

# An Examination of Challenges Faced by First Responders in the Midst of Disaster

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

*The ineluctable threat of future natural and manmade disasters makes it imperative to advance the understanding of key issues that first responders face in the midst of disasters, and to develop meaningful strategies for preparing them for disaster response. The potential conflicts between professional and personal responsibilities that first responders may face in responding to an incident can represent a distinctive feature of a catastrophic event. This project examined the issues of role conflict and resilience among first responders who have participated in major disaster events. Answers to the project's research questions provide an understanding of the human dynamics experienced by first responders when they are personally impacted by a disaster. This work advances the mission of the Science and Technology Directorate of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) by providing information needed for advancing the development of simulation models and effective training curricula to assist first responders in their quest for preparing and responding to future disaster events.*

## **ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND**

The Principle Investigator (PI) for this project is an Associate Professor of Criminology in the Department of Sociology and Criminology at Howard University. Howard University is considered the nation's top-ranked historically black college or university. The main campus, located in Washington, DC, houses the undergraduate and graduate programs, Howard hospital, medical school, and dental school. The university also has three additional campuses that include: the School of Divinity, the Law School, and the Beltsville Center of Climate Systems Observations. Howard University is a comprehensive research university, with a commitment to educating youth for leadership and service to our nation and the global community. The Carnegie Foundation classifies Howard University as a "Doctoral Research University-Extensive." It is one of only 88 institutions, one of only 25 private institutions, and the only historically black college/university with this designation.

## **SETTING THE STAGE**

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) began offering Summer Research Team opportunities to faculty members at Minority Serving Institutions (MSI) in 2005. This program provides an avenue for MSI faculty to engage in research germane to the mission of the DHS at one of the many Centers of Excellence that are supported by the agency. Selected faculty members are invited to bring with them up to two students to participate in their research endeavor; all participants are awarded a stipend to support their summer expenses. Faculty members can either select an independent topic that relates to the mission of their selected Center of Excellence, or participate in one of the pre-established research teams. The affiliation of this PI with DHS began with participation in this program.

During the summer of 2006, the PI worked at the Johns Hopkins' Preparedness and Catastrophic Event Response (PACER) Center of Excellence in Baltimore, Maryland. The research project undertaken for the DHS Summer Team Program was an independent project lead by the PI that focused on examining the challenges faced by first responders during disasters. While working with the PACER Center of Excellence, the PI was able to network with faculty members at the Johns Hopkins Division of Public Safety Leadership, and gain insights about public safety professionals, and fostered networking opportunities through these connections. This opportunity led to additional funding through DHS that supported the expansion of the project.

The additional DHS funding provided the resources necessary to expand the original research conducted during the PI's participation in the Summer Research

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