF, are being called upon more often to provide support to those impacted by disasters or emergencies in Canada and around the globe. Since 2018, the Canadian Red Cross

has supported more than 700,000 people impacted by disasters in Canada. For the CAF, the past decade has also brought significant changes and an increased reliance on resources for domestic disaster responses, with the military supporting more than 30 domestic operations between 2010 and 2020, compared to only six between 1990 and 2010⁴¹. The humanitarian sector is designed to rapidly surge people and assets into disaster areas in support of public authorities to help those in need. While the CAF has provided frequent support to those living in Canada in times of crisis, its intended role is as a complementary resource of last resort in climate-related emergencies, not a lead humanitarian instrument.

Strengthening Humanitarian Workforce Capacities

The Canadian Red Cross supports that a strong civilian capacity exists to conduct humanitarian and disaster relief work in Canada, and this work should be carried out by dedicated and professional humanitarian agencies. Doing so leads to a

⁴¹ Department of National Defence. (2021). *Canadian Armed Forces Operations and Activities – Transition Binder 2020: March 2020 – Operation LENTUS*. <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/transition-materials/caf-operations-activities/2020/03/caf-ops-activities/op-lentus.html>

better continuum of support from response to recovery and into long-term disaster risk reduction actions, while also being a more efficient form of engagement for local actors. In other words, impacted communities are supported consistently and comprehensively throughout their journey, and long after the hazard has receded are national attention and emergency resources diverted elsewhere. This is in line with the proposal that disaster responses would be strengthened by increased coordination and clarification of roles and mandates between response agencies, such as between the humanitarian sector and the CAF.

The disaster events of the past few years have demonstrated the challenges of ad hoc and siloed operational response capacities. More specifically, there is a lack of predictability in terms of which actors can respond, when, how, and for what purpose. Public authorities are often unclear about what response instruments are available to them to meet the demands of the rising risk environment. The result is the absence of a holistic view of Canada's readiness capacities, and core capabilities, and there is no comprehensive response plan. This means that the humanitarian sector is left

without clear instructions, funding, and mandates of what is expected of them, and the CAF is often used as a short-term cure for a larger issue.

Actionable Next Steps

Now is the time to: 1) increase collaboration for readiness; 2) create a coordination table for pan-Canadian event response; and 3) strengthen the capacity that exists within the humanitarian sector.

On the first point—increasing proactive collaboration for readiness—recognizing that all-hazard risk events have interdepartmental, inter-jurisdictional, and whole-of-society impacts, we would welcome a discussion on collective risks, readiness capacities, and mandates. For example, convening a series of meetings across federal departments and including provinces, territories, First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities, and the humanitarian sector. This would be a significant step forward for gaining greater clarity for this and future disaster response seasons and help to create effective structures to better support those impacted by disaster events. Additionally, conducting joint readiness planning sessions and

exercises to address large-scale events as well as concurrent smaller events across the country that equally draw on resources, would be an excellent short-term commitment.

On the second point—creating a coordination table for pan-Canadian event response—the Canadian Red Cross welcomes increased governance and collaboration in the federal, provincial, territorial, and Indigenous leadership space. This is especially necessary as Canada faces increasing disaster events that transcend departmental mandates and provincial/territorial borders. Institutionalizing a coordination table inclusive of auxiliary actors, like the Canadian Red Cross, that can provide pan-Canadian, real-time operational insights, would increase operational efficiency, and ultimately limit the impacts disasters have on the lives of people in Canada.

Finally, on the last point, more must be done to strengthen, adapt, and modernize our collective national preparedness tools. This includes the adoption of permanent mechanisms to fund and enable appropriately mandated civilian humanitarian response capacity. While CAF

members have done a tremendous job supporting communities in times of immediate response needs, our military cannot be the only tool in our collective federal emergency response toolbox. Surge humanitarian workforces should be the lead and primary response actors in support of public authorities during times of disaster response.

A fit-for-purpose structure, leveraging the strengths of the humanitarian sector to enable whole-of-society response, recovery, and risk reduction efforts is critical and must be built around a set of founding principles. To be successful, the model for strengthening Canada's civilian humanitarian response capacity must:

1. Have clarified roles, responsibilities, and a mandated scope that aligns with the purpose and expertise of respective actors. Further, a corresponding investment proportionate to the mandate and scope must be made to ensure the sustainability and viability of surge actor capacity.
2. Meaningfully include the voices of those most impacted to help shape solutions, be mindful of human costs and impacts, and include operational response

capacities experienced in providing tailored humanitarian support.

3. Better support local needs and capacities beyond response and include risk reduction, recovery, and resiliency.

Without a confirmed mandate and proportionate funding for the humanitarian actors whose core purpose is to support people in Canada before, during, and after disasters, responses will remain ad hoc, and capacities are at risk of being pushed beyond the breaking point.

Institutionalizing Collaboration

It is important to recognize the positive aspects that exist, which for this conversation are two-fold. First, collaboration and coordination between the CAF, public sector, and humanitarian actors in disaster response in Canada is happening. The humanitarian sector routinely works together during disaster responses, supporting each other and enabling each other's missions and service delivery. For example, the Canadian Red Cross and Team Rubicon Canada worked closely together in response to flooding in Halifax earlier this

year. However, this was done on an ad-hoc and just-in-time basis at the initiative of the two organizations; not because of intentional, coordinated pre-planning.

Second, a model for a standing civilian disaster response capacity is emerging through the *Humanitarian Workforce* program under Public Safety Canada. Since 2020, the Canadian Red Cross has managed over 9,500 deployments of our Emergency Response Surge Workforce personnel to support people in Canada in their time of need. Our partners in the Humanitarian Workforce program have been there alongside us. As of April 2023, the Canadian Red Cross has secured a 3-year funding allocation for the Emergency Response Workforce, spanning to March 2026. Through the Humanitarian Workforce project, St. John Ambulance, The Salvation Army, and the Search and Rescue Volunteer Association of Canada (SARVAC) have also received funding to support their programming.⁴² This is an excellent step toward establishing a standing civilian disaster response capacity that leverages the expertise present within the humanitarian

⁴² Public Safety Canada. (2023). *Government of Canada continues to build disaster response capacity to large-scale disasters*. <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-safety-canada/news/2023/07/government-of-canada-continues-to-build-disaster-response-capacity-to-large-scale-disasters.html>

sector. Moreover, this emergent model has proven to provide a predictable standing-ready capacity with expert organizations when people in Canada need support. That said, the model needs to be expanded and strengthened.

It is time to institutionalize the mechanisms that enable pan-sectoral collaboration:

- increasing collaboration for readiness
- creating a coordination table for pan-Canadian event response, and
- increasing investments in a standing civilian capacity for disaster response built on the expertise present within the humanitarian sector.

Strong coordination limits competition and overlap, while ensuring a more nuanced approach that keeps the needs of the communities at the centre of the event. Because at the end of the day, the success of any response efforts will be judged at the household and individual level in times of crisis.

Tying it Together

The unprecedented scale and frequency of climate-related emergencies, notably 2023's record-breaking wildfires in

Canada, have underscored the urgent need for a comprehensive and coordinated approach to emergency management. The existing response mechanisms have been strained, revealing the limitations of ad hoc and siloed operational capacities. The lessons learned from the successful whole-of-government approach during the COVID-19 pandemic serve as a valuable model for addressing the evolving landscape of disaster response, recovery, and risk reduction.

To address the challenges posed by ongoing and concurrent climate-related emergencies, it is imperative to take proactive steps. First, enhancing collaboration for readiness among federal departments, provinces, territories, Indigenous communities, and the humanitarian sector is crucial. This collaborative effort can facilitate a more coherent understanding of collective risks, readiness capacities, and mandates, leading to effective structures to support communities impacted by disasters and crises.

Second, establishing a coordination table for pan-Canadian event response, which includes auxiliary actors like the

Canadian Red Cross, can enhance operational efficiency and provide real-time insights to limit the impacts of disasters on Canadians' lives.

Lastly, there is a pressing need to strengthen and modernize the national preparedness tools and invest in surge humanitarian workforces as the primary response actors during disasters. This approach, built on clarified roles, meaningful engagement with impacted communities, and support for local needs beyond response, recovery, and resiliency, can create a more effective and sustainable disaster response system.

Institutionalizing these mechanisms for collaboration and coordination will not only reduce competition and overlap but also ensure that the needs of communities remain at the forefront of emergency response efforts. As the world faces an increasingly challenging risk environment, embracing a holistic, whole-of-society approach is not a luxury but a necessity for the well-being and resilience of the people living in Canada. The time to act is now, to build a more robust and adaptive emergency management ecosystem that can effectively

respond to the growing threats posed by climate change.

Josh Bowen has more than 20 years of crisis leadership and emergency management experience and training in disaster, military, and academic settings. He is the former Senior Director, Emergency Planning at the Canadian Red Cross and is serving as a Subject Matter Expert supporting Public Safety Canada's National Risk Profile initiative and Environment and Climate Change Canada's National Adaptation Strategy. He is now the Vice President of Organizational Excellence at Team Rubicon Canada. Josh served 13 years in the Canadian Armed Forces as an Infantry Officer, where he was directly involved in five disaster response operations. He holds a BA in Peace and Conflict Studies, an MA in Disaster and Emergency Management, an Executive MBA, and is an alumnus of the National Preparedness Leadership Initiative at Harvard University.

Disrupting a Culture to Improve Canada's Resilience

By Lisa Paul, Director,
Community Programs, St. John
Ambulance in Canada

Emergency management in Canada is increasingly defined by higher orders of government being triggered to respond regularly due to local response capacity being exhausted rather quickly when disasters hit communities. With no nationwide strategy in place to empower citizens and communities to be more aware, prepared, and capable of helping during times of emergency and disaster, we lack resilience at the individual, household, and community levels in Canada. Building a program to support these gaps from the ground up, that starts at the local level, could ensure increased capacity by leveraging Canada's largest available workforce – the community. Such a program would not replace current efforts to reform Canada's emergency management system at provincial and

federal levels, but rather help build up and contribute to Canada's overall resilience and response capacity.

St. John Ambulance (SJA) believes that **every** person in Canada should be prepared to save a life, and further be prepared with basic awareness, preparedness, and capabilities for times of emergency or disaster. Statistics show that people in Canada are concerned about emergencies and disasters but feel that they are not ready for them. StatsCan recently reported that 76% of people have not taken any steps to prepare their household for an emergency or natural disaster.¹

With better-prepared citizens and communities, less intervention may be required from higher orders of government, and resources like the CAF could remain a true force of last resort. Embodying a community approach, especially to nature-triggered disasters, means the Canadian government and emergency management stakeholders must take greater initiative to educate and empower citizens and communities while improving their ability to mobilize and manage spontaneous community

responders effectively and efficiently.

In Canada, we must re-engineer the model for emergency management. We currently operate within an order of failures, waiting on municipalities, then provinces or territories to become overwhelmed. When capacity is exceeded at those levels, a Federal Request for Assistance is triggered and in far too many cases the CAF is deployed to respond. While the current framework enables the access of funds, unique military support, and other resources for significant response efforts, Canada must simultaneously research best practices around the world and make intentional efforts to build an emergency management framework to include, not overlook, capacity building opportunities like citizens, communities, and NGOs.

To increase the immediate disaster response capabilities, especially in preventing loss of life, individuals and households must build their own resiliency which will also contribute to the overall resiliency of their community. Governments and large NGOs can contribute by empowering people in Canada and by maintaining strong

support. As explained by Michel C Doré, National Emergency Management Advisor with St. John Ambulance in Canada “such a reality calls for a system re-engineering to foster a culture shift toward a community approach to disaster response. Such an approach also promotes individual and community responsibilities about prevention and mitigation.”²

In the United States, the Community Emergency Response Team³, run by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), is a public awareness, preparedness, and response program effectively supporting similar gaps that are found in Canada. We may look to this program as just one example of what Canada can do to improve identified gaps and build capacity to coordinate community response.

Based on experience, St. John Ambulance believes increasing individual household and community awareness, preparation and capability for emergency and disaster response is imperative for resilience building. As SJA Director of Community Programs, Lisa Paul often reminds the teams at SJA that it is the citizens of a community who are the first

people on the scene, the last to leave and often the ones most impacted by disaster.

Research published in recent years suggests that spontaneous community response is often overlooked in emergency management plans.⁴ The potential loss of life and property can be reduced, and community resilience increased by leveraging the capacity and the capabilities of community members who are more aware, better prepared, and more capable of responding. Military assets do not need to be used as a substitute for civilian workers in many circumstances.

As a former 911 responder in Canada's capital, Mrs. Paul thinks of the St. John Ambulance Lifesaving Award as an example to highlight the community's capacity to act. In the last 5 years, over 1900 life-saving awards have been granted to people in Canada who have acted to save someone in a life-threatening situation, demonstrating their willingness and capability to help in times of emergency. This example demonstrates how empowered citizens can be successfully leveraged as part of the emergency management plan their

community has in place.

An example shared by Mrs. Paul during the CDA Institute panel discussion in June 2023 was an observation she made during the 2018 flood season. That year, SJA was providing emergency health services, operating a field hospital for evacuees in a large Canadian municipality. The road into the community was lined with passenger vehicles, dump trucks, emergency response, and armoured vehicles entering the community during the initial hours of response. While in that convoy, Mrs. Paul's first impression was to think *'We're not even on the ground, and the tank carrying the **last resort** is 4 vehicles in front of my ambulance'*. She asked herself if this was a situation of deploying the CAF as an asset when municipal and provincial capacity was exceeded, or as a habit.

On-site during Operation LENTUS in that community, CAF members were sandbagging 24 hours a day and the sea of green was working hard, exhausted, and being as productive as possible. The questions in many minds however were *'Where is the municipal people's power? The sandbagging machines? The citizens*

and the other regional NGOs to assist?’ This community floods every year, and although 2018 was exceptionally bad, some principles of emergency management and the concept of a whole-of-society approach were not functioning well.

During that deployment, a contingent of nearly 15 civilians armed with strong backs and shovels were turned away from a municipal sand pile because there was no agency on-site to manage them which negatively impacted their ability to effectively respond to this situation. Merely 30 minutes later, sandbagging output wasn’t meeting water-front demand and SJA medical teams were asked to spare members to sandbag. Civilian help was not considered until a clever emergency manager engaged those citizens, who were now multiplying by the minute at an unstaffed sand pile up the road.

In times of emergency and disaster, the industry can overlook the community or leverage Canada’s largest workforce; it is our choice. In the situation outlined above, advanced preparation to mobilize and manage community responders may

have saved more property, as there was an earlier opportunity to leverage their ability to produce a large volume of sandbags from the various ad-hoc work sites staffed by the community before the waves were crashing down the wall.

The observation shared by SJA during the CDA Institute panel discussions is a simple example highlighting just one situation, in one municipality, during one flood season. If that is multiplied by decades in a country of 3700 municipalities, during times of increasing frequency and severity of nature-triggered disasters, it shows us that we must disrupt the current culture and build a more efficient and effective system. We must empower all of society to take a more active and successful approach to domestic response because the community members are always going to be there, and if they are more aware, better prepared, and more capable it will lead to increased community resilience.

Throughout the country, we ought not to deny that CAF is exceptionally efficient and effective in its response to emergencies. Their trustworthiness, ability to deploy quickly, and steadfastness to aid

Canadian communities do not go unnoticed or unappreciated. It must also be recognized that empowering the community to mobilize and work during emergencies is not without its challenges. To further Canada's ability to be successful in the future, civil society must find ways to learn from the CAF. To educate and empower citizens and communities in Canada, we must more actively share civil and military strategies, educate each other, and establish shared priorities and objectives. This needs to be done in advance of disasters so that we are not challenged with those tasks during times of response. In that process, during times of non-emergency, regular exercises involving community groups and municipal governments, supported by the Government of Canada and provincial/territorial authorities, must be undertaken to become more effective, and efficient, and to increase abilities to work as a cohesive team, capable of interoperability.

In addition to practice, community preplanning must strengthen and include using historical and data-driven decision-making tools to optimize emergency management concepts, time, and

resources. Canada can build a system of civil-military cooperation that empowers Canadian citizens and communities to be more aware, prepared, capable, and resilient and allows for CAF to be the actual force of last resort.

Understanding why the CAF is requested in so many nature-triggered disasters is as important as identifying the gaps that would exist if they were used only as a force of last resort. In re-engineering the system, we must look to other resources to fill the gaps such as the Humanitarian Workforce Program.⁵ The program, supported by Public Safety Canada, is enabling four national NGOs to increase their preparedness to work in disaster zones through increased capabilities and capacities. The availability of these resources must now be shared with Canada's 3700 municipalities and the provincial and territorial governments, who ought to know they can call upon The Salvation Army, St. John Ambulance, the Canadian Red Cross and the Search and Rescue Volunteer Association of Canada more often.

Currently, SJA is building

strategically located Emergency Response Units across Canada with a focus on providing Emergency Health Services. This includes Medical First Response and Psychosocial Support, such as therapy dog services and mental health assistance, to care for both the physical and mental health needs of people impacted by emergencies and disasters. Emergency responders from NGOs play a crucial role in Canada's ability to respond to nature-triggered and human-induced disasters. These teams of trained and equipped responders, made up largely of volunteers, can be leveraged by municipal, provincial/territorial, and federal governments in response to emergencies and disasters.

At SJA, the focus between 2023 and 2026 is to continue increasing the number of responders, their capabilities, and their rapid response abilities. To further enable and sustain adequate volunteer emergency response workforces, NGOs need government and private industry support to ensure this workforce is available, such as volunteer tax benefits like firefighters, policies to aid in the retention of peoples' jobs when volunteering for emergency

response organizations and amendments to long-term insurance policies to provide coverage to volunteers when there is no wage to recover. The benefits of financial support and legislative policies will enable NGOs to build larger teams and improve the retention of the volunteer workforce that plays a crucial role in response to emergencies and disasters in Canada.

As a federally incorporated and non-profit organization, the mission of St. John Ambulance is to improve the health, safety, and quality of life of people in Canada through training, education, resources, and community service. SJA is a trusted partner in Canada, which has demonstrated response alongside CAF from the time of WWI, deploying members to Voluntary Aid Detachments, hospital and nursing services, and Army and Navy fighting medical units. This emergency and disaster response work has continued in the support of the people in Canada up to and including the 2023 flood and fire season, and for more than a century in between. During any disaster, human or natural, SJA members offer assistance, expertise, care, and compassion. Our tradition of coming to

the aid of people in Canadian communities reaches back to well over a century.⁶

Teaching in Canada for over 140 years, including the Canadian Armed Forces for 25 years, SJA trains nearly 500K people each year in both official languages, in areas of opioid poisoning response, mental health and wellness, workplace safety courses and first aid and CPR. With over 10,000 staff and volunteers supporting charitable efforts, SJA uses training revenue to fund volunteer services in more than 300 communities through efforts focused on Medical First Response, Therapy Dog Services, Emergency Management, and youth-related initiatives.

Many individuals do not know why it is important to be more aware and prepared, let alone know what to do or where to find reputable information for themselves and their household. This may be why they are not reacting and taking the necessary steps to become more aware of the changing climate in their region, and preparatory steps for emergencies and natural disasters.

As a health, safety and training

organization, St. John Ambulance is one of many organizations in Canada that can work to close this gap. Being entrusted with public education in Canada, SJA provides first aid, CPR, mental health and opioid poisoning response training and equipment to individuals and businesses to be always prepared for medical emergencies. St. John Ambulance can also be an organization that increases awareness and shares emergency preparedness information with the public, so they are more capable and confident to help during times of emergency and disaster.

In summary, with a nationwide strategy and actionable program to empower the largest workforce in Canada during times of emergency and disaster – local communities and residents in Canada will build on past successes in emergency management. Imperative to success is to engage in a whole-of-society approach, with a strategic focus on increasing individual, household and community awareness, preparation, and capability which can contribute to the alleviation of pressure on high orders of government to intervene.

Lisa Paul, as the national Director of Community Programs for St John Ambulance Canada, is passionate and specialized in providing operational and strategic leadership while collaboratively improving organizational performance. Through values-driven leadership and integrity, she leads initiatives in a pragmatic, relevant, and competitive way. Key areas of focus for her work include community safety, youth leadership initiatives and mental health and wellbeing. Lisa is a Member of the Order of St. John, an experienced 911 and mental health crisis responder, founder and past president of a non-profit organization, and a recipient of the Ontario Medical Association Centennial Award, recognizing her distinguished acts in serving the health and welfare of the people on Ontario.

Beyond Catching Up – A Radical Shift in Disaster Response

By Eva Cohen, *President, Civil Protection Youth Canada*

Canadians' collective sensitivity to risk is different from what it was 20, 10, or even 5 years ago. When I first introduced the idea of creating a Federal Agency for Disaster Readiness in 2008, many people were unaware that our response system was mainly established for *emergency* response - which is swift, affecting a small area only, and is often over within 24 hours – and that it would be quickly overwhelmed by disasters, and completely inadequate for catastrophic events.

Now, 15 years later, we are experiencing one unprecedented disaster after the next.

One after the other, these incidents are highlighting critical gaps in our response system, showing that we require very different capabilities and capacities for major disasters and catastrophic events.

Such disaster response capacity is missing at the municipal, regional, and



provincial levels. More hands on deck are needed to support local authorities and first responders for hazard-specific tasks and prolonged operations.

A huge gap needs to be filled between first response and recovery.

Traditionally, emergency response and recovery have been supported by NGOs. They focus on first aid, locating missing people, the social components of a disaster, and financial assistance. But we have never had timely specialized technical support capabilities needed to address the actual *destruction* that disasters cause, with tasks

such as debris clearing, emergency power supply, emergency infrastructure repair, or providing emergency communications when our networks are down.

This deficit often leads to unnecessary evacuations and longer recovery times.

Our reactive approach means that additional resources arrive only after the situation has already escalated, resulting in our inability to intervene and prevent or mitigate cascading effects.

Recovery in general is seen as a separate issue that occurs after the fact, when it really should be linked to preparedness and

response. It should include technical recovery capabilities like debris clearance, building assessments, pumping, shoring up or demolishing buildings as well as provision of emergency infrastructure repair, etc.

The fact that there is no extra capacity on stand-by to assist local or regional efforts at short notice—with the necessary expertise and special capabilities—is the reason why the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) are being called upon so often.

“Emergency Management” is only one of the many capabilities needed when disaster strikes. Most Provinces can provide extra staff for that task, but not much more. Moreover, the expectations around the tasks of emergency managers are sometimes misunderstood. Imagine an emergency manager as a “general contractor” of a building site who is mainly responsible for oversight and managing resources and capacity. But there is still a shortage of trained individuals to actually do the tasks required, on the ground, in a coordinated

way. It becomes obvious why we evermore frequently turn to the CAF to fulfill that capacity as our asset of last resort. In fact, the Armed Forces is the only government tool available that has a strong command and control structure, robust logistics, and is self-sufficient. It can put capable boots on the ground and work safely in a hazardous environment—with the necessary equipment and vehicles. But what we need is this kind of structure, skills, capacity, and quick deployment upon which we can rely *on a regular basis*—as disasters are becoming *regular events*. Now more than ever, we need to stop diverting our military defences for these purposes before it becomes completely unfeasible.

Canada’s military leaders have repeatedly stated that the ever-increasing calls for domestic operations are hampering mission readiness and their focus on their Defence mandate.⁴³

However, as an asset of last resort, the CAF is invaluable, but only that. They are not experts in wildfire fighting, flood protection, or other natural hazard-specific technical tasks. The general public tends to

⁴³ Christian Paas-Lang, “Facing foreign conflicts, domestic disasters, Canada’s top soldier worries about readiness,” CBC News, October 2, 2022. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/eyre-military-readiness-challenge-1.6603430>

overlook the obvious: that using sophisticated military equipment for disaster response and recovery is expensive, and not our best option. The cost of our reliance on the CAF for these tasks needs to be taken into account.

Instead of armored vehicles, we need excavators, cranes, high-capacity pumps, water bombers, and other equipment. We need people trained to use them, to clear debris, to provide emergency power and water, and to repair damaged infrastructure.

That our soldiers are not specialised in disaster response is by no means a criticism. Our Armed Forces are simply neither trained nor equipped to be the first go-to. And the question is – should they be? Especially when assisting in disaster response is one of the CAF's responsibilities. I argue that because we can clearly foresee that this need is going to become exponentially more desperate, we cannot do things as we have in the past. We have a new need. We need a new response.

Whose role is it to protect citizens and communities?

Since the 1980s, the government has been telling each of us to be aware of our risks, have a kit, and have a plan.

Despite that, to this day, less than half of Canadian households have that minimum of emergency preparedness. This well-meaning messaging has contributed to a false sense of security, as well as a lack of responsibility and ownership of the problem. The message has been that all we need to do is to hunker down and wait to be rescued. The message needs to change!

If the government simply ensures that the uninsured will receive financial assistance, what signal are we sending in terms of disaster risk reduction? One of the oldest justifications for government is its role as protector: protecting citizens from violence and any other harm. In the context of increasing disaster frequency and intensity, if people feel that the government has failed them, this can quickly lead to civil discontent and unrest when expectations are not met, even if they are false expectations.

It is therefore crucially important to ensure that the government is capable of fulfilling its role of providing swift and adequate response and recovery. Sending the CAF to show citizens that their plight has

been recognised by the federal government or hoping that the presence of soldiers will give a sense of security and gratitude to a population in crisis, is not a great strategy for Canada's future. Especially as the increased frequency and severity of disasters globally are highlighting other successful approaches and capacity-building efforts. Canadians will soon wonder why we are the only developed nation without an agency dedicated solely to protecting us and our communities from disaster impact.

The federal government has called upon the military to also cover tasks that ideally the NGO sector should long have identified and prepared for. In an effort to reduce these sorts of calls – like COVID-19 assistance in elderly residences and hospitals – millions of dollars are being invested in a so-called Humanitarian Workforce.

However, this effort will not solve the main issue at hand: that it is the government's duty to protect its citizens. And currently, other than the CAF, there is no reliable tool or government agency to fulfill this task.

The new recognition of the need for a mechanism specifically focused on disaster relief presents a unique opportunity for the

federal government to demonstrate its leadership and fix three issues at once. First, to shift our system from reactive to proactive; second, to reject the delusion that “a few can be tasked to rescue all”, and third, to enable citizen volunteers who want to help, to do so.

We often associate the term “volunteers” with well-meaning but not necessarily well-trained reliable citizens. Also, if volunteers have day jobs, they will simply not be available when needed.

But there are best practices from other successful models that address these concerns.

The German Federal Agency for Technical Relief (Technisches Hilfswerk, known as THW) is unique in that it is a government organisation (GO) based on 98% of unpaid citizen volunteer experts. As a GO, it can implement the needed checks and balances to ensure that: a) volunteers are trained and certified to recognised standards and expertise; b) that they are continuously integrated into the response system to assist and to be ready when the call comes, and; c) to establish private sector collaboration, incentives and laws that allow volunteers to leave their day jobs when they are needed to

step into their disaster relief role, turning them into a timely and reliable asset.

Through my years of experience advocating for this new approach across many sectors in Canada, I know there is uncertainty regarding the feasibility and reception of this idea. I hear comments such as “It’s a different culture in Germany.” However, I have come to realise that that is simply not true. Whether it is within my neighborhood, my sons’ school environment, or as a long-time member of a pick-up hockey team – I have found that Canadians are incredibly generous and ready to help, even eager to help. All the news reports during and after disasters show affected citizens expressing the same desire and demonstrating their selflessness and courage to help others. Imagine they were also highly skilled, organized, and integrated to respond quickly and in a coordinated way.

Just to give a few recent examples: in the NWT, after 68% of Yellowknife residents had to evacuate due to approaching

wildfires, returning residents were overwhelmed to see the number of volunteers eager to make a difference. They worked hard to welcome residents home after the difficult experience of the evacuations.⁴⁴ In New Brunswick, a new initiative called the “citizen network” is bringing together coastal property owners who have fresh memories of the damaging impact of Hurricane Fiona last year. They are self-organising to share ideas and find out how to help each other before and after hurricanes. One of the members of the group, could not have said it better: “Getting concerned or getting worried is not enough,” she said. “We need to try to prevent the damage and help repair it if it happens.”⁴⁵

The difference in Canada is that when it comes to disaster response, is not a lack of commitment by citizens to help their neighbours or of not having the “right culture”, it’s that the government does not invite and enable citizens to be part of the solution.

⁴⁴ Rachel Schoutsen TWN (@RachelSchoutsen). “Sharing a Sunday smile as many Canadians head back home to #Yellowknife. Dr. @courtghoward thank you for sharing this with me.” X, September 10, 2023. <https://x.com/RachelSchoutsen/status/1700844499616862355?s=09>

⁴⁵ Alexandre Silberman, “Coastal N.B. residents join forces against devastating hurricanes,” CBC News, September 11, 2023. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/new-brunswick/coastal-residents-hurricane-prep-group-1.6960965>

To clarify the difference citizens can make when they are proactively and continuously integrated into the response system, I would like to highlight the advantages of establishing a completely new federal Civil Protection agency in Canada that would be modelled after the successful example of Germany's volunteer-based approach. This would significantly relieve the pressure of relying on an over-stretched CAF as the only asset of choice. The CAF would still have an important role, but instead, it would only contribute the resources not available elsewhere, such as emergency airlift.

The Volunteer Agency Model

Our current reactive approach is simply no longer adequate. Waiting until local resources are overwhelmed, and for a situation to be out of control before we deploy the military prevents us from intervening appropriately and immediately to reduce the impact of a disaster. It also prevents us from identifying and addressing vulnerabilities before disaster strikes.

Of course, establishing a completely new body that is well-equipped and trained, comes at a cost. Especially, when the goal is

to be ready for a wide variety of catastrophic events. We need technical capabilities to monitor land movement, clear mud and debris, build emergency bridges, etc. When communities, hospitals, and elderly residences lose power for days or weeks on end because of an ice storm, we need to be able to provide emergency power. We need to be able to purify water and provide drinking water. None of this can be done without the right equipment and the people trained to do it.

When using the term “agency” in this context, many immediately picture a large and complex bureaucratic government organisation, civil servants, red tape, not easily approachable, and insanely expensive in itself.

This “new agency” which I am talking about is the complete opposite. It is a volunteer agency, based on the principle that for readiness for catastrophic events, we need all hands on deck and a mechanism to work together. And this mechanism can only work if it has a proper framework, structure, and oversight.

The most cost-effective approach eliminates the high cost of wages and instead invests in needed infrastructure,

institutional knowledge, equipment, training, and structure to guarantee readiness. It is also the most efficient method to include all residents willing to help, rather than only a small group of full-time staff who are deployed when needed but who are otherwise paid to basically wait around for the call to action. Such a force would be, by its very nature, limited in size, not scalable, and probably located far from where it is needed.

Bringing in help from outside is a reactive approach. It also creates a divide between those impacted and those who come to the rescue. It discourages communities from proactively building and maintaining their own disaster response capacity, and identifying local hazards and vulnerabilities.

We already have what we need. We can hit the ground running.

In fact, many of the skills needed already exist within our communities, even in remote regions. After all, many citizens have professional backgrounds that make them experts in logistics, situational awareness, media relations, construction, wastewater, pumping, cutting down trees,

building assessments, clearing debris, operating heavy machinery, and so much more. All that is missing is the *agency* to provide the training to work safely together in a hazardous environment, with a command and control structure and in collaboration with other response agencies – but that aspect is easily added.

In truth, Canadians need to have a role in protecting their own communities. If *enabled* by the government, they become a partner and active contributor to the solution rather than a critic of perceived failures. With training in civil protection skills, technical equipment, integration, and engagement in routine community tasks, they become an efficient, timely, and reliable asset.

Canadians who have been introduced directly to the THW system in Germany have felt encouraged by the potential of something like this for Canada. I have initiated and accompanied Canadian delegations to visit and study the German THW in person in 2013 and again in 2015. I have also hosted a joint THW/ Defence Research and Development Canada (DRDC), Prov/Fed Senior Officials Responsible for Emergency Management

(SOREM) workshop which I co-facilitated. Key concerns were first about the ‘insurmountable’ jurisdictional issue of Emergency Management responsibilities in Canada, and the role of the federal government. However, every time, the delegates were astonished to learn that Germany’s federation has EXACTLY the same division of tasks as Canada has. And they noted the huge benefit to all three levels of government of having a coordinated federal Agency for Technical Relief on the ground.

Why there has been such little progress despite all the groundwork that has been done, has little to do with the feasibility of the approach, but all with the challenges one would naturally expect with such a big idea and a reluctance to change. First of all, most people – including key decision makers – have simply been unaware of the need to modernize our system before it became obvious when put to the test by an increase in disasters. Presenting a solution to a problem that has not been identified rarely leads to action. And, of course, like with any

other new idea, stakeholders are protective of their turf and continue to persuade senior bureaucrats that they can do it all if only they will receive more funding and wider mandates. Now that reality has set that straight, that has changed, the biggest challenge that remains is that we need to **act now**, as we no longer have the luxury of time.

How can this work, and why is it a better solution than rallying the troops and sending them where needed when things are out of control?

First, let’s talk about cost. In Germany, the federal government provides the funding, structure, oversight, and standards to train a nationwide civil protection force. The current annual budget for that government organisation is roughly \$700M⁴⁶. (For comparison, the City of Ottawa’s 2023 total expenditures for emergency and protective services, not including the police, is \$357M).⁴⁷

For this money, about \$8 per citizen per year, Germany maintains 80,000 all-

⁴⁶Bundesministerium der Finanzen (2023). *Bundeshaushaltsplan 2023*, <https://www.bundeshaushalt.de/static/daten/2023/soll/epl06.pdf#page=194>

⁴⁷ City of Ottawa. (2023). *Draft Budget 2023 – At a glance*. <https://ottawa.ca/en/city-hall/budget-finance-and-corporate-planning/previous-budgets/budget-2023#>

hazards-trained volunteers in over 700 locations across the country.⁴⁸ They are equipped with state-of-the-art technical equipment for rescue, threat prevention, and infrastructure repair; excavators, drones, cranes, boats, pumps... anything you would need to address structural collapse, flooding, power outages, storm damage, and more. Each of these detachments has a youth component where (approx. 15,000) children as young as 6 years old learn about civil engagement and emergency preparedness and begin training to become adult rescuers. At the provincial level, specialty modules for high-capacity pumping, heavy urban search and rescue (HUSAR), bridge building, water purification, etc. are distributed across the country, determined by each region's risk profile. And yes, these volunteer experts do not just volunteer to have a role. They are unpaid expert volunteers. They are neither paid for their training nor for the time they deploy to help when they are needed. They step up because they are enabled by the government to do so. This is the result of a functioning “whole-of-

society-approach”, which I will explain in more detail later.

Second, let's talk about structure. Nationally, it is solely the *local* authorities who activate their local THW detachments when needed to assist first responders (firefighters, paramedics, police) and local authorities. A *second response capacity* with additional capabilities. In larger scale operations, the THW can quickly scale up and draw from its regional resources to assist the local government rapidly and, without red tape, as in the catastrophic 2021 Ahr River flooding, where volunteers from all 700 detachments across Germany assisted as rotating surge capacity, with all the THW's 25 technical capabilities, from providing illumination to blasting and emergency bridge building.⁴⁹

Note that for the international deployment of the THW, deployment becomes a decision of the federal government, such as the example of the recent devastating earthquake in Turkey, or to support humanitarian efforts in Ukraine.

⁴⁸ Technisches Hilfswerk (2022). *Jahresbericht Annual Report 2022*.

https://www.thw.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/Hintergrund/Jahresberichte/jahresbericht_2022.pdf;jsessionid=F3C3704547AE65B732757A587ED247BD.2_cid293?__blob=publicationFile

⁴⁹ Technisches Hilfswerk, *THW im Unwettereinsatz*, August 06, 2021.

This structure is based on incentives and benefits all levels of government:

Municipalities maintain their ‘own’ capabilities, based on unpaid citizen volunteers. The more volunteers the municipality manages to recruit and maintain, the more funding it will receive. Because these volunteers train regularly, and in collaboration with local first responders, they are integrated into the response system and there is clarity about each other’s capabilities, roles, and responsibilities. The THW detachments train weekly, or if preferred monthly, a cherished social function building team spirit, unit cohesion, and expertise. Vulnerabilities can be identified and addressed to mitigate disaster risk; disaster response is strengthened, and the recovery phase is directly tied to preparedness efforts. Anyone is welcome, children, youth, seniors, veterans, immigrants, highly skilled workers, unemployed – anyone who wants to help. Imagine the cascading social impact such a GO can have by giving people purpose, relevance, and a network to grow with and rely on.

States (provinces) are supported in their need to maintain additional capacity

ready to assist and determine which capabilities/modules are most needed by their municipalities depending on their risk profile, and where to base highly specialised equipment. They are responsible for overseeing, leading, and managing the provincial operations and part of the costs.

The Federal Government proactively manages resources and controls spending, thereby ensuring the local and national capacity needs are met to protect citizens. Moreover, the THW also provides the German federal government with a tailored and responsive international disaster response capability, which is frequently deployed around the world.

Because of the structure, national standardised training, and equipment, any THW helper from across the country can easily join a surge to another jurisdiction, a critical factor for reliable scalability.

The most obvious advantage, however, is the whole-of-society approach. Each sector *enables* the other to have a role in an advanced, multi-layered joint effort ready when disaster strikes. The THW is a government agency based on 98% unpaid citizen volunteers with very small full-time paid staff at the national and regional levels.

It is a unique partnership between citizens and governments. Just like military personnel, citizens are proud to be of service and to be trusted with a role of such critical importance. If done well, training technical skills for a catastrophic event can be a thrilling, adventurous highlight of an otherwise monotonous, dull work week. It is like a hobby people enjoy making time for at night or in their free time. They don't expect to be paid, but they expect to not incur a loss by stepping up, either. This is why the government sees to it, that the members of this agency continue to receive their salary from their regular day jobs, even if they have to step away from it and into their rescuer role. (The NGO sector is not always happy with this special treatment for GO volunteers – however, it is very obvious why the government cannot guarantee equal treatment for the volunteers of NGOs, with no control over deployments, standards, training, and certifications).

Citizens commit to volunteer their time and (often professional) expertise and in return, the government commits to providing them with state-of-the-art equipment, and the highest standards of training and relevance.

Through this government agency, a link is established between citizens, government, NGOs, and the private sector.

Specialized training is conducted in accordance with industry standards. The private sector enables volunteers to step aside from their day jobs if needed and the federal government reimburses companies for the period of loss of their employees. However, many companies are proud to see their employers help and forgo reimbursement. They also benefit, in return, from the special knowledge and expertise their employers can contribute to their workplace environment.

Some say that we need a Canadian version of the US Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). But we should not duplicate what we already have, as FEMA's role is very much that of Public Safety Canada's Emergency Management branch and coordination within the federal government. And our government chooses to task NGOs with FEMA's role of distributing government funding and financial disaster relief. FEMA is a professionally staffed coordination agency, not unlike our provincial and territorial Emergency Management Organizations, although roles

and responsibilities are different. It should be noted that although FEMA offers courses to improve citizens' ability to respond, like CERT (Community Emergency Response Team) courses or empowering individuals with "you are the help until help arrives" training⁵⁰, it does *not* provide boots on the ground, fully trained and organized volunteers with their own specialized equipment.

Most Canadians have come to realise that we need a **whole-of-society approach** to prepare ourselves for what is to come. Unfortunately, too often that is understood to mean that *everybody needs to do something*. On a personal level, this is true, and everybody needs to be prepared, have their kit ready, and know their risks. But for effective disaster response and relief, the key to success is a coordinated approach that includes close collaboration and coordination of all sectors of society, including trained local citizens. Without the agency to provide the framework, structure, and deployment mechanism, we will never be able to reach our full potential and ensure that we are able to scale up our response

wherever needed and even simultaneously in various parts of the country.

To establish this agency, a substantial initial investment is needed. However, because of the modular nature of this approach, it depends on our appetite for change how much we choose to invest to get started, and how fast we are going to add more capacity and capabilities. The biggest benefit of this model lies in financial sustainability as once established, the operating costs are much lower than any comparable option can ever be.

One major thing is needed to accomplish this: Leadership with a determination to succeed. We know that disasters are only going to increase. We need to build up our collective resilience and start protecting Canada, and our communities, *all together*, instead of expecting a few to do it all for us.

Eva is the Founder & President of Civil Protection Youth Canada (CPYC), a not-for-profit organisation focused on building community resilience and disaster readiness through youth engagement.

As an expert on citizen-based disaster response, Eva writes, teaches, lectures and broadcasts extensively on the subject. She has advocated for

⁵⁰Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). (2022). Individuals and Communities. <https://www.fema.gov/emergency-managers/individuals-communities>

the creation of a federal agency for disaster response and recovery for over a decade. Hers is a proven approach, though novel to Canada, based on training and equipping volunteer detachments across the country. Eva regularly briefs stakeholders on the concept of a civil protection agency, including ministers, MPs, senior officials, emergency management professionals, and first responders. Eva's expertise is based on a broad range of training, experience, and research. She served with the German Federal Agency for Technical Relief (Technisches Hilfswerk, THW), an all-hazards government civil protection organization based on volunteer experts, which she sees as an exemplary model to be tailored to Canadian needs. She has led various Canadian delegations on study-visits to the THW in Germany and she has initiated and hosted discussions between senior THW officials and Canadian stakeholders.

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