

Local Responses for Dealing with Severe Weather

Descriptive Summary of Session

In a blink of an eye, the entire town of Greensburg was wiped out. When the town went to rebuild, it was critical that the infrastructure, most especially the informal networks, that was needed for people to communicate with one another was in place. When disaster struck, the town had a means and a process for coming together and communicating among public and private entities to determine how to rebuild, and how to restore the assets that the community lost. A physical symbol of this could be seen in the large circus tent that FEMA installed in the town site shortly after the tornado, providing a space for meetings to discuss the steps for recovery as well as a place for community members to gather and reconnect, and a home for the many public and private groups working to assist the community.

While the public tends to think of FEMA as the principal agency tasked with responding to disasters, but the Small Business Administration (SBA) can play a significant role as well. The SBA is can provide low-cost loans to businesses, homeowners and renters during a nationally declared disaster, or under their own authority. SBA can assist impacted businesses from a wide range of declared disasters, including ones in which FEMA would not be activated, such as drought, to support farm related businesses, communities, and individuals. Additionally, SBA works very closely with state business offices that offer free services to affected businesses to plan and foresee new opportunities. SBA is able to extend loans for capital losses to businesses, homeowners or renters as well as provide working capital for businesses who will be unable to pay bills due to a disaster-related revenue shortfall.

It is important to note that responses to natural disasters are most effective when they are well-planned. In Weld County, Colorado, a devastating tornado in 2008 galvanized the county to examine its preparedness and response to natural disasters. This review resulted in changes and policy that became very beneficial during the floods that devastated the community this past summer. Among the key findings from the review was the importance of knowing the private and public sector resources that are available, as well as the need to work on coordination and training. As a result of the review, the county undertook a number of steps, including a comprehensive training program and exercise and developed a social media policy and system that was essential when the county had to respond to a flooding event that resulted in more than a trillion gallons of water descending on the area.

Emergency response has been undergoing a massive cultural shift over the past 30 years, from an orientation toward nuclear war to one focused on natural disasters. Because of this, the field is very much an emerging profession, developing as it continues to grow. In a sense, response is the easiest part of emergency preparedness, as resources will be available after disaster strikes. Preparedness requires attention to future negative events, something that is difficult to do. Taking steps in non-disaster times to prepare for disasters requires commitment.