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PRACTICE NOTE

Disaster Recovery: The Public Information Partnership formed by the Cities of Joplin and Duquesne, the State of Missouri, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency after the May 22, 2011 Tornado

PRACTICE

The cities of Joplin and Duquesne, Missouri, the State of Missouri, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) partnered to effectively communicate public information about the debris removal process after the May 22, 2011, tornado that struck Jasper and Newton counties. The information partnership employed innovative strategies and developed customized products for the impacted areas. These strategies ensured that residents received accurate and up-to-date information about debris removal, which helped them make informed choices for their own recoveries.

DESCRIPTION

The May 22, 2011 Tornado

On Sunday, May 22, 2011, cold and warm fronts clashed throughout the central U.S., creating a supercell thunderstorm that generated several tornadoes, wind damage, and flash flooding across southwest Missouri. The National Weather Service Forecast Office in Springfield, Missouri, issued a tornado warning for Joplin at 5:17 p.m. Central Daylight Time (CDT), providing residents with about 24 minutes of warning. At 5:41 p.m. CDT, a $\frac{3}{4}$ mile-wide Enhanced Fujita-5 (EF-5) tornado touched down in Joplin with winds in excess of 200 mph. The tornado moved through the city at less than 20 mph and produced an EF-4/EF-5 damage path for six miles through the city. At 6:12 p.m. CDT, the tornado ended after traveling a total of 22.1 miles. The tornado had a continuous ground path of 13 miles.

The tornado resulted in catastrophic loss of life and destruction during its six-mile track through Joplin. The tornado caused 161 fatalities and more than 1,300 injuries, making it

Joplin is located primarily in Jasper County, Missouri; its southern edge extends into Newton County. Duquesne is located on Joplin's east side. Both cities are in the four corners area of Missouri, Arkansas, Kansas, and Oklahoma. Joplin's population is 50,175 people, while Duquesne's is 1,763 people. Joplin swells to approximately 240,000 people on work days. An estimated 825,000 people live within one hour of the city.



Tornado damage and debris in Joplin (Source: FEMA)

the single deadliest U.S. tornado since 1947. The tornado destroyed an estimated 4,380 homes, damaged an additional 3,884, and impacted numerous other structures, including fire stations, schools, St. John's Regional Medical Center (now Mercy Hospital), and commercial buildings. The tornado-impact area spanned nearly 30 percent of Joplin and most of Duquesne, generating an estimated 3 million cubic yards of residential and commercial debris. A National Institute of Standards and Technology team determined that there was "enough [debris] to fill a football field (end zones included) approximately 470 yards high (over 120 stories tall)."

The Federal Response

Prior to the tornado, FEMA had been conducting disaster response and recovery operations in Missouri. Spring brought severe storms, tornadoes, and flooding to Missouri, principally in the eastern and southern tiers. On May 9, 2011, President Barack Obama issued a major disaster declaration (FEMA-DR-1980) for five counties in Missouri. A Joint Field Office (JFO) was established in Columbia, Missouri to manage Federal assistance. Eight more counties were added on May 16, 2011 because of additional flooding. On May 23, 2011, an amendment was issued to DR-1980 to include the two counties (Jasper and Newton) affected by the Joplin tornado. A division office was established in Joplin to manage FEMA response operations for the tornado. The Joplin Division Office reported to the JFO's Operations Section, following both incident command system principles and JFO procedures.

Forming the Public Information Partnership

The cities of Joplin and Duquesne, the State, FEMA, and other response partners recognized that the magnitude of the disaster created public information needs that would quickly overwhelm existing capabilities. Further, debris removal, housing, and other areas required specific, technical expertise not available locally. Within the first week after the tornado, the partners identified three key public information needs:

- Supplementing the sole city public information officer (PIO) with other public information professionals from surrounding communities;
- Providing technical expertise to the city on debris removal and housing issues;
- Using an established interagency Emergency Support Function 15 (ESF #15) Working Group to help provide unified and cohesive messaging, particularly related to debris removal.



Impacted Joplin resident (Source: FEMA)

The city PIO directed the supplemental PIO assistance and used it to assist with overall messaging, media relations, and product development/dissemination.

FEMA Region VII assigned two external affairs (EA) specialists who had expertise in debris and housing, respectively, to the city to help provide with strategy, messaging, and product development. Both EA specialists were embedded in a Debris Task Force and in a Housing Task Force, providing each with PIO expertise. The FEMA EA specialist for debris, who had served in a similar capacity in Louisiana after hurricanes Katrina and Rita, also served as the PIO liaison among the city, the State, FEMA, and other Federal agencies engaged in the

debris mission. This helped to ensure unity, visibility, and continuity for messaging and products among all responding agencies.

The city of Joplin had the primary responsibility for disseminating information to the public about debris removal and other recovery activities. This reflected the city's lead role in response and recovery operations as well as the credibility that it had established with its citizens prior to the disaster for following through on city-issued directives. Consequently, the FEMA EA debris specialist supported the city by drafting the overall strategy, messaging, and products for approval by city, FEMA, and other partners.

City officials released the majority of debris products and served as the principal spokespersons. The only exceptions were if a message involved an issue, usually related to technical information that was more appropriate for a specific agency. For example, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) released the results of air monitoring during debris removal operations since FEMA had tasked the agency to perform that function. Duquesne city officials established similar arrangements with FEMA and other response partners for developing and releasing public information products.



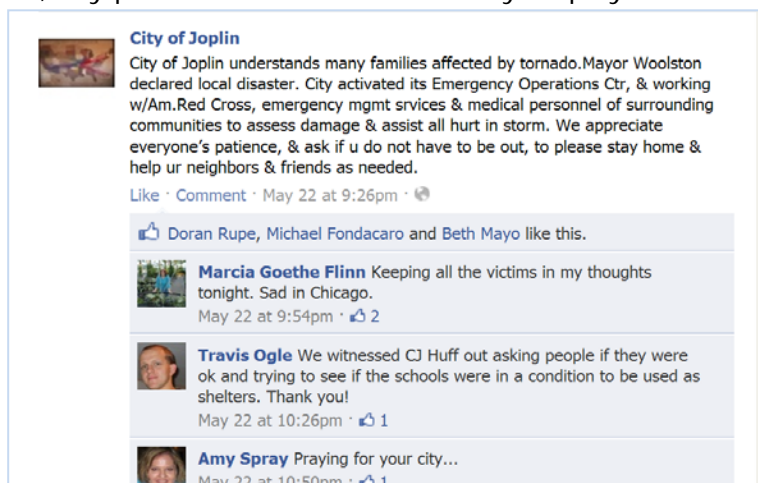
Media Interview by Joplin PIO at debris removal operation (Source: FEMA)

Disseminating Public Information

Joplin city officials used both traditional and social media to ensure that the public received essential information about response and recovery operations. City personnel pushed out this information through radio interviews, press conferences, press releases, news alerts, flyers, fact sheets, and public meetings. Information also was distributed via e-mail, and was posted on the city's Web page. Over time, the city's public information strategy was modified to ensure that the information reached targeted audiences.

City personnel used social media to supplement information disseminated through traditional methods. Prior to the tornado, city personnel had not extensively employed social media to share information with residents. Shortly after the tornado, a city employee with social media expertise began managing Joplin's Facebook page and established a Twitter page and a YouTube channel. Other city employees provided assistance when the number of postings increased significantly.

The city's Facebook page contained posts exclusively by city officials about sheltering, disaster recovery centers, volunteer and donations opportunities, applying for FEMA assistance, and other critical information. City personnel also used the page to provide phone



Initial post-tornado posts to the city of Joplin's Facebook page (Source: Joplin Facebook page)

numbers for Joplin residents who were attempting to locate family members or share information. Individuals could comment on these posts but could not create their own posts. The city's Facebook page also proved invaluable for engaging those outside the region who wanted to support the Joplin response. City personnel tweeted about volunteer opportunities, town meetings, and general information for the public, such as about a class on how to protect against home-repair contractor fraud.

Expedited Debris Removal

On May 31, 2011, President Obama authorized a special debris removal initiative, Expedited Debris Removal (EDR). This initiative's purpose was to help clear loose tornado debris from public rights-of-way and private, residential property in the hardest-hit areas to help hasten the communities' recovery. The EDR initiative also provided a 90 percent Federal cost-share for eligible debris removal costs. The State of Missouri paid the remaining 10 percent.



Crews remove debris in Joplin (Source: FEMA)

President Obama authorized EDR for the first 75 days of operations, or for the period beginning May 22 through August 7, 2011. It was modeled after "Operation Clean Sweep," a debris removal pilot program implemented in the southeastern U.S. after spring 2011 tornadoes. At the request of the city and State, FEMA tasked the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) to execute debris removal operations during the EDR operational period. Missouri Governor Jay Nixon directed the Missouri National Guard to lead the joint Debris Task Force and provide State oversight and coordination of debris removal operations. Numerous Federal, State, and local entities, as well as citizen volunteers and voluntary and faith-based organizations, contributed to the debris removal effort.

Public Information Challenges of Expedited Debris Removal

The EDR initiative presented the city of Joplin, the State, FEMA and their partners with a complex public information challenge. This challenge revolved around four major factors:

- First, eligible debris had to be removed by August 7, 2011—68 days from when EDR was announced—in order to maximize the program's 90 percent Federal cost share. That necessitated a rapid, public education effort to get all elements in place and completed before the deadline.
- Second, the EDR initiative applied only to the areas of Joplin that suffered the greatest destruction from the tornado. Areas with lesser debris amounts were handled by more traditional means. Thus, not all Joplin residents with debris removal needs would be served by EDR. As a result, other debris removal options needed to be identified and communicated to those property owners not eligible for EDR.
- Third, participation in the EDR initiative was voluntary. Property owners who chose to participate had to sign a Right-of-Entry (ROE) form, which gave government contractors permission to go on their private property to remove loose debris. This

required that property owners be educated about the process, their rights regarding participation, and the importance of taking action within a required timeframe.

- Fourth, Federal law prohibits the duplication of benefits between Federal disaster assistance and other sources, such as insurance. Many property owners had some level of insurance coverage for debris removal but often not enough and/or the amount was intended to cover both debris removal and structural demolition, which some property owners would ultimately have to do. Consequently, the city had to develop processes for handling cases when property owners had insurance and wanted to participate in EDR. Information about this process had to be communicated to these property owners.

These four factors, among others, constituted the heart of the public information challenge. The FEMA Region VII PAO described the challenge in Joplin, like after other catastrophic disasters this way: "There is just shock and denial that people live with for awhile. Now, we are trying to get people to take action, understand the action that they are taking, and do it on our timeline."

Disseminating Information about Expedited Debris Removal

Joplin, Duquesne, FEMA, Missouri National Guard, Missouri Department of Natural Resources, USACE, and EPA personnel employed a joint strategy to disseminate EDR information to the public through traditional and social media, and other innovative means. This enabled messages about debris removal and demolition to be unified and reinforced across multiple mechanisms in order to reach a range of audiences. Dissemination methods included news releases, fact sheets, talking points, flyers, videos, and other products that provided information in a consumer-friendly format. These products were distributed at locations throughout Joplin where they would reach those most impacted by the disaster. To distribute information through additional public information networks, the city's PIO leveraged other local PIOs while FEMA Region VII leveraged its Federal Interagency ESF #15 Working Group. Further, the city of Joplin, FEMA, and other partners employed a range of innovative outreach methods to disseminate information about debris removal and demolition. Following are examples of these innovative methods.

Citywide Town Hall Meeting

On June 6, 2011, the city held a town hall meeting at the Missouri Southern State University, attended by nearly 2,500 residents, to address debris removal and other recovery issues. Audience members viewed a video produced by the city about debris and EDR. Attendees received fact sheets and other products that explained the process and options in greater depth. City personnel and AmeriCorps volunteers helped residents

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The ABCs of Tornado Debris Removal

After a storm or tornado, one of the biggest jobs for government, residents and business owners is cleaning up the debris left behind.

Initial debris-removal efforts generally focus on clearing main streets enough to get them re-opened so that transportation can safely and effectively be restored.

Once that is done, attention often shifts to clearing debris from curbsides, public rights-of-way and other public areas. This is generally a function of local, state and/or federal governments.

Private property debris removal after a disaster typically is the responsibility of an individual property owner, either through their own personal efforts or aided by insurance settlements and/or assistance from citizen volunteers, the private sector or voluntary agencies.

In extreme cases, the government may assist with debris removal when extensive or catastrophic storm damage has occurred, especially if there is a threat to public health, safety or the economic recovery of a community.

For Joplin, Duquesne and surrounding areas, cleanup from the May 22, 2011 tornado will use some or all of these options.

Public Property Debris Removal

(Curbsides, Rights-of-Way, Public Property)

Debris removal from curbsides, public rights-of-way and other public property such as parks, public facilities, etc. is being done through local, state and federal government-funded operations.

In Jasper and Newton counties, including the City of Joplin, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), through its direct federal assistance capabilities, has directed the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to manage all federal aspects of the public property debris-removal effort, including hiring contractors to pick up and haul away damaged items.

There are some important things that YOU can do to help make this process a success.

- * Retrieve what you want to keep.
Please do NOT place personal property you are trying to save on or near the public rights-of-way. Debris-removal crews are picking up everything from these areas. They will not be able to tell whether you are intending to keep these items so they may accidentally remove them.
- * Look out for your safety.
Injuries can happen easier than you think, so be careful when retrieving personal property from the wreckage or carrying storm-debris to the right-of-way for pickup.

June 6, 2011 City of Joplin, MO 1

Joplin debris removal information product (Source: City of Joplin)

complete ROE forms and answered their questions. The next day, city officials posted frequently asked questions and the answers on the city's Facebook page, the city's Web site, and other outlets. City officials also posted the video to the city's Web site for those who wanted to view the information again and for those who did not attend the meeting.

Electronic Signage

The Missouri Department of Transportation loaned its electronic road signage to the city for several weeks. The signage displayed round-the-clock messages about debris removal and, later, demolition, for residents of Joplin and Duquesne.


Traditional and Social Media Outreach

The city, FEMA, and other partners maintained an open and cooperative relationship with local media. This facilitated the city's ability to reinforce important debris and recovery messaging. Local radio, television, and the newspaper provided frequent opportunities to explain EDR and debris removal issues, as well as for receiving citizen feedback. This dialogue through the local media allowed PIOs to refine product content and adjust the frequency of dissemination.

City officials used Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other social media as an additional means of communicating information about EDR. On June 9, 2011, city officials posted a video featuring City Manager Mark Rohr on YouTube that explained the correct procedures and guidelines for debris removal and answered citizens' concerns and questions about the process. On June 13, the City Manager posted two additional YouTube videos that answered questions about personal property insurance and EDR.

Field Information Stations

City of Joplin officials established 10 field information stations throughout the impacted area to make it easier for residents to pick up and return ROE forms, as well as other debris removal information. This alleviated the residents of having to go to City Hall to receive or return forms and information. The stations, manned by city staff and augmented by the Missouri National Guard, remained open for approximately two weeks.



The screenshot displays four Facebook posts from the City of Joplin, each featuring a profile picture of a person in a red shirt and a blue background. The posts are as follows:

- Post 1:** "A residential property owner who had insurance at the time of the tornado but has not been provided specific money for debris removal, will not be required to remit any insurance proceeds or additional funds to the City of Joplin, because there will be no duplication of benefits." Posted June 13 at 8:02am. Liked by Karen Conrad, Evalyn Loyd and 2 others.
- Post 2:** "A residential property owner who did not have insurance coverage at the time of the tornado will not be required to remit any funds to the City of Joplin for debris removal because there is no duplication of benefits." Posted June 13 at 8:01am. Liked by Kris Lowry, Tammy Majewski Bish and Bro Shane Callcut.
- Post 3:** "In order for residential property owners to participate in the EDR initiative, a properly completed Right-of-Entry (ROE) form must be signed and returned to the City of Joplin by June 17, 2011 at one of seven designated distribution points throughout the city." Posted June 13 at 7:51am. A link to "View all 2 comments" is visible.
- Post 4:** "The Expedited Debris Removal (EDR) initiative allows the removal of loose, tornado-related debris from private residential property by government-funded contractors in those areas with extensive or catastrophic damage." Posted June 13 at 7:19am. Liked by Karen Conrad, April Dawn Baldwin Lawson and 2 others.

Posts about EDR on the City of Joplin's Facebook page (Source: City of Joplin Facebook Page)

Dedicated Telephone Information Line

City officials established and staffed a free Tornado Assistance Information Line that residents could call seven days a week to receive information about a variety of recovery topics and resources, particularly regarding debris removal, EDR, and ROEs.

Local PIO Network

The city PIO leveraged a network of local PIOs to identify information gaps collectively and to share cross-cutting issues and solutions. The group met regularly and included PIOs from the chamber of commerce, both hospitals, utility companies, the homebuilders association, realtors association, Joplin Schools, the State, the local Congressional office, FEMA, and other Federal departments and agencies. The PIO group received debris removal products and messaging; in some cases, products were created for specific target audiences, such as the realtors.

Field Personnel

Many property owners chose to hire private contractors to remove debris or to make home repairs, which generated additional debris. Many of these contractors were not from the Joplin area and thus were unaware of citywide communication channels. To address this issue, informational packets about EDR, debris removal requirements, and safety practices were created and printed. Missouri National Guard members and FEMA debris monitors in the field disseminated the packets to all contractors observed working in impacted neighborhoods. AmeriCorps personnel disseminated debris safety information to citizen volunteers when they arrived at the Volunteer Reception Center. The center served as a coordination point for the tens of thousands of volunteers who arrived to assist with the recovery.

Concluding Observations

The public information strategies employed after the Joplin tornado illustrate how timely and accurate public information is essential for helping disaster-impacted communities, citizens, and businesses achieve a successful recovery. The cohesive and effective partnership established by the cities of Joplin and Duquesne, the State of Missouri, FEMA, and other partners was instrumental for successful public messaging. The partnership helped to ensure that the citizens of Joplin and Duquesne had the right information at the right time to make informed choices about their recoveries.



**The impact of EDR on a Joplin intersection
(Source: FEMA)**

Two additional factors contributed to the success of the partnership:

- The technical support from a FEMA EA specialist experienced in messaging and product development for a complex debris removal operation enabled the city PIO to communicate about EDR and debris removal in general, while simultaneously handling public information for a multitude of other recovery issues.
- City officials led an aggressive effort to disseminate public information, thus ensuring that citizens had important, time-sensitive information about debris removal. City officials could have relied solely on traditional, well-known methods. Instead, the officials augmented mainstream media with social media and a host of other innovative techniques. This created the maximum possible amount of information saturation so that residents knew what to do and could take action that would help themselves and the community. It is unlikely that the debris removal and demolition effort would have been as successful had city officials relied only on traditional methods to disseminate information.

In the end, all loose debris from private, residential property in the EDR zones was removed by August, 7, 2011 deadline, which enabled the city to maximize the 90% Federal cost share. The public information effort can be considered a key component to this achievement.

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