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7-24-2020

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Sherry DiBari

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## ODU Professors Focus on Hurricane Planning During a Pandemic

July 24, 2020

By [Sherry DiBari](#)

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) predicts a busy Atlantic hurricane season. More than a dozen named storms are expected. Of those, half have the potential to become hurricanes.

This hurricane season occurs during the COVID-19 pandemic. The public health crisis necessitates precautions such as physical distancing and isolation of populations with symptoms.

This raises an important question: How might emergency managers and health officials alter planning assumptions related to evacuation and sheltering practices under the threat of COVID-19?

Two Old Dominion University professors have reached out nationally to answer this question.

Wie Yusuf, a professor in ODU's School of Public Service in the Strome College of Business, and Joshua G. Behr, associate professor at ODU's Virginia Modeling, Analysis and Simulation Center (VMASC), led an effort with the University of South Florida (USF) to conduct a series of six National Science Foundation-sponsored national working groups focused on the dynamics of evacuation and sheltering during COVID-19.

Topics for the working groups included infectious disease control, shelter capacity and management, staffing and volunteers, and psychological adjustment.

The series, which was held virtually, drew hundreds of participants spanning 20 states and 17 universities. Included were representatives from state, city and county governments and five federal agencies: the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Health and Human Services, Veterans Affairs and the U.S. Department of Transportation.



Joshua G. Behr



Wie Yusuf

"The population's risk perceptions about this hurricane season has been altered by COVID-19. Assumptions about how many people will seek shelter and how many will need help evacuating are being revisited," Behr said. "In general, there was not much anticipation of a hurricane in conjunction with a public health crisis of this nature."

The two universities coordinated with the NSF-supported Natural Hazards Center, located at University of Colorado, Boulder, to organize the working groups.

"The team included multiple faculty members from ODU and USF, plus a number of graduate students," Behr said. "It could not have been pulled off successfully without everybody on the team."

To have such a broad reach, the ODU team began by drawing upon its networks of colleagues, asking them to reach out to their colleagues.

"We at ODU have pretty good presence in the emergency management, nonprofit and public health arenas," Behr said. "Much of evacuation and sheltering is managed locally and supplemented by states, so we really wanted a strong local presence and we reached out to coastal urban cities and counties."

They also invited representatives of state departments of health and emergency management from the East and Gulf coasts.

"One of the goals of the NSF was for our efforts to facilitate the building of a national network of experts in this area," Behr said. "And we have certainly begun that."

Six after-action reports were completed and are available to emergency managers, planners, public health professionals, nonprofits and researchers.

"I do think we have done a remarkable job over the past 10 years in planning, but there is always room for better and more planning," Behr said. "After all, we are talking about serious threats to life and limb, and you can never plan and rehearse enough."

As an extension of the effort, on July 15 Behr and Jim Redick, director for emergency management for Norfolk and an ODU alum, sat on a panel discussion titled "COVID-19 and Hurricane Preparedness" hosted by the Natural Hazards Center.