

Phillips County looks to improve emergency response communication

Written by Kyle Arnoldy

More than a dozen citizens representing various agencies in Phillips County met Thursday, April 18 to address gaps in communication channels and possible additions to protocols regarding emergency response procedures.

In most instances, it takes a tragedy to expose the importance of an up-to-date emergency plan. Luckily for Holyoke, the April 8 spring storm that damaged many structures and destroyed several trees—but caused no deaths or injuries—was the wake-up call that began the process of evaluating what information is necessary in an emergency.

The key point taken away from the meeting was that Phillips County is in need of a resource directory that localizes all services and programs that are necessary when dealing with emergency situations.

Families that faced unfit living conditions, lack of food and limited funds from the havoc wreaked by the storm were unaware of where to turn for help. When they did reach out, responses were full of uncertainties, making it difficult to figure out what services were readily available in times of need.

Carol Brom, a volunteer from Red Cross responsible for Phillips, Logan and Sedgwick counties, explained the process involved in getting in contact with Red Cross and what services they offer.

“What we do is provide emergency response to disaster settings,” Brom said. “It can be a single family emergency; it can be a community emergency. It ranges from fires to wind storms to earthquakes and a variety of things.”

Brom stated that the first step in acquiring Red Cross assistance is simply getting in touch with them at 1-800-824-6615. The call can be lengthy, and patience is stressed. An on-call worker is then contacted by Red Cross, and if it is necessary, a disaster action team of volunteers will respond to the scene of the emergency within a couple of hours.

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The first priority for Red Cross upon arriving at the scene is determining if those afflicted have a place to sleep, have food to eat and have clothes to wear. These issues are addressed immediately.

Brom emphasized the importance of potential clients not waiting until they reach dire straits before reaching out to Red Cross.

“Don’t try to use up all of your resources before you call Red Cross,” Brom said. “Call Red Cross first and let us assist with what we can assist with in an emergency situation and let your resources carry you on a little bit further.”

Once taken care of in the short-term, Red Cross turns their attention to long-term problems. Health and mental services are offered to help deal with the aftermath of emergencies.

The Red Cross looks within the community for services necessary for those dealing with great loss from emergency situations. Food and clothing banks are utilized, and clients in need may be given a credit card for specific amenities, such as clothing and food.

Food services can also be supplied by Phillips County Department of Social Services, as well as through food banks found at the Lutheran and Methodist churches in Holyoke.

Three nights in a hotel can also be paid for by Red Cross if it is deemed necessary.

For these services to be set into action, Red Cross must first receive word from a credited source, such as someone at the communications center or a member of the Holyoke Police Department, to verify that the living condition of a home is not fit to stay the night in. Red Cross offers cursory training for damage assessment for these situations.

Designated shelters are crucial in emergency situations, but during the storm, many were unaware of where to take shelter.

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John Ayoub, administrator at Melissa Memorial Hospital, commented that during the storm he had a few groups show up at MMH looking to take cover. He noted he had no problem letting them in, but during tornadoes, employees and guests are moved to the innermost hall where there is no view of the door, and those looking to get in face being locked out.

In time of emergency, residents can seek shelter at the Phillips County Event Center or at Holyoke High School. Secondary shelters include First Baptist Church, Phillips County Courthouse, First United Methodist Church and Zion Lutheran Church. Shelter is also available at St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Amherst and at the Paoli elevators.

While these shelters can offer protection, the protocols for opening them in emergencies, such as during tornado warnings, is still unclear.

"We need to clarify procedures with people who have agreed to provide that type of shelter," Phillips County emergency manager Randy Schafer said.

The idea of sending someone to open shelters when a tornado warning is issued was thrown around, but communication channels must first be established to ensure the process is successful.

After considering the best plan of action to proceed with to better prepare the city of Holyoke for future emergencies, it was determined by those in attendance that a manual containing all important information, such as services offered, contact information and possible translators, should be constructed.

Sharon Jones, Holyoke Elementary School counselor, volunteered to take on the responsibility of gathering all of those pieces of information over the summer to draft the first Phillips County Resource Manual. She noted that communication is the key. The manual should ensure officials, citizens and other agencies in the county are on the same page when approaching emergency situations.

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Holyoke Enterprise April 25, 2013