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Creating a Non-Military Disaster Workforce Must be Part of Canada's Climate Change Response

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From Last Resort to First: The CAF and Disaster Response

The floods and mudslides that struck British Columbia in November 2021 have led to the [deployment](#) of hundreds of Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) personnel to assist with response and relief efforts. This mission caps off a busy year of domestic operations for the CAF. Military personnel deployed as part of [Operation LENTUS](#) have helped the Yukon prepare for intense flooding, assisted with wildfire evacuations in Northwestern Ontario, fought wildfires in Manitoba and B.C., and provided potable water for Iqaluit through the deployment of Reverse Osmosis Water Purification Units (ROWPU). Meanwhile, hundreds more CAF members supported the Government of Canada's response to COVID-19 and its vaccine distribution efforts through Operations [LASER](#) and [VECTOR](#).

These activities are part of a growing trend. Between 1990 and 2010, the CAF [participated](#) in six humanitarian assistance and disaster relief missions. In the next 10 years, that number jumped to 30.

Climate change, the natural hazards it amplifies, and limited provincial and territorial investment in disaster management capabilities explain this mission increase – as does the fact that the CAF is very good at disaster response. This [effectiveness](#) flows from the military's organization, strong command and control, logistical capabilities, specialized equipment, and its ability to quickly put hundreds of self-sustaining boots on the ground – a source of human power that is physically fit, does not get paid overtime, can work for extended periods (in past disasters, soldiers have slept less than three hours a day for 72 hours), and can be put in harm's way. The CAF's unique capabilities and the lack of other options across the country have transformed it from a force of last resort in disaster response into a force of first, or only, resort. As climate change [increases](#) the number, duration, and frequency of natural hazard events facing Canada, demands for the CAF's assistance will only grow.

But, as [previous commentators have pointed](#) out, this tempo of domestic operations will negatively affect the CAF's force generation, operational readiness, and training for its combat role – issues that are exacerbated by the military's ongoing

recruitment and retention challenges. Further, the CAF provides only response and relief; it does not do mitigation or recovery work. In short, the military is not a cure-all to the current disaster management gaps in this country. With the climate crisis intensifying, provinces, territories, and the federal government need to build surge capacity across the disaster management spectrum of prevention, mitigation, response, and recovery. To do so, Canada needs a non-military disaster workforce.

Building From the Ground Up

The solution begins at the local level. In response to the B.C. floods and mudslides, hundreds of local volunteers in the Fraser Valley – Search and Rescue groups, Emergency Support Services, Community Emergency Response Teams, Canadian Red Cross, First Nations Emergency Services Society members, and [many others](#) – have worked tirelessly to help their fellow community members. The presence of [community-based response organizations](#) with even modest training can play a [key role](#) in [bolstering](#) the disaster resilience of their communities. In recognition of this, the last decades have seen the proliferation of voluntary and trained local emergency response teams in communities around the world, including many in Canada (e.g. [Federal Emergency Management Community Emergency Response Teams](#) (CERT) in the United States; [Red Cross emergency management/disaster response teams](#); [Salvation Army Community Response Units](#); and the [Ontario Volunteer Community Emergency Response Team](#) (OVERT)).

During a disaster, members of these groups can [perform](#) search and rescue, render basic first aid, perform wellness checks on community members, direct traffic, assess damage, and execute other roles as required. More importantly, these teams consist of individuals who are part of relationships, groups, and networks that span the social breadth

of their communities. They also foster new relationships and associations between members, ultimately forming a nexus that a community can draw upon during an emergency or disaster. The intersection of multiple social networks in these response teams ensures that members know most or all community members, understand who is vulnerable, and who needs assistance (hence their prominent role in performing wellness checks during emergencies). Given their pre-existing relationships, local responders can also persuade people to take action, whether it be evacuating or taking immediate shelter. Further, when outside agencies respond to local emergencies and disasters, these teams can offer a ready entry point into the community, provide a steady stream of accurate and essential information, and give immediate access to their extensive networks, all of which facilitates response activities.

Building a cohesive and formalized network of voluntary local emergency response teams in at-risk and vulnerable communities across the country – particularly in underserved rural and isolated areas with little emergency management capacity and limited access to rapid external assistance – is an effective and relatively inexpensive way to strengthen Canada’s disaster resilience. Such a network requires regular training and exercise opportunities to keep skills sharp and team members engaged, and to ensure that local channels of communication and collaboration remain open and ready for a quick response.

Working together, provincial and territorial emergency management organizations and Public Safety Canada should build off existing emergency response and/or search and rescue organizations to create this nation-wide network of community emergency response teams. Funding should also be provided for full-time emergency workers that can facilitate the ongoing training, coordination, and

engagement of these teams. This could be provided for at the community or municipal levels through the hiring of additional emergency managers who could assist with the establishment and organization of the teams, while performing other local emergency management duties. Other [possible](#) frameworks exist, however. For instance, public safety [experts have](#) highlighted Germany's [Bundesanstalt Technisches Hilfswerk](#) (Federal Agency for Technical Relief) or Australia's [State Emergency Services](#) as potential models for Canada to follow in expanding its voluntary emergency management sector. Both organizations have small cadres of full-time professionals organized at the federal and state levels to assist with organizing, administering, and providing standardized and nationally-recognized training to thousands of volunteers at the local level. Both organizations, however, have recently [raised concerns about](#) volunteer recruitment and retention. To ensure its sustainability, the Canadian model may need to consider possible incentives, such as increasing the current [tax credit](#) provided to emergency services volunteers or even considering a “paid-per-call” system.

The Canadian Resilience Corps: A Professional and Permanent Disaster Workforce

Strengthening Canada's network of community emergency response teams is an important first step and will help communities across the country respond to the first minutes, hours, and days of a disaster. Eventually, however, local response teams are overwhelmed or are required to deal with their own personal and property concerns. Rapid response disaster aid groups, such as [Team Rubicon](#), understand this and try to provide disaster relief between the moment a disaster happens and when traditional aid organizations arrive on scene. But

they need help. These small teams cannot compare to the hundreds of self-sustaining responders that the CAF is able to provide.

It is time for Canada to invest in a sustainable disaster management workforce: a *professional* and *permanent* Canadian Resilience Corps or Agency – or multiple provincial and territorial corps' – that do not have to be re-established for each new disaster. An organization of full-time responders could be quickly mobilized and deployed to disaster zones for response and recovery efforts. To justify its permanent existence, such an organization must also be engaged in every phase of disaster management: not just response and recovery, but mitigation, preparation, and prevention. These efforts would pay for themselves. Every [dollar spent](#) on mitigation and prevention saves *at least* six dollars in response and recovery.

The U.S. offers several potential models for disaster workforces that could be adapted to the Canadian context. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has a [disaster workforce](#) that is “designed to scale up or down depending on the timing and magnitude of disasters.” The agency has its [permanent full-time](#) staff members that support its mission areas and operations on a daily basis. FEMA also uses a [Cadre of On-Call Response/Recovery Employees \(CORE\)](#) – temporary full-time employees that are hired to support disaster response and recovery efforts for 2- to 4-year terms, which are renewable if needed. [FEMA Reservists](#) are on-call employees who work intermittently as required. They must be able to deploy within 28-48 hours and to remain on scene for 30 or more days. If an incident exceeds the capacity of the FEMA disaster workforce, the Agency can also draw upon the Department of Homeland Security [Surge Capacity Force](#) (SCF), which consists of federal employees from other government agencies who can deploy to disaster zones to assist with relief and

recovery efforts. The agency can also call upon the services of [FEMA Corps](#), made up of 18-24 year old members who engage in a 12-month residential emergency management service program and work in communities impacted by disasters. Finally, FEMA also has the authority to augment its disaster workforce with local hires. In short, FEMA's disaster workforce model offers the flexibility of full-time staff with the ability to rapidly mobilize temporary workers.

FEMA's disaster workforce, however, has been subject to criticism in recent years. It has been hard-pressed to [deploy](#) adequate staff to past disasters amidst [persistent](#) workforce shortages, [employee burnout](#) has been identified as a major issue, the cadre of temporary workers and pool of Reservists have proven [difficult](#) to maintain, and the practice of having Reservists on constant call has been [questioned](#). These workforce issues have not only created challenges in responding to disasters, but in administering long-term recovery operations, and supporting local and state planning, preparedness, and hazard mitigation efforts.

These critiques have led other organizations to suggest that the current FEMA disaster workforce is insufficient to address the climate crisis. The U.S. non-profit [Resilience Force](#) is attempting to convince President Biden to launch a nation-wide Resilience Corps, which it views as a central component of the [resilience economy](#).¹ The Corps would perform climate adaptation and mitigation work year-round. After disasters, members of the Corps would be deployed to provide response

services, repair work, and long-term recovery, providing a constant surge capacity of human-power in an emergency. The [New Orleans Resilience Corps](#) has already been launched as a pilot program, "training under-employed and laid-off people from the local service sector industries in critical community health outreach practices, preparing them to take on new roles that are critical to the recovery."

Whether it be fashioned after FEMA's disaster work force, the Resilience Force, or a made-in-Canada model, the establishment of a Canadian Resilience Corps would provide the kind of disaster management capabilities that this country is currently lacking. On the preparation side, Resilience Corps members could provide year-round training of the country's community emergency response teams. During these training visits, they could also bring together key stakeholders in the community to create, update, and/or exercise robust emergency response *and* recovery plans (most communities do not possess the latter). On the mitigation, prevention, and adaptation side, they could conduct hazard mapping, assist with FireSmart activities, create floodways, build resilient infrastructure, and take the lead on dozens of other actions required to reduce disaster risk and vulnerability. They could be rapidly deployed to respond to disasters and support other first responders. They could also spearhead recovery efforts, providing the human power to get communities back on their feet and paving the way for long-term recovery efforts by private industry. In short, a Resilience Corps would fulfill many of the

¹ Other jurisdictions in the U.S. and abroad have established their own versions of a Resilience Corps – particularly as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. [Many of these programs](#) are focused on providing jobs to unemployed or underemployed individuals, on engaging young adults, or on coordinating existing volunteer efforts. In November 2021, the

Minderoo Foundation, in partnership with NRMA Insurance, announced the creation of an [Australian Resilience Corps](#) – an initiative aimed at creating and mobilizing a national network of volunteers trained to help Australians better prepare for the effects of fire and flood.

functions required to make Canada more disaster resilient, while providing valuable on-the-job training opportunities to its members.

The military will always have a role to play in disaster response. The [RCAF Cormorants](#) that rescued almost 300 people trapped by landslides on Highway 7 near Agassiz, B.C., are a prime example. Even with the Bundesanstalt Technisches Hilfswerk and State Emergency Services, both [Germany](#) and [Australia](#) regularly draw upon their militaries for disaster response. But more is required as the climate crisis worsens. Last month's [Speech from the Throne](#) promised to better prepare communities for floods, wildfires, extreme weather, and other hazards through the development of Canada's first National Adaptation Strategy. A key component of this strategy should be a nation-wide network of community emergency response teams supported and trained by a professional Resilience Corps engaged in full-time preparation, mitigation, response, and recovery activities – all of which will help a more resilient Canada withstand future disasters.

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