

Annual Report

Emergency Management Program

Niagara Region // December 10, 2025

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Overview

Emergency management across the Niagara region is in a strong position. Most departments have continuity plans and/or emergency guidelines in place. There is a well-established culture of prioritizing staff safety and wellbeing, and the necessary technology and resources are both adequate and accessible. The leadership team demonstrates a clear understanding of the importance of preparedness and risk mitigation. Departments appear to be in compliance with provincial and federal regulations, and relationships with line ministries are transparent and constructive.

Within the Emergency Management (NREM) portfolio specifically, requirements set by the Ministry of Emergency Response and Preparedness (MEPR) have not only been met but exceeded in recent years and are on track to be fulfilled again in 2025. This level of compliance extends to all 12 municipalities, despite none having a dedicated full-time employee (FTE) for emergency management. This represents a solid foundation from which to build a more resilient region by rebalancing priorities and enhancing efficiency and impact.

For 2025, non-substantive changes to the Emergency Response Plan and membership of both the Regional Emergency Control Group (RECG) and Regional Emergency Management Program Committee (REMPC) have been introduced. Additionally, the Hazard Identification and Risk Analysis (HIRA) has been updated with analysis of new hazards highlighted by Emergency Management Ontario.

Public education continued through traditional methods, primarily focused on literature distribution at municipal public safety or community events and continued to utilize volunteers from the Community Emergency Response Team (CERT). However, the formation of a regional committee will guide plans for greater engagement moving forward.

Significant gains in emergency management training were seen this year and will be expanded in the future, utilizing staff that are certified trainers. In addition to the annual exercise of the RECG, a full-scale exercise was completed in Wainfleet with regional resources, and NREM staff supported exercises in Welland and the Hamilton Health system.

Changes to the structure of Emergency Management Ontario and revisions to legislation had little impact in 2025 but will be significant in coming years and strategic plans highlighted below capture these changes. The NREM program has had a good year, despite staffing changes, and will continue to grow in the years ahead.

Emergency Management Program

Staffing and Structure

The current NREM structure consists of the following:

1. Chris Sheach, Manager of Emergency Management, CEMC
2. Elora Ferdous, Emergency Management Specialist, Alternate CEMC
3. Drew Maddison, Emergency Management Specialist, Alternate CEMC
4. David Wood, Special Project Coordinator (Contract)

However, this team has only been together since June 15, when Chris was hired. Prior to that, Elora served as acting manager for several months, and there was no manager before that. Aligning the team, defining roles and catching up from the understaffing was a significant task, but the team is functioning well. David's contract ends March 30, 2026. While he has been tasked significantly with delivering the project objectives, he has also provided logistic support which will be missed going forward. Additionally, administrative support from EMS division has been reduced with staffing shortages there.

Plans for next year reflect a three-person team, with the following operational priorities:

1. Chris – Program management, policies and guidelines, stakeholder coordination
2. Elora – Public education, volunteer coordination, legislative compliance
3. Drew – Training, exercises, air support, logistics

There has been discussion this year (and previously) about the location of the NREM team with the organizational structure. A decision on this will guide 2026 strategic planning and coordination with other divisions. A geographic move to the Region headquarters is also in consideration as part of the Building Utilization project.

Emergency Response Plan (ERP)

Non-substantial changes to the Emergency Response Plan (ERP) were approved in the October meeting of the REMPC. However, 2026 will be ten years since the last substantial revision of the ERP and the approval of the plan and program by council bylaw. Revisions for 2026 will broaden the scope of the plan to include all five phases of emergency management, as a comprehensive emergency management plan. The response plan will be updated to capture the breadth of response by the Regional Municipality of Niagara (RMON), including continuity of government measures and the ERPs of all operational divisions. In keeping with current best practice, the focus will shift from all-hazards to community lifelines, prioritizing response to community needs, regardless of the hazard. The Standard Operating Procedures and Guidelines (SOP/SOG) for NREM and the EOC will also need to be reviewed.

Regional Emergency Management Program Committee (REMP)

The REMPC met only in October, largely due to the staffing changes in the first half of the year. The committee has been subject to scope creep over the past few years, and in an attempt to address this, a recommendation was made to the CLT to amend the membership of this committee and realign the TOR to both align with the existing RMON structure and the legislated expectations. Since the primary role of the REMPC is to govern the EM program and recommend it to council, it seems fit that this function be filled by the existing CLT.

Recognizing that the existing TOR describes the role of the REMPC in collaboration, discussion, and interoperability, these activities will continue with relevant stakeholders on an *ad hoc* basis. For example, the ongoing development of a policy for transporting essential staff in winter weather is being developed with directors and managers of the affected divisions. These recommendations will then be brought to the REMPC for review and approval. The new Terms of Reference for the REMPC will be included in the revised plan for 2026.

Regional Emergency Control Group (RECG)

According to the TOR and recent plan revisions, the RECG has been represented by the entire REMPC. Legislatively, this gives all members authority to activate the EOC and recommend a declaration to the Regional Chair and Council. It also requires that all members are trained and exercised each year for compliance. To reduce logistical and administrative complications, the RECG membership has been reduced to include only the legislative requirement: the CAO, DCAO, EIO, CEMC, Commissioner of Corporate Services, and their alternates. The DCAO serves as the CAO alternate, and the Director of Partnerships and Communication serves as the alternate for the DCAO and EIO.

Hazard Identification and Risk Analysis (HIRA)

The HIRA was modified this year by reviewing the new hazards identified by EMO in their 2025 HIRA and using the same risk analysis process as had been used for the hazards already in the report. The revised HIRA was approved in the October REMPC meeting. No updated analysis of all hazards was done in 2025, and this will be a priority for 2026. A plan is already in place to collaborate with local area municipalities (LAMs) to develop the regional and municipal HIRAs together.

Critical Infrastructure List

Each year, NREM compiles Critical Infrastructure (CI) lists from municipalities across the region. CI includes essential services, facilities, and systems that support public health, safety, and emergency response. This year we also focused on a review of regional assets, primarily Public Works. Updated lists have been received from most municipalities and all received data has been reviewed and uploaded for internal use and emergency planning. The Niagara Regional

Police (NRP), through their newly formed Emergency Services division, has also done a review of CI in Niagara region. In the future, CI work will be more closely coordinated to ensure all needed information is captured while reducing duplication of efforts.

Public Education

In 2025, NREM participated in 7 key public education and outreach events, including community events, exercises, and training sessions with CERT members. A total of 38 CERT volunteers contributed throughout the year, supporting events according to their availability. During these activities, the program distributed preparedness materials covering severe weather awareness, health and safety, and family preparedness, reaching residents across Niagara. Through these efforts, the program reinforced community preparedness while complying with legislative requirements for public education.

Looking ahead to 2026, the program is developing a coordinated public education campaign, partially funded through the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR). The Public Education Committee is actively working to plan and implement this campaign, which will include targeted outreach, unified messaging, and volunteer-supported events across the Region. By leveraging trained volunteers, distributing targeted materials, and planning a coordinated 2026 campaign, the program continues to strengthen regional preparedness, maximize resources, and ensure measurable, high-quality public education outcomes.

Training and Exercises

In 2025 NREM ran many training courses, workshops and sessions both virtually and in person. These fell into three categories: provincial emergency management courses, provincial Incident Management System courses, and miscellaneous. The training specialist spent significant time to develop a Niagara-specific update of the provincial courses. This regionalization of the training content led to better engagement of the participants as they could relate better to the training concepts from a more local viewpoint.

This year's annual exercise was twofold: the first was a full field exercise that engaged paid NR staff and volunteer members (CERT) trying out new equipment and processes combined with frontline staff from EMS, local fire departments and NRP; the second was a tabletop exercise which facilitated a discussion for RMON senior leaders around continuity of government during a loss-of-facility scenario.

In total, at least 96 unique individuals were trained, for more than 2,600 hours of training as detailed below.

Ontario Emergency Management courses

Course	Date (s)	Location	Numbers
EM240	14 Apr 2025	Virtual	10
EM225	12 – 13 May 2025	Virtual	16
EM200	14-15 Oct 2025	CE101	12
		Total	38

Ontario IMS Courses

Course	Date (s)	Location	Numbers
IMS 200	13 – 14 Jan 2025	NF Pub Health	24
IMS 200	24-25 Apr 2025	NF Pub Health	24
IMS200	20-21 Jun 2025	NF Pub Health	24
IMS200	25-26 Sep 2025	NF Pub Health	24
		Total	96

Other workshops and training

Course	Date (s)	Location	Numbers
Radio operator		NEMS HQ	5
Scribe	19 Nov 2025	NF Pub Health	23
COOP for Municipalities	2 Dec 2025	Welland FH	15
CERT	Misc	NEMS HQ	40
Annual REOC	18 Nov 2025	NEMS HQ	34
		Total	114

Activations

Flood/Wildfire Evacuations

RMON did not offer to host evacuees for the 2025 season; however this was common trend, and EMO resorted to their “next best” option, contracting vendors of record (VoR). In May, the Xpera, negotiated directly with hoteliers in Niagara Falls to shelter evacuees and started transporting them to the region. This VoR subcontracted wraparound services, particularly food and medical care, to a subcontractor. Mental health services were provided by another vendor.

Early on, there was no coordination system established between health, social, and logistical services and NREM staff stepped in and hosted coordination calls with health partners for three months, identifying responsibilities and tracking who was responsible for specific tasks. Additionally, operational support was provided in organizing vaccination clinics, managing intake logistics, supporting clinical staff and front-line providers, and liaising between Xpera, municipal services, hospitals, and Indigenous partners.

New evacuees arrived daily with urgent needs—mental health, clinical support, and basic necessities—but there was no plan to scale up staff or resources to meet these expectations. Pharmacists and other health service providers lacked access to critical data, including information about pregnancy, insulin needs, or infants. NREM staff developed a tracking system and communication protocol to ensure gaps were addressed and needs met.

After three months, health coordination was taken over by Ontario Health and other service needs were met. NREM negotiated with the VoR to pay for requested additional EMS service

over several months, however over the course of the season the region hosted over 5000 evacuees, with a continuous presence from May through September. Additional fire, EMS, public health and social services were provided. Data is still being collected, but the regional cost of providing services to evacuees is estimated to be more than \$2 million. If RMON or Niagara Falls had been the designated host, these costs would be reimbursed by Indigenous Services Canada.

NREM has been invited to meetings with EMO to improve the VoR process for evacuation hosting, but these private companies are bound only to contractual obligations. The duty of care (and liability) will remain with municipal service providers. Internal planning for the next season will need to start early in the year.

Landfill Fire

On October 14, the morning after the start of the Humberstone landfill fire, the Regional Fire Coordinator requested the support of NREM drone operators to provide thermal imaging of the fire. With support from NEMS, NREM and NRP drones were deployed for several hours, providing fire crews with gas monitoring, plume modeling and thermal imaging of the fireground. The incident commander was able to more quickly identify hotspots and direct crews for suppression.

Enhanced Monitoring

In the second half of the year, NREM introduced a policy for Level 2 – Enhanced Monitoring. Under this process, the standby staff member will move to call-in, with a minimum of 1 hour of additional monitoring per day, including weekends, and a standard reporting routine. No other resources are activated in the EOC, but this ensures that potential threats are monitored and acted on more quickly. Incident reports are routinely sent to the RECG, LAM CEMCs, NRP and EMS. Relevant RMON divisions may be copied.

This year, enhanced monitoring was activated during the G7 first ministers meeting (where coordination between NRP and Signals Operations was requested), and for two winter weather events that had a medium probability of escalating.

Special Projects

Community Emergency Response Team (CERT)

CERT is a cadre of trained volunteers within the region, equipped over the past few years to provide support to first responders in emergencies. During the course of 2025, analysis of the project revealed that demand for CERT services is very low, especially for emergency response. Additionally, there is not adequate assurance of liability coverage for these activities.

CERT was deployed, as mentioned above, for a few public awareness events, distributing information.

One development through CERT was the equipping of some volunteers trained in auxiliary communications. This continued, largely due to grant funding, in 2025, with additional radio and satellite equipment purchases and the outfitting of the Operational Support Vehicle to provide auxiliary communication support. Due to the professional experience of the operators that volunteer with NREM, RMON auxiliary communications capacity is world class and seen as exemplary in Canada. However, the number of operators is limited, as is their availability, and their future availability is even less certain. Another plan was to train volunteers as drone pilots, but training was not completed in 2025.

With all of these precedents, CERT will focus completely on public education support going forward and will look at a rebrand away from “emergency response”. Auxiliary communications requests will be referred to the local amateur radio club, as all CERT operators are members. For drone pilot training, we will focus on RMON employees in 2026 and reevaluate the cadre in 2027.

Legacy Gas Well Transfer Payment Program

The third year of funding was approved for this project, and David Wood was brought on to see out the grant funded by Ministry of Natural Resources (MNRF). This year was the most successful of the program, as proposed funding of \$140,000 was supplemented with additional negotiated amounts. All told, grant revenue from the MNRF for this fiscal year will exceed \$500,000 and funded the following activities and equipment:

1. Region-wide joint field exercise on hazardous materials
2. Most of the costs of the training done this year
3. Public Educational materials
4. Auxiliary Communications radio and satellite equipment.
5. Remote-piloted Aircraft Systems (RPAS) – drones and monitoring equipment
6. Gas detection equipment for fire departments
7. Communication devices for fire coordinators
8. Region Command Trailer with communication and coordination technology
9. Mass casualty triage tools and equipment
10. Inflatable shelters with heating and lighting
11. Future technology for upgrades to the REOC

The joint exercise was the largest in quite some time, directly involving NRP, NEMS and Wainfleet Fire for several hours in a hazardous materials contamination environment. Support from Niagara Falls FD HazMat and GFL Hazmat was provided, as well as NREM and NRP

RPAS operators, NREM auxiliary communications and CERT volunteers. More than 100 people were involved in the exercise, which included the first use of unified incident command for all involved. It is possible there will be continued funding through this provincial TPP, but probability is low. This grant ends in March 2026.

Emergency Management Niagara Committee (EMNC)

The EMNC is a meeting of emergency management actors across the region, including higher education, healthcare institutions, utilities and not-for-profit organizations. Throughout the year, the EMNC meetings (bimonthly) heard presentations from members and visitors on topics of interest. In the last quarter, new members include Ontario Power Generation, NPCA and the Rapid Relief Team charity. For 2026, the EMNC will continue to meet, but move to quarterly meetings all in person.

CEMCs Niagara

In November, NREM revived a quarterly CEMC meeting for the CEMCs of the 13 municipalities. This is a one-hour, closed door, unrecorded meeting for discussion and collaboration. The meeting was well received and will continue through 2026 with a focus on transparent trust building.

External Changes

During 2025, the Emergency Management Ontario office moved to the newly created Ministry of Emergency Preparedness and Response (MEPR). This had little impact on day-to-day activities. However, the passage of Bill 25, Emergency Management Modernization Act amending the Emergency Management and Civil Protection Act on December 3, 2025, promises to bring changes in the years to come. There will be increased provincial oversight of municipal plans and also plans for critical infrastructure, including private utilities. It is likely this will mean MEPR review of institutional emergency response plans (ERP) legislated through other ministries, such as Health or Long-Term Care. For municipalities, there is increased incentive to amalgamate emergency plans.

Strategic Plans

REOC

Under current consideration is the relocation of the REOC to Campbell East. A smaller, more fit to purpose dedicated location will provide two main benefits. First, access in headquarters to a dedicated watch desk, with 24/7 situational awareness. Second, the change to a smaller location will require the EOC to operate in a hub and spoke model, with only the command staff meeting in the REOC, and other teams, especially operations, collaborating remotely from their department operating centre (DOC).

Expanded Mandate

Ensuring the preparedness and safety of the Region and residents is the primary goal of the NREM team, not merely meeting minimum compliance standards. This requires a comprehensive plan for the RMON across all departments. It is important that the mandate of NREM includes emergency planning, business continuity and response efforts for all departments, as written in the bylaw. Collaboration with existing BC/ER coordinators in Community Services and Public Health and additional resources in other departments will be essential to ensuring a comprehensive plan.

One of the compliance requirements of Ontario legislation is for LAM plans to conform to the regional plan. This requires greater collaboration with LAMs but does not provide a mandate. Efforts made this year to build trust and support with municipalities will continue. Some of these have expressed interest in NREM providing some or all of the EM services for their municipality, and there is increased interest in a shared service model. Again, this would require an increased mandate to provide these services.

Situational Awareness

Being prepared requires timely analysis of relevant data. NREM can increase situational awareness through a couple of key initiatives: bringing existing data sources together in a readable format and providing concise and timely analysis. To do this, we are working with IT and other divisions to identify a software solution for data analysis and incident management. It is expected that these solutions can be achieved with existing RMON resources and NREM operational budgets, providing visual mapping of threats and resources, dashboards for reporting, and seamless data entry during EOC activation. While current staffing allows for 24/7 standby, it would be ideal to arrange schedules and staff hours to provide 24/7 on duty staffing.

Training and Exercises

In 2025, 134 staff were trained by NREM staff. Had these trainings all been taken external to the region, the cost of training fees alone would have exceeded \$30,000, not including travel costs, since most of these are 2-day courses. An increased training schedule has already been planned for 2026, but additional training design is an intended growth area. Staff have requested training on specific roles in the EOC as well as practice filling this role. These trainings and exercises will also benefit the LAMs.

Dedicating staff time to develop these courses and work with HR on possible learning management software integration is a strategic plan for 2026. There is also the opportunity to introduce more staff to disaster exercise scenarios by adding multiple exercise dates to the calendar and running shorter exercises.

Conclusion

The last half of 2025, with a full team on board, has been a whirlwind of realignment and re-establishing the groundwork. While RMON remains compliant with provincial legislation and has successfully responded to emerging incidents, there is much more to achieve. 2026 will start with strategic planning for the next 5 years and build on existing plans to develop a leading comprehensive emergency management program.