

FALL 2017

The Story of North Carolina Counties

County **QUARTERLY**

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Profile IN SERVICE Michael Sprayberry

A Discussion on How to Keep Counties Safe when Disaster Strikes

By Lacy Pate | Public Relations Manager



From left, NCACC Executive Director, Kevin Leonard; NC Emergency Management Director, Michael Sprayberry; and NCACC Past President and Davidson County Commissioner Fred McClure gather as Director Sprayberry is honored with NCACC's "Friend of the Counties Award," at the Association's 2017 Annual Conference held in Durham County.

This summer at the Annual Conference, NCACC honored Michael Sprayberry, Director of North Carolina Emergency Management.

He received the 2017 NCACC Friend of the County Award for his support of counties and locally driven policies. He has a genuine appreciation for local emergency managers and commends their work. "We are so proud of our local emergency managers...we think they are the nation's best...it's the backbone of our preparedness here in the state," said Sprayberry.

Director Sprayberry is keenly aware of the pressure on county commissioners and other local officials, particularly when disaster strikes. He often reminds his staff that every day local officials come face to face with their constituents, who expect results. "For us, we know that our local emergency managers work for the county commissioners and the county managers and so it's important for us to realize that each and every day and not get so wrapped up in what's happening in Raleigh and our headquarters building."

Director Sprayberry served in the U.S. Marine Corps and N.C. Army National Guard for 25 years before joining North Carolina Emergency Management in 2005 as the Deputy Director and Logistics Section Chief. His expertise and ability to lead the state through all kinds of crises with a calm and steady hand won the confidence of both Republican and Democratic Governors. NCACC Executive Director, Kevin Leonard, puts it best "in his presence, you just feel safe. You know that he's got this." Sprayberry is an apolitical problem solver, who isn't afraid to tell it like it is. Sprayberry recounted a candid conversation he had with a senior federal official about why he opposes proposals to shift disaster costs onto states. "I don't think he [the federal official]



Photo courtesy of NC Department of Public Safety.

Governor Roy Cooper stands alongside NC Emergency Management Director Michael Sprayberry as he delivers a briefing on Hurricane Irma.

liked it, but I don't care. I work for the Governor."

Director Sprayberry is also a nationally recognized leader, serving as Vice Chair of the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) National Advisory Council and President of the National Emergency Management Association. In these national leadership positions, he continually encourages policy makers to solicit input from county partners. He often reminds national leaders that emergency management is a partnership and that local input is needed to make good, informed policy decisions. He views his work as a team effort and emphasizes the importance of listening

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to partners. "When I come into this building [NC Emergency Management Headquarters] I check my ego at the door. I'm not telling you what to do, we're working as a team."

Director Sprayberry also understands the critical role local emergency managers play in preparedness and response. He described the integral partnership between the state and local government and the significant financial and human capital investments that are made at the

local level. "When we call out resources, we call them out under a state flag, but the reality is they are resources kept and maintained at the county-level with a lot of county investment...and also their blood, sweat and tears."

As Director Sprayberry explains, "there are real consequences to your actions," so he takes his job very seriously and doesn't leave room for chance. Even though he felt pretty certain there weren't going to be significant impacts to the state from Hurricane Irma, which began as a category five system and made landfall mid-September, he activated NC Emergency Management in response to the storm. He said it's better to err on the side of caution. "We did not want to be surprised," said Sprayberry. "We owe it to our counties to be ready with a decisive hand."

And it's not just hurricanes for which N.C. Emergency Management is prepared to respond. "If you've got an issue then we assemble the team. It doesn't matter if it's contaminated water, a disease, a terrorist event, hazmat... we have the ability to gather up the team and to put all the resources together so that you can successfully guide a response to whatever threat you're facing with the full spectrum of disaster resources," said Sprayberry.

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Director Sprayberry is grateful to have broad, bipartisan support throughout North Carolina on public safety issues. “Commissioners understand the importance of public safety. I’ve heard about other states where maybe that’s not the fact, but we really enjoy good support from commissioners.”

Additionally, he noted that unlike many other states, North Carolina has state programs in place to provide public assistance and individual assistance to disaster victims for events that don’t meet the threshold for a federal disaster declaration. The state disaster reserve fund also allows N.C. Emergency Management to easily activate resources as needed. “Our state is strong in that aspect, we have a lot of disaster resources,” said Sprayberry.

During Hurricane Matthew, the category five system that devastated much of eastern North Carolina on October 8, 2016, Director Sprayberry worked closely with the NCACC to ensure that counties received the most up-to-date and accurate information possible. He said that establishing good lines of communications in a disaster is paramount and he’s focused on making additional improvements to existing emergency communications channels. “It’s our duty to keep the commissioners informed as to what’s happening... not just the response, but the recovery as well,” said Sprayberry.

As the recovery process continues for Matthew victims, Director Sprayberry remains actively engaged in county issues. He is coordinating an effort to bring together various agencies and organizations involved in the recovery to work with the hardest hit counties and the state to identify any remaining unmet needs. And he wants to make it as easy as possible for counties to report their needs.

Sprayberry described the process, “We are meeting weekly to make sure that we’re identifying all the unmet needs. We want to make sure that if you’re the local in Bertie County, we come as a group together to visit you and sit down with you. And as you present your issues to us, the FEMA person can say ‘ok we’re planning to pay you \$2 million for this project’ and then DEQ [NC Department of Environmental Quality] says ‘well, we’re going to chip in \$3 million’...so that way we can identify the gaps and you only need to tell your story one time...we want to make sure the counties and municipalities are getting the funding they need so we’re trying to do it in a methodical, synchronized and coordinated way.”

Director Sprayberry also shared his insight on the top three things commissioners can do to help make their county more resilient. First, he recommends promoting personal preparedness. “The main thing we need to keep promoting is preparedness...not just for 3 days, but for 5 days,” said Sprayberry. “Have your emergency kit equipped with flashlights, batteries, medications, non-perishable food, water and an emergency plan, and download the ReadyNC App on your smart phone.”

Second, implement smart and responsible development practices in your county. “It makes good sense that when we build things closer to the water that we do so with an eye to mitigation. Build to the Base Flood Elevation level or higher. If you invest a little bit of money on the front end and build things to base flood elevation or a little higher the payoff is extraordinary on the back end.”

Third, encourage residents and business owners

to get flood insurance coverage, particularly those located in the floodplain. “It’s so obvious...the people we still have hanging right now that are in a bad spot from Matthew are the ones who didn’t have flood insurance. The ones who had flood insurance...it’s back to normal.”

When NCACC created the Friend of the Counties Award in 2005, the purpose was to recognize individuals and organizations who are not directly affiliated with the NCACC, but who make our counties strong. There is perhaps no one more deserving to receive the award this year than Director Sprayberry as he has been a true partner, working closely with counties to recover from the devastating effects of Hurricane Matthew

and fires in the west. He went above and beyond to keep counties informed and continues to help find pathways to making our counties whole again. Even the tagline in his email signature reflects his commitment to counties. Every email he sends is a powerful reminder that Director Sprayberry is a devoted and trusted friend of counties. He signs off saying, “What have you done for counties today?” ■

County Resilience Checklist: Director Sprayberry’s Top 3

1. Advocate Personal Preparedness - Provide guidance to residents and businesses on steps individuals can take to prepare for a disaster.

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2. Practice Flood Smart Development - Know where flood risks exist in your county and implement smart and responsible development practices to mitigate them.

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3. Promote Flood Coverage - Encourage residents and business owners to get flood insurance coverage, particularly those located in the floodplain.

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