

Phil Navin: Conversation with the Director

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Phil Navin recently sat down for a Conversation with CDC Director Tom Frieden, MD, MPH. It was a chance for the two to get to know each other better, and dig more deeply into CDC's readiness. *Photo by Kathy Chastney*

"I Feel Very Comfortable from an Organizational Perspective, That We've Put All the Right Pieces in Place." The word from the director of CDC's Emergency Operations Center (EOC) is the agency is well-positioned and well-prepared for any challenge.

You already know that CDC plays a pivotal role in public health preparedness for catastrophic events such as pandemics, natural disasters, and acts of bioterrorism. You know that CDC is uniquely positioned to respond to infectious, occupational, or environmental outbreaks.

But have you met the man standing at the helm of CDC's Division of Emergency Operations?

Phil Navin recently sat down for a Conversation with CDC Director Tom Frieden, MD, MPH. It was a chance for the two to get to know each other better, and dig more deeply into CDC's readiness.

Navin oversees the Division of Emergency Operations (DEO), and is responsible for maintaining the 24/7/365 EOC. Think of it as a bustling hub, a nerve center which gathers and sends out critical information on events (both global and domestic) as they occur, and provide timely logistical support to CDC responders. Tasks range from managing emergency communication systems to conducting and planning exercises and trainings across CDC to ensure an ever-ready high level of preparedness.



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Navin frequently becomes the event chief of staff under the CDC incident management structure (IMS); however, the training programs that have been put in place over the years and the experience gained during responses have allowed many to lead as incident managers and chiefs of staff. "That's a great change for CDC," says Navin. He has served in his current position as division director at CDC since March 2003, so he is celebrating ten years of service. His service really began decades ago with the US Army as a distinguished military graduate from the University of Montana in 1973. Navin was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the US Army's Medical Service Corps, served for 30 years, and retired in 2003 as a colonel. His roles as leader and manager across the entire spectrum of military medical and public health operations were instrumental in his ability to seamlessly transition to CDC. And that brings us back to the EOC and CDC's readiness. "It has been a challenge to get to this point," Navin told Frieden. "It's been a struggle here at CDC, but I feel comfortable from an organizational perspective that we've put all the right pieces in place." Numerous organizations across CDC have developed a great understanding of incident command and want to use the CDC EOC more and more when a public health threat surfaces.

At the start up in 2003, many people at CDC felt operations in the EOC were too rigid and structured, explains Navin. The initial struggle was implementing the use of IMS. As staff was trained and the system demonstrated its effectiveness, it became an accepted method of operation. "After 9/11, we made great strides to move to the new system. We had great leadership; leaders who made sure we have the staff and resources that we need. It was also a challenge persuading the rest of CDC that this is the way we are going to have to operate to be able to do business. There are 11 federal agencies using IMS. Once you turn on IMS, there are action steps in place to ensure synchronization across CDC."



Navin said, "After 9/11, we made great strides to move to the new system. We had great leadership; leaders who made sure we have the staff and resources that we need." *Photo by Kathy Chastney*

Navin and his staff are taking it one step further now, working to obtain accreditation through the Emergency Management Accreditation Program. If CDC receives accreditation, it would become the first fully accredited federal agency to reach that distinction, a milestone that both he and Frieden look forward to achieving. Things have changed rapidly at the EOC and Navin has many memorable moments. "Hurricane Katrina was one of the biggest CDC and federal government responses ever. There was lots of learning and growing from that experience. It helped develop procedures and really made emergency response part of the public health mission. Today, deployment is a regular term you hear; ten years ago, it was never used." Events like the tsunami in Indonesia or the tsunami in Japan which turned into a radiation event have CDC

staff across the agency working together, Navin says. "CDC reacts and responds, bringing experts together instantaneously."

The EOC has enhanced the already well-recognized and world-renowned reputation of CDC. Navin says, "The name of CDC has always been respected around the world. With the myriad of responses we have worked, the world has a better understanding of what CDC does and what CDC contributes during a public health emergency response."

He cites Frieden's activation of the EOC for the polio eradication response as an example. "Polio is a slowly migrating disease, and you would not have expected it to be an EOC event. But the activation was instrumental in moving eradication forward, increasing the focus, raising awareness about the disease, and acquiring resources to fight it. It was truly an eye-opening experience for me and our staff to realize the impact EOC activation can have by strengthening a public health response. It made us realize that we're not just about a 30- or 60- or 90-day response, but we are also a 2-year or 3-year or 4-year response organization. It's a way to get results."

Right now, the EOC is activated for polio eradication, Middle Eastern Respiratory Syndrome – Corona Virus. The activation for Multistate Cyclosporiasis Outbreak ended just last week. No one knows when a new threat will arise, but rest assured that DEO is monitoring. If experience is the best teacher, then CDC's rich history has served to further strengthen and prepare public health experts for what lies ahead. At the end of the day, Frieden and Phil Navin know we cannot afford to lose our momentum in preparing for the unexpected.

For more on Phil Navin and the EOC, watch these related videos:

[CDC Emergency Operations Center \(EOC\)](#)

[Phil Navin](#)



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Phil Navin: The Back Story

His military education included Airborne and Ranger School, Army Medical Department (AMEDD) officers' basic and advanced courses, and Command and General Staff College. He commanded at the company level in Germany, battalion level at Ft. Bragg, NC, served in many roles such as: the chief of staff for the 18th

Medical Command in South Korea; deputy surgeon at HQ USPACOM; and “worked in places I’m not allowed to say.”

His awards include the Defense Superior Service Medal, Legion of Merit, Bronze Star, and other meritorious recognitions. He earned a master’s degree in health care administration in 1984 from Webster University.

His accomplishments with CDC focused on the development of CDC’s Emergency Management Program, the convergence of emergency management practice and public health programs’ expertise aimed at preventing, protecting against, mitigating, responding to, and recovering from public health emergencies. This included implementing and standardizing EOC protocols, structure and processes, which have enhanced overall preparedness for CDC to respond to small and large scale events.

He has institutionalized plans and exercises in coordination with multiple programs as a performance evaluation system to validate expected actions; developed an after action reporting system; organized systems to logistically support deployments; and, developed the overall organizational structure to support a core response element on a daily basis.

In 2010, the agency’s emergency response communication function was added to DEO, and now provides a robust emergency management communication capability for preparedness and response.



Navin checks in with Operations Chief Peter Rzeszotarski during the 2011 pandemic influenza exercise. Photo by Mark Fletcher



Navin explains the significance of the photos along the wall as he conducts a tour of the CDC Emergency Operations Center (CDC EOC).



Incident Manager (IM) RADM Steve Redd and Navin discuss the activities and current status of exercise at the end of the day. Photo by Mark Fletcher