

# Local Government and Elected Officials Guide to Emergency Management

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# Contents

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I. ACRONYMS .....	3
II. OVERVIEW .....	4
III. ROLE OF ELECTED OFFICIALS IN EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT .....	5
A. ROLE OF ELECTED OFFICIALS BEFORE A DISASTER OCCURS .....	5
B. ROLE OF ELECTED OFFICIALS DURING A DISASTER.....	6
C. ROLE OF ELECTED OFFICIALS FOLLOWING A DISASTER .....	6
D. NIMS and ICS .....	7
IV. MANAGING EMERGENCIES.....	8
A. Emergency Operations Center (EOC) OPERATIONS.....	8
B. Declaring a Local Disaster.....	10
C. State of Emergency Proclamation .....	11
D. Federal Disaster Assistance/Declaration .....	11
V. LAWS AND AUTHORITIES .....	13
VI. RESOURCE LINKS.....	14
Attachment 1 – SAMPLE LOCAL DISASTER DECLARATION .....	15

*Photos courtesy of Jodi Fawl, Nebraska Emergency Management Agency and Barb Sturner, Federal Emergency Management Agency Region VII.*

# I. ACRONYMS

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COG - Continuity of Government  
COOP - Continuity of Operations Plan  
EMA - Emergency Management Agency  
EMS - Emergency Medical Services  
EOC - Emergency Operations Center  
ESF - Emergency Support Function  
FEMA - Federal Emergency Management Agency  
IC - Incident Commander  
ICS - Incident Command System  
IS - Independent Study  
LEOP - Local Emergency Operations Plan  
NEMA - Nebraska Emergency Management Agency  
NGO - Non Government Organization  
NIMS - National Incident Management System  
PDA - Preliminary Damage Assessment

## II. OVERVIEW

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The State of Nebraska is vulnerable to many hazards, ranging from severe storms and flooding, to terrorism and nuclear power plant incidents. Locally-elected officials are responsible for ensuring the public safety and welfare of their communities.

The duties of responding to and recovering from incidents, begin and end at the local level with public officials and community members. Emergency management operations before, during, and after an emergency or disaster, are an essential function of local elected officials and local government agencies.



This Guide is a resource to assist Local Government Officials to better understand their roles and responsibilities related to preparing for, responding to, recovering from and mitigating all hazards that may occur in their jurisdiction.

Citizens expect their government to protect them, assist them, and inform them when a disaster threatens or occurs, and to instruct them when it is necessary to take protective actions for their own personal safety. Educating the public and working directly with the citizens and the media is imperative for a successful emergency management program.

This guide is meant to be a general overview of the Emergency Management process for local government and elected officials, and is not a complete reference document. Please consult your local Emergency Management Director for further information or questions.

Related Publications and Disaster related documents referenced in this document can be found in the "Resource Links" section of this guide.

### III. ROLE OF ELECTED OFFICIALS IN EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

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All disasters are locally-driven events, and it is the local official's role to provide leadership and policy guidance to their jurisdiction before, during, and after a disaster.

It is important for local elected officials to engage in preparedness efforts, which are ongoing and involve activities undertaken to prepare for disasters and emergencies, as well as to facilitate future response and recovery efforts.

The following sections detail some of the local official's roles and responsibilities before, during, and following a disaster:

#### ***A. ROLE OF ELECTED OFFICIALS BEFORE A DISASTER OCCURS***

The primary role of an elected official before a disaster is that of preparedness. Whether you are a Commissioner or a Councilmember, you have the ability to guide your City towards effective emergency management planning strategies. Many give in to the notion that emergency preparedness is too daunting, so why try. But it is the citizen's expectation of you to always keep emergency management in your list of priorities when you serve, especially during budget preparation. The following is a list of suggestions to follow to help you be as prepared as you can possibly be.

- Make planning for emergencies and disasters a priority at all levels of your organization.
- Meet with your Local Emergency Management Agency to learn about the hazards that threaten your jurisdiction and what is being done to address those hazards.
- Learn about emergency management and disaster assistance programs both at the state and federal levels, (These Resources can be found in the Resource Links Section)
- Provide policy direction for prevention/protection-related, response, recovery, and mitigation-related activities,
- Encourage all government agencies and business leaders to coordinate and collaborate with your jurisdiction's Emergency Management Agency.
- Ensure your Continuity of Operations (COOP) and Continuity of Government (COG) plans are up-to-date.
- Provide policy direction for emergency management-related activities, when needed.
- Familiarize yourself with your jurisdiction's Emergency Operations Center (EOC).
- Encourage individuals, families, and businesses in your community to develop an emergency plan and be self-sufficient in the immediate aftermath of a disaster.
- Obtain the necessary training to become a leader to your constituents during an emergency.
- Participate in emergency and disaster drills and exercises.
- Learn the damage assessment process and how it impacts the possibility of obtaining federal assistance.
- Learn your legal authorities and responsibilities.

## ***B. ROLE OF ELECTED OFFICIALS DURING A DISASTER***

The primary role of an elected official during a disaster is that of support. As the disaster is occurring and the immediate response is underway, you will best serve your citizens by empowering and allowing your first responders and the EOC staff the freedom to manage the incident as they have been trained to do. Allow them time to stabilize the situation before attempting to step in as a decision maker. Your role as decision maker will come, but the primary goal of addressing a disaster as it is happening is to stabilize the situation quickly and efficiently – your staff will do that for you. To help in this goal, your role consists of:

- Support and work with your emergency management officials, as needed. This may include facilitating communication with and obtaining assistance from other agencies, declaring a local state of emergency, and issuing emergency orders.
- Communicate quickly, clearly, and effectively to your constituents and work with your partners to ensure a coordinated message.
- Get accurate information out early and often, and ensure all messaging is accessible.
- Maintain situational awareness regarding the disaster by staying informed.
- Provide direction for response-related activities, when appropriate.
- Trust and empower your emergency management officials to make the right decisions.
- Serve your citizens by allowing the First Responders and the EOC staff to manage the incident as they are trained to do. The active participation of Elected Officials in planning / training before a disaster and leadership during the recovery period is where you will have the greatest impact and be of most value.
- Use an EOC Liaison to help you stay informed during the incident.



## ***C. ROLE OF ELECTED OFFICIALS FOLLOWING A DISASTER***

The primary role of an elected official after a disaster is that of leadership. Once the first responders and EOC staff have stabilized the situation, your role as an elected official becomes crucial to the recovery process. A community is built on law and order, and this stems from City Code, Zoning Regulations, Building Code, Police Enforcement, and much more. Just because a disaster occurs does not mean these regulations are null and void. On the contrary, they are crucial to make sure your community is built back right. For a City to truly recover, diligent and firm adherence to the City's Codes and Regulations must be adhered to. To help in accomplishing this goal, the following is a list of roles for you to fill.

- Understand the disaster assistance programs available and application process for State of Nebraska and the Federal Disaster Declarations.
- Support your community throughout the recovery – it can be a long process and may take multiple years.
- The State of Nebraska views recovery in terms of short – (days to weeks), intermediate – (weeks to months), and long-term recovery (months to years).

- Help identify opportunities to rebuild and mitigate future damage through planning and smart infrastructure investments.
- Ask questions – the recovery process and programs can be complex.
- Ensure all Codes and Regulations are enforced during the recovery process.

### *D. NIMS and ICS*

The National Incident Management System (NIMS) is applicable to state, tribal and local governments, private sector organizations, critical infrastructure owners and operators, nongovernmental organizations and other organizations with an active role in emergency management and incident response. State and Local Governments must comply with the use of NIMS and ICS to remain eligible to receive federal Homeland Security or Federal Emergency Management Agency grant funding – this is often referred to as being NIMS Compliant.

Local First Responders use NIMS and the Incident Command System (ICS) on every call. Elected and appointed officials, who are responsible for jurisdictional policy decisions, must also have a clear understanding of Incident Command and NIMS, and their roles and responsibilities in the ICS process. The basic NIMS/ICS on-line classes listed below are vital for local government workers and Elected Officials.

A basic premise of NIMS is that all incidents begin and end locally. NIMS does not take command away from state and local authorities. NIMS simply provides the framework to enhance the ability of responders, including the private sector and NGOs, to work together more effectively.

ICS is a widely applicable management system designed to enable effective, efficient incident management by integrating a combination of facilities, equipment, personnel, procedures and communications operating within a common organizational structure.

The minimum training requirements for NIMS is the completion of the Basic Incident Command System (IS-100) and NIMS an Introduction (IS-700). These are free on-line courses available on the FEMA Website. See the resource links page for a link to the FEMA Emergency Management Institute for access to the NIMS/ICS Independent Study (IS) courses.

## IV. MANAGING EMERGENCIES

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The Chief Executive Officer, whether Mayor, County/City Commissioner, Chair of the Village Board or other title, bears the direct and ultimate responsibility for how well the jurisdiction prevents, prepares for, survives and recovers from an emergency or disaster.

The Emergency Manager provides assistance and advises the Chief Executive Officer to ensure that proper emergency actions are taken in a timely manner to provide the care and support for those citizens affected.



### *A. Emergency Operations Center (EOC) OPERATIONS*

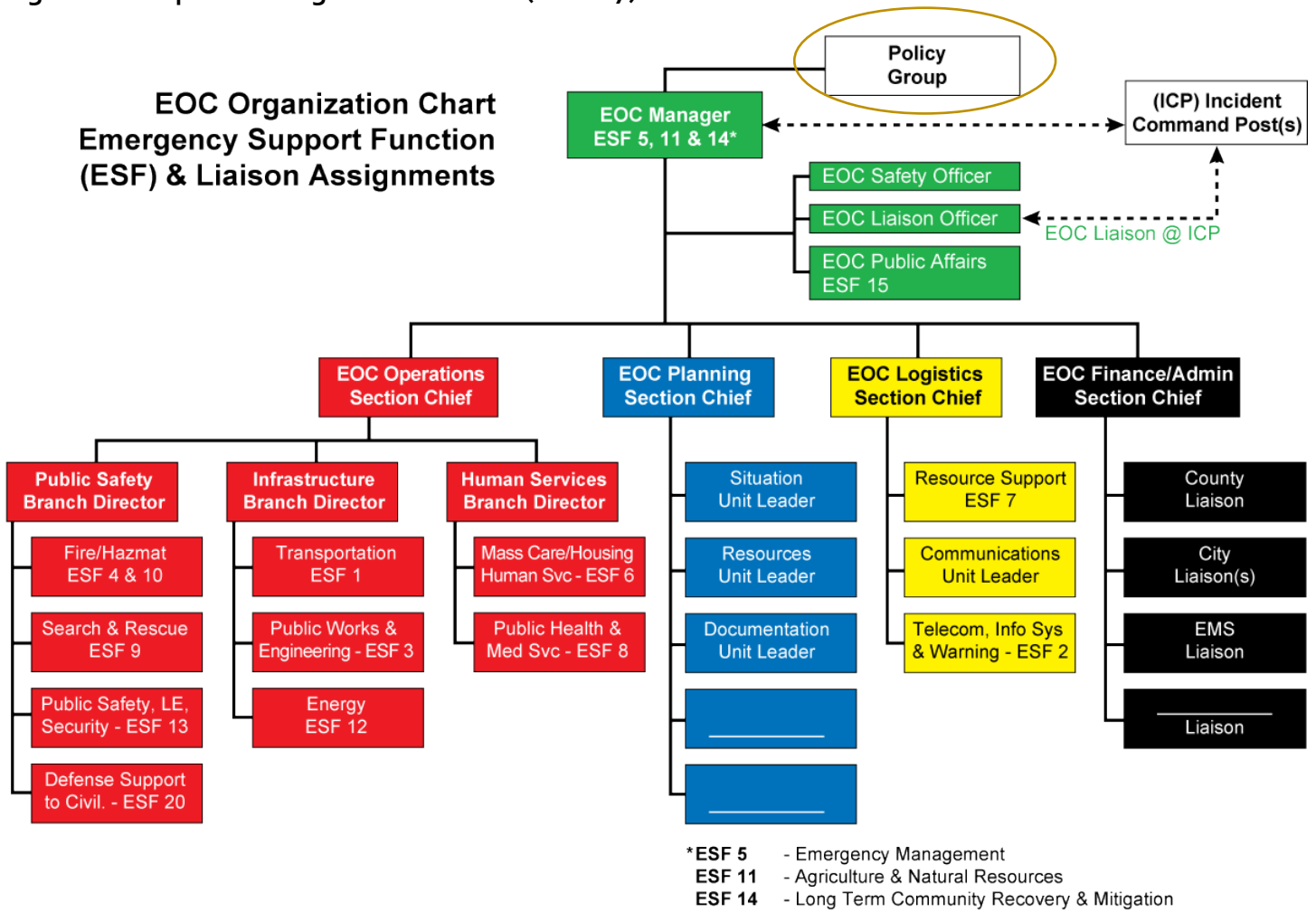
EOCs are used to help coordinate and manage disasters that require response resources from numerous agencies and/or levels of government. An EOC is a location from which centralized emergency management can be performed. It is a facility used to coordinate the overall agency or jurisdictional response and support to an emergency.

The EOC exists to support the response activities occurring in the field, and **it is critical that all information and/or resource requests be routed through the EOC when activated.** EOCs are typically activated for larger events, or in some cases to monitor emerging situations or planned events. EOCs vary in size and complexity depending upon the jurisdiction.

Elected officials should make time to visit their jurisdiction's EOC to understand how it is organized and activated during an event. Please remember, during a disaster you as an elected official will need to report to your City's designated center of operations, not the EOC unless requested.



Figure 1. Sample EOC Organization Chart (ICS-207)



It is important for all elected officials and local government department heads to understand their role in the process and where they fit into the incident organization.

In **Figure 1** (ICS-207), Mayors and Commissioners fall into the Policy Group. Other officials (Assessors, Clerks, Treasurers and Administrators) may be assigned to the Finance/Admin or Documentation section as needed to manage the incident.

### **Policy Group functions in support of the EOC:**

- Support the EOC Manager in providing jurisdictional coordination amongst all government departments.
- Make policy and financial decisions related to the emergency or disaster.
- Make strategic decisions as needed or requested by the emergency manager and/or the Incident Commander.
- Determine jurisdictional priorities to ensure they are included in the long-term incident planning.
- Provide legal guidance to the incident and EOC managers.
- Consider cultural, economic, political and social implications of the incident and communicate needs to the incident and EOC managers.
- Request that a Liaison Officer position be established between the EOC and the Policy Group to help coordinate the flow of information and interactions between these two elements.
- Create Delegations of Authority (also known as Delegations of Responsibility), Declarations of Emergency/Disaster, and any other documents needed to ensure the safety of the population and the ability for the community to recover.

## ***B. Declaring a Local Disaster***

Most emergencies are handled locally without any need for State or Federal assistance. However, in those cases where the emergency evolves into a disaster that overwhelms Local or State resources, there is an established process to seek support from the Federal government.

Local authorities are the first line of response in disasters. By state statute, the Chief Elected Official of the jurisdiction is charged with taking immediate steps to warn and evacuate citizens, alleviate suffering, and protect life and property. In addition, local authorities are responsible for conducting the initial damage assessment and notifying the appropriate State agencies.



The advice is to declare a local disaster in any situation that may have a significant impact socially or economically on the citizens within your jurisdiction when the situation threatens to exhaust or overwhelm local resources (personnel, equipment, materials, money, etc.). Note that any protective action that may require the evacuation of residents with special needs, such as day care/school age children, elderly residents, people with mobility problems, hospitalized or institutionalized populations, should be considered as a reason for a local disaster declaration.

Declaring a disaster appropriately will....

- increase coverage related to liability for the jurisdiction; an important resource for legal considerations will be the city or county attorney
- make it easier to utilize mutual aid agreements to obtain resources and personnel from nearby local jurisdictions

- mobilize additional powers under the Nebraska Emergency Management Act; e.g., State and Federal assistance which would otherwise be unavailable without a local declaration

Provisions for a declaration are covered in the Local Emergency Operations Plan (LEOP). The local disaster declaration must be signed by the Chief village, City or County Elected Official, or their designee, in coordination with the local Emergency Manager.<sup>1</sup> Prompt notification by the Emergency Manager, of a local or county disaster declaration must be made to NEMA, who in turn reviews it and may submit it to the State Adjutant General. When warranted, the disaster declaration is forwarded to the Governor’s office.

Should the disaster affect other counties or have a scope that State resources are required, the Governor may issue a State Emergency Declaration.

The declaration of a local or county emergency does not guarantee the availability of financial support by the Governor’s Emergency Fund. To qualify for Emergency Fund support the jurisdiction must meet the damage expense thresholds as defined in the “Governor’s Emergency Fund – Guidance for Local Officials”

Consult with the Public Information Officer to effectively disseminate timely information to the public and media outlets when a disaster declaration is made.

### ***C. State of Emergency Proclamation***

Upon the advice of NEMA, the Governor may sign a State of Emergency Proclamation. The justification for a proclamation is based on the information about damages reported to NEMA by local officials, as well as the apparent need for additional resources to protect lives and property. When the Governor issues a State of Emergency Proclamation, the Governor’s Emergency Fund is activated and all State resources become available to assist local jurisdictions. A State Proclamation provides the Governor with emergency powers necessary to deal with a disaster. NEMA provides the coordination between supporting agencies and critical or key resources.

### ***D. Federal Disaster Assistance/Declaration***

A request for Federal assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency may be made after the Governor declares a State of Emergency and issues a request for a joint State and Federal (with the assistance of Region VII FEMA) Preliminary Damage Assessment (PDA).

Depending on the scope of the disaster, two different sets of damage assessment teams could be deployed to the field comprised of Local, State, and Federal representatives. One team assesses the damage to privately owned structures and small businesses. The second team is tasked with assessing damage to public facilities. Information collected through the Preliminary Disaster Assessments (PDAs) [see the LEOP Annex C, Damage Assessment], will affect the authorization of a Federal Disaster Declaration. For assistance or guidance on this procedure, Emergency Managers contact the NEMA Recovery Division Manager at (402) 471-7416

**NEMA Recovery  
Section Manager**  
(402) 471-7416

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<sup>1</sup> A template for a declaring a local disaster is included as an appendix to this guide.

Some specific Federal assistance may be available to the State of Nebraska without a Federal Disaster Declaration. Typically, this support comes either from the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) or the U.S. Department of Agriculture. For this reason, it is vital that Emergency Managers keep NEMA apprised of the situation as it develops.

If the President declares a disaster, Federal assistance becomes available to affected communities through the Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act. FEMA implements the provisions of this Act.

Throughout this process local officials remain in charge of their jurisdiction. Depending on the magnitude of the disaster, Emergency Managers will be required to provide assistance to State and Federal representatives deployed to their community. If a Federal Disaster Declaration is not issued, or Federal assistance is denied, the cost of response and recovery efforts may still qualify for State Disaster Assistance (Public Sector only) or may have to be borne by the citizens of the affected jurisdiction.

## V. LAWS AND AUTHORITIES

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The powers and duties of local officials are set forth in State statutes, and modified by home rule. When a local government wants to do something not authorized by these statutes or by the constitution, it must ask the legislature for a law permitting it to undertake the new activity.

Many activities of local officials, particularly County officials, are concerned with what might be considered State rather than County activities. The State itself generally depends on County officials for the enforcement of State laws.

Effective July 19, 1996, the Nebraska Emergency Management Act (Reissue Revised Statutes of Nebraska, Section 81-829.31 and Sections 81-829.36 to 81-829.75) became law, establishing standards and guidance for Emergency Management operations in Nebraska. The Nebraska Emergency Management Act addresses all areas of emergency management including the roles and responsibilities of State and Local officials, the Governor's Emergency Fund, emergency management aid and assistance, mutual aid, and liability issues.

There are two provisions of the Nebraska Emergency Management Act that Local Elected Officials should become familiar with:

- RRS Section 81-829.50 (1): A local emergency may be declared only by the principal executive officer of a local government who finds that conditions defined as a disaster or an emergency exist or by a person who by resolution has been authorized and designated by the governing board of a local government to determine that an emergency within the scope of his or her authorization exists. A copy of the resolution shall be filed with the Nebraska Emergency Management Agency to be effective. The proclamation shall continue in effect until the principle executive officer finds that those conditions no longer exist.
- Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act, PL 100-707, signed into law November 23, 1988; amended the Disaster Relief Act of 1974, PL 93-288. This Act constitutes the statutory authority for most Federal disaster response activities especially as they pertain to FEMA and FEMA programs.

## VI. RESOURCE LINKS

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Federal Emergency Management Agency

[www.fema.gov](http://www.fema.gov)

FEMA Emergency Management Institute (NIMS/ICS Training)

<https://training.fema.gov/is/>

Nebraska Emergency Management Agency

[www.nema.ne.gov](http://www.nema.ne.gov)

Nebraska Governor's Emergency Fund Guidelines

<https://nema.nebraska.gov/operations/governors-emergency-fund>

Nebraska Local Emergency Operations Plans

<https://nema.nebraska.gov/preparedness/leop>

Nebraska State Emergency Operations Plan

<https://nema.nebraska.gov/preparedness/state-emergency-operations-plan>

Nebraska Radiological Emergency Response Plan

<https://nema.nebraska.gov/tech-hazard/radiological-emergency-preparedness-rep-links>

Nebraska State Hazard Mitigation Plan

<https://nema.nebraska.gov/recovery/state-hazard-mitigation-program>

Nebraska Emergency Management Act

<https://nema.nebraska.gov/sites/nema.nebraska.gov/files/doc/nebraska-emergency-management-act.pdf>

Additional Links, Publications and Disaster Related Documents can be found at

[www.nema.nebraska.gov/news/newsroom-index](http://www.nema.nebraska.gov/news/newsroom-index)

# Attachment 1 – SAMPLE LOCAL DISASTER DECLARATION

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- A Disaster Declaration must be issued prior to requesting state or federal assistance.
- A Disaster Declaration for a city or village should be transmitted through the County Emergency Management Director.
- The County Board should also declare a disaster using this same form. The following is a sample of the language that should be retyped onto the jurisdiction's official letterhead before submitting it to the State Emergency Operations Center (EOC)

\*\*\* County (or affected city/village) has suffered from a \_\_\_\_\_ (i.e., *disastrous tornado strike*) that occurred on \_\_\_\_\_ (include date(s) and time) causing severe damage to public and private property, disruption of utility service, and endangerment of health and safety of the citizens of \*\*\* County (or city/village) within the disaster area.

Therefore, the Chair of the \*\*\* County Board of *Commissioners/Supervisors (or the Mayor/Board Chair of \_\_\_\_\_)* has declared a state of emergency authorized under Nebraska State Statute R.R.S. 81-829.50 on behalf of \*\*\* County (or city/village), and will execute for and on behalf of \*\*\* County (or city/village), the expenditure of emergency funds from all available sources, the invoking of mutual aid agreements, and the applying to the State of Nebraska for assistance from the Governor's Emergency Fund and any other resources he/she deems necessary in the fulfillment of his/her duties.

\_\_\_\_\_  
WITNESS my hand and the seal of my office Chair, \*\*\* County this \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_, 20\_\_.

Board of *Commissioners/Supervisors*  
(or *Mayor/Board Chair of affected jurisdiction or by appointed authorized representative*)

\_\_\_\_\_  
*County (or City/Village) Clerk*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date