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Astronaut makes a splash at PELP

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Astronaut makes a splash at PELP

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The same perils astronauts face during space travel hold lessons for emergency managers and policy makers working in the U.S. Pacific Islands and territories, astronaut Lt. Col. (ret.) Jim Kelly told participants at the Naval Postgraduate School Center for Homeland Defense and Security (CHDS) [Pacific Executive Leaders Program](#) (PELP) conducted in Hilo, Hawaii, March 7-11.

Kelly was a guest speaker at the week-long event that brings together members of the homeland security enterprise from around the Pacific Rim for a graduate-level educational course that is modeled on CHDS' Executive Leaders Program. An earlier PELP was conducted with a different cohort February 8-12.

Participants discussed and debated the practical and philosophical principles of homeland security and emergency management on topics such as crisis leadership, resiliency, planning and lessons on leadership.

“PELP has evolved from a pilot where we used some broad ideas against the backdrop of the Pacific to a program that really gives participants different aspects of how to think about problems and how to solve problems, with a Pacific focus and using best practices that can be applied here,” PELP Program Manager David Fukutomi said.

Kelly's message centered on preparedness and resilience. During a presentation titled “Flying in Space: Lessons Learned in Leadership and Safety,” he provided an overview of the International Space Station and how within a year its crew overcame three failed missions to resupply the craft with basic goods and groceries. Shortly before the first failure, NASA had increased the volume of a supply delivery to one that would last six months, a move that proved prescient.

“That's the only thing that allowed us to keep crew on board after three major failures in one year,” Kelly noted in his presentation slides.

The course featured noted leaders in their respective fields, including Kelly and Chief Joseph Pfeifer of the New York City Fire Department, a master's degree alumnus, along with familiar CHDS subject matters experts such as former FEMA Associate Administrator Bill Carwile and FEMA veteran Steve Sharro, with lessons that coupled hands-on knowledge with philosophical doctrine.

Participant Mathew MacCleod commended Pfeifer's presentation on adapting during complex, multiple emergencies.

“Until you're in one of those situations you don't really think about those things,” he said. “That was eye opening for how things get done quickly during a Black Swan event.”

Networking with peers from across the Pacific region is another benefit, as they often rely on one another during disaster events.

“The fact we have such a diverse group, being in USPACOM (U.S. Pacific Command) we deal with all areas of the Pacific,” MacCleod noted. “Being able to meet people from CMNI, meet people who have been part of the response.



It helps to talk to them directly. It was also helpful to listen to people I don't deal with directly and hear their opinions on how they respond to emergencies. They're part of the response even if we don't interact. A great part of this course is the networking capabilities."

Paul Camacho, Disaster Program Director with the Northern Mariana Islands Red Cross, agreed that bonds formed during the course, with fellow participants as well as instructors, are likely to be useful during future incidents. Discussions centered on the presentations nurtured strategic thought, looking at incidents from a current and future perspective.

"It helps to have that guidance to mold how you should really be thinking at the executive level," Camacho said. "It really helps to be talking to people who are changing my thinking to think more strategically. It's a big boost."

Learning about the complex threats and federal capabilities were useful to Malologa "Malo" Lagai, Office of Homeland Security Administrator with the American Samoa Department of Homeland Security, as was the opportunity to discuss similar challenges with Pacific territory peers.

"We have the same challenge and uniqueness, but it will force me as a territorial emergency manager to be self-sufficient," he said. "There are a lot of lessons learned to take back and incorporate."

Carwile's review of major incidents in recent U.S. history and the psychology associated with those events was intriguing, said Jen Amaral, FEMA Individual Assistance Branch Chief

"Even though it doesn't all translate directly to the Pacific, it illustrated that organizational challenges transcend across oceans," Amaral said.

She echoed those who cited networking and access to resources as one of the courses pay-offs.

"This networking opportunity with the class as well as the instructors enhances your ability to reach out to people who have done this before and lived through it," she said. "The biggest lesson is there are a lot of people who you can reach out to."

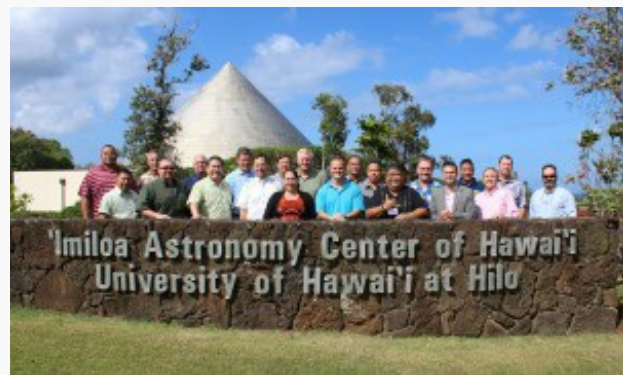
For Wassilly Bonet, Director of the Puerto Rico Emergency Management Agency and the one of the first participant from that territory to take a CHDS course, discussion of legal and constitutional issues were helpful.

"That's something we have to keep in mind all the time," he said.

For Julie Greenly, Hawaii Emergency Management Agency Liaison at the Pacific Disaster Center, a session on complexity presented by Sharo was relevant along with discussions of the Cynefin Framework, a tool to break down big, complex problems into smaller, more manageable ones.

"As the first session of the course, I thought this was a very good topic to kick off the week because it set the stage for the participants to explore beyond the obvious, and to really dig deep into the many variables that contribute to disasters," said Greenly, who attended the February session.

Even some topics that may not immediately appear salient to the Pacific have applicability. Tafaimamao Tua-Tupuola, Director of the American Samoa Community College-University Center for Excellence on Developmental Disabilities, said she was intrigued by the threat matrix section presented by long time CHDS subject matter expert Mike Walker, a longtime D.C. operative.



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“I think it was because we all share the common concern about threat and security issues,” she said.

Another take-away was the importance of including all stakeholders in planning and response.

“We need to be sure we engage key stakeholders not just in a collaborative manner but also engage them in ways to think holistically and how everyone’s role at the table interconnects with one another,” she added.

The PELP began as a pilot program and the session in March was the ninth iteration. The course now has 180 alumni from around the Pacific region.

“Over half of attendees here have a link to some alumni,” Fukutomi observed. “There is no better validation than when your participants are your best advocates. They are telling their co-workers that it’s worthwhile for them to take a week here.”

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