

**Office of Equal Rights**  
**Equal Rights Officer Cadre**

**Mission**

In time of disaster, the Equal Rights Officer (ERO) cadre supports the basic mission of the Office of Equal Rights (OER). That mission is to promote diversity, ensure a discrimination-free work place, and guarantee equal access to FEMA programs and benefits.

Through its activities, the cadre also supports a key goal of FEMA's Strategic Plan: "to ensure that the public is served in a timely and efficient manner." During the next several years, the organization will play an important role in fulfilling the plan's objective of achieving and maintaining a high level of overall customer satisfaction, internal and external, with FEMA services.

**Management and Policy Documentation**

The Director of OER has general oversight of the cadre, which is delegated to a Cadre Manager. Because the cadre is centrally managed from Headquarters, there is no formal link to the Regions.

The Manager and a CORE staffer analyze ERO recommendations from the field, and refer them to the Director of OER for action if the suggestions involve other offices. The Cadre Manager, with the final approval of the Director of OER, is responsible for developing or altering cadre policy. The cadre maintains a web site linked to the FEMA public Internet site, containing policy issuances, complaint processing forms, and other helpful information and links.

**Job Titles and Functions**

Each member of the cadre is a Disaster Assistance Employee (DAE) bearing the title of Equal Rights Officer. The primary functions of the ERO cadre are:

Assistance and Training - Provides advice and guidance to the FCO on EEO and Civil Rights matters; presents training on sexual harassment prevention, cultural diversity, and the EEO process. This training is a vital component in an Agency defense to allegations of discrimination.

Civil Rights Resolution - Works proactively with Community Relations, Public Affairs, Human Services, and other DFO components to resolve individual or group Civil Rights issues; visits and speaks with key community leaders and organizations; assesses accessibility at Disaster Recovery Centers and distributes information about OER programs.

Counseling - assists FEMA employees, employment applicants, and managers to resolve quickly EEO problems or other employment issues that arise from lack of a DAE grievance procedure; guides supervisors through downsizing to achieve the best possible outcome; processes all EEO complaints that cannot be resolved informally.

## **History**

Until the creation of the cadre in 1995, Equal Rights services at the DFO were inadequate. A collateral-duty EEO counselor (when appointed) handled employee complaints, but had little training or contact with Headquarters OER. These individuals rarely if ever dealt with perceived discrimination issues raised by disaster victims.

After OER reached agreement with the Response and Recovery Directorate and the Office of Human Resources Management on the scope and functions of the cadre, recruiting began in 1995. The first cadre members went almost directly from their training class to assignments in the Caribbean in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands following Hurricane Marilyn in September of that year. During the past several years the cadre has participated in most disaster operations.

## **Recruitment**

OER has sought persons with the following knowledge, skills and abilities: Knowledge of EEO/Civil Rights complaint procedures; demonstrated skills in management and political and human sensitivity, strategic planning, problem solving, and negotiation; excellent presentation, writing and briefing capacity; ability to be flexible and to effectively communicate orally and in writing to officials of diverse groups; ability to empathize when communicating orally or in writing with people of diverse groups; ability to empathize when communicating orally or in writing with people of diverse racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds; and the ability to work under stressful and austere conditions in a rapidly changing environment. A

background in a discipline such as psychology, social work, political science, urban studies, black or ethnic studies, or sociology is useful but not mandatory. Experience is expected to be a minimum of two years in a field related to the KSAs listed above. This could include paid or volunteer service in a community-based organization.

For the most part, recruits come to us through newspaper ads and word of mouth from others already in the cadre. Interviews generally are by telephone. The Cadre Manager and another OER staffer conduct the interview and assess the candidate, but the Manager makes the hiring decision. Our experience is that cadre members come from one of three main groups (percentages based on January 2000 personnel): human resources managers and consultants who specialize in EEO and diversity (about 33 percent); EEO professionals, such as attorneys and former EEOC employees (about 45 percent); and leaders or activists in community organizations with a wide range of experiences, or Civil Rights Specialists (about 22 percent).

### **Training and Credentialing**

All classroom training for the cadre is designed and most is delivered by OER and staff of the Emergency Management Institute (EMI). A basic orientation course for new recruits is offered when numbers warrant. The course lasts six days and includes a DFO simulation exercise. Veteran cadre members attend an annual weeklong update course. Update topics vary yearly, dependent upon changes in ERO responsibilities or functions, but every two years students receive EEOC mandated refresher training in counseling.

Training for new recruits also includes on-the-job learning. All new hires must successfully complete two three-week rotations at different disasters under mentors at Level 3 (fully qualified) proficiency. Student EROs must accomplish certain prescribed tasks and are evaluated by the mentor on general knowledge, skill and ability. A successful graduate of this combined classroom/deployment program is raised to Level 2 proficiency and can deploy independently.

EROs seeking advancement to Level 3 are evaluated by the Cadre Manager during an actual deployment. The assessment also includes a review of the candidate's previous EEO counseling activity and after-action reports to evaluate effective written communication.

Our performance standards plan outlines the KSAs and experience expected at each proficiency level. The Cadre Manager, assisted

by a Deputy, monitors proficiency and determines who may be eligible for advancement. At the end of each appointment period, the Cadre Manager and the Director of OER consult on retention or termination of individual cadre members.

### **Staffing Levels and Deployment Trends**

After a needs assessment and staffing analysis, the FEMA Deputy Directors Council established a maximum size for the cadre of 40 members. Because of the centralized nature and mission of the cadre, OER devotes attention both to demographic and geographic diversity. Recruitment efforts are nationwide in scope.

Cadre members usually serve a four-week or thirty-day rotation. This time-span lessened the chance for burnout and equalizes deployment opportunity. We hold to this policy as much as possible, but will make adjustments for longer stays if a DFO would be left without service, or if cost considerations limit the ability to rotate personnel (e.g., in the Pacific Islands). Once an ERO is on-site he/she is expected to keep headquarters aware of changes in DFO staffing and cadre requirements. The Director of OER or the Cadre Manager can relocate an ERO from one operation to another if required.

In its first years the cadre sent only a single staffer to each disaster, regardless of operational size, unless a trainee was added. Experience over nearly 300 disasters has refined our needs analysis, which was based primarily on Agency criteria for overall staffing. Unless specifically requested, we do not staff Public Assistance disasters or any operation with total personnel of fewer than fifty. Our analysis has shown that, in a major catastrophic operation, we may have to specialize functions, e.g., devoting one ERO solely to external Civil Rights work, another to training, a third to internal EEO issues, and so forth.