

The 1998 Labor Day Storm

It came with little warning at a time when most people slept. A very rare form of straight-line wind and rainstorm swept across 12 Central New York counties with devastating effects. Winds in excess of 100 miles per hour came with such suddenness that the weather experts could not adequately warn people. The wreckage left in the wake of the storm left trees and power lines toppled, homes and buildings damaged or destroyed, and thousands without power. There were deaths and injuries across the state. Many were left homeless as a result. Millions of dollars of damage and a monumental clean up and recovery effort meant many communities issued a state of emergency. Health and travel advisories, curfews, and appeals for State and Federal assistance drew national attention to the Central New York region.

In basic terms, the safety and security of citizens were in jeopardy due to an unprecedented and unique weather related natural disaster. The loss of power, communications, transportation, and in some cases protection from the elements, meant that community leaders from many municipalities, both public and private, were required to coordinate and manage a crisis response on a scale unfamiliar to many.



(AP Photo/Mike Derer)

What would be done? What roles would the various groups have? How would recovery priorities be set? How would coordination, cooperation, and communication work? These and many other questions would be tackled as the recovery began.

Emphasis on Coordination

As the storm subsided and damage assessments began to be reported to the 911 Center and various public offices, leaders knew that a massive and coordinated effort would be required to handle the effects of the storm. The following occasions for decisions and decision units were seen as critical and relevant for analysis in this case studied by John G. Eberle:

- The storm hit Central New York hard with reports of

casualties and unknown amounts of property damage. The County Executive for Onondaga County declared a state of emergency for the county which set many subsequent actions into motion.

- A state of emergency was declared. An Emergency Operations Center (EOC) concept and Incident Command Systems (ICS) had been studied and partially installed already. The County Executive, after consulting with the

Director of Emergency Management, made the decision to open an EOC.

- The EOC opening was planned. A single group of experts was convened to serve as heads of task forces and divisional branches specifically equipped to respond to all areas of need. Priorities were set immediately for life / safety and containment. Within the first day, law enforcement, debris clearance, utility restoration, human needs, and damage assessment task forces had been convened, tasked, and deployed.

- There were many unsafe conditions and reports of looting. The County had the authority to set a wide-sweeping curfew to help speed recovery efforts and prevent further losses but did not. The City of Syracuse, under the direction

of the Mayor, set curfews and hundreds were arrested for violating those curfews. Disputes and legal battles followed in the wake.

- Perceptions that the poor, minority neighborhoods were somehow being neglected regarding power restoration caused concerns, and frustrated citizens formed coalitions and began advocating for action. When a visiting state attorney general was in the neighborhood, citizens seized the opportunity. The Attorney General made phone calls to the local utility company and power was restored in that area very soon after.

Lessons Learned

- The formation of an Emergency Operations Center (EOC) that serves as a central base for authority, communication, and operations is an essential structure to help manage disasters of this nature. It provides a frame for coordination efforts and for garnering cooperation among various groups and sectors of a community, assuming they will come under its authority.

- The actual equipping and physical orchestration of the EOC—who is present, how meetings are structured and facilitated, how tasks are assigned and followed up on—all have dramatic effects on the outcomes of recovery efforts.

- Having a disaster response repository of key resource information on each task force or divisional branch area could alleviate much organizational work during the initial response phase of a disaster.

- Services should be prearranged and coordinated to be activated at a moment's notice to respond to a disaster. Ample disaster preparedness supplies should be stocked in accessible places in all vital human service and recovery facilities.

- All aspects of emergency communications into and out of the EOC could be refined to ensure mutual understanding

of community needs and, as a result, helpful leadership responses. This would include essential equipment and logistics such as updated phone trees and alternative communication modes. Improved methods for reaching every person within a community with everything from weather alerts to declarations of emergencies or curfews could be improved.

- Community collaboration could be improved to bring all stakeholders and community human or recovery resources to bear on a community concern. These growing relationships, if nurtured, could lead to new levels of cooperation and preparedness, while preventing conflicts and misperceptions.

- Defining responsibilities in advance of a crisis—by department, task force or divisional branch—would improve understanding of who should do what and what specific expectations and measures would be implemented to ensure success.

Overall, the 1998 Labor Day Storm, which came as such a surprise, was handled by a group of leaders that had an eye toward coordination; cooperation across public, private and municipality lines; and a common goal for timely restoration of a community in distress. Although there are many areas for improvement, from the research of recovery efforts it appears that overall leadership's service to the community was commendable. The further analysis contained in the complete case study clearly points out the many positive decisions and actions that produced positive results, while not neglecting to point out critical areas in need of improvement. All these findings could serve to aid other communities wishing to build stronger systems of disaster preparedness and recovery response.



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