

Kansas

GOVERNMENT JOURNAL

VOLUME 106 - NUMBER 4

MAY/JUNE 2020

**LESSONS LEARNED IN
AN EMERGENCY**

LOCAL ELECTIONS FAQ

CITIZEN ACADEMIES



A Publication of
The League of Kansas Municipalities



EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT: *Lessons Learned from an EF-4 Tornado*

By Megan Gilliland, Communications and Education Manager, League of Kansas Municipalities

They knew something was coming. The National Weather Service had been issuing briefings for three days in advance that a meteorological melee was possible in north central or northeastern Kansas on the evening of May 28, 2019. For our western Kansas readers, large tornadoes aren't very commonplace in eastern Kansas and what finally transpired was a sight that few people were prepared to see.

On the evening of May 28, 2019, two tornadoes, rated EF-2 and EF-4, carved a continuous 39-mile path through Douglas and southern Leavenworth counties. The EF-4 tornado split the cities of Lawrence and Eudora, passed just west of Linwood, and dissipated just as it reached the western Kansas City metropolitan area. Fortunately, the storm didn't take aim on densely populated areas and, thankfully, there were no casualties. The storm's arrival time and advanced warning systems are most likely the reason for saving lives; but emergency management professionals learned a lot of lessons that day about preparing yourself for something you never thought you'd have to encounter.

The storm developed over Greenwood and Lyon Counties in the mid-afternoon. A brief tornado touched down south of Osage City at 5:10 p.m. Then, within an hour, a small tornado developed and moved northeast into Douglas County. According to the National Weather Service, and based on a combination of radar and post-event satellite imagery, there is very strong evidence that two tornadoes merged in central Douglas County. This tornado began to plow through the dense and wooded countryside and grew into a mile-wide, rain-wrapped, EF-4 tornado that churned through the Kansas River Valley damaging hundreds of structures and snapping trees like toothpicks. The tornado crossed the Kansas River; it sucked up the rich Kansas farmland and the water from the muddy Kansas River. The storm took about one hour to travel from central Douglas County to southern Leavenworth County.

"I had been through tornadoes before this," said Jillian Rodrigue, Assistant Director of Emergency Management for Douglas

County. "Even as an emergency manager, the situation doesn't become real until you are in the Emergency Operations Center and you have a warning on your hands."

"I started to get reports of damage and it felt like I was in slow motion," said Rodrigue. "It was like one of those movies where there is one person standing still and everyone is rushing past them. I kept thinking through the paths this storm could take. If it stayed on its current course, I was tallying up how bad it could be and questioning if we would all make it out of this storm together. Then, you stop yourself and disconnect your emotion and anxiety, and go back to the job you have to do. We had over 100,000 people in the area that needed us to just keep going."

Trained weather spotters in the field radioed their information back to the Emergency Management Center (EOC). There was definite debris. Local law enforcement arrived on the scene to assess the damage and began setting up the perimeter to keep people out of the area and to search for victims and dangerous downed power lines or other utility failures.

The messages started to flood in from all over – from the dispatch center, Facebook Messenger, and Twitter. The calls started to come into the EOC from media and local agencies. What's the damage? How can we help? What is the next step?

The tornado's path ripped through several rural subdivisions in each county. In Leavenworth County alone, the County hauled off a dramatic collection of debris including 12,000 cubic-yards of construction and demolition debris, 70,000 cubic-yards of vegetation collected along the roadside, and 6,000 cubic-yards of metals.

The picture above was taken at approximately 6:00 p.m. looking south from The University of Kansas Fraser Hall. The photo was taken by John Hoopes of Lawrence.

"If the storm had deviated from its path by just an eighth of a mile, we would be having a very different conversation today," said Chuck Magaha, Director of Emergency Management for Leavenworth County.

Both county agencies reported that creating a large enough perimeter to keep people out of the area was a necessity.

"The thick vegetation and massive amount of tree damage made the search to check residences a little difficult," said Magaha. "We weren't able to access the area with traditional emergency vehicles and we had to use utility vehicles or walking the area on-foot to make sure we had checked every residence."

The media onslaught was another thing that few can prepare for when dealing with a disaster this large. Since the tornado occurred during the traditional evening news cycle, the Topeka and Kansas City television stations were broadcasting live and emergency management staff had to plead with the media to tell people to stay away and let first responders do their job.

"Everyone was well-meaning," said Magaha. "I wish now I had had a larger perimeter around the area and we could have kept more traffic out of the area. Even as it was, we had traffic backed up for four miles trying to get into Linwood."

Linwood is a small town, population 392, that came very close to taking a direct hit from the tornado. The area to the northwest of Linwood saw homes and businesses leveled during the tornado.

"I live outside of town and I tried to get to City Hall from my home but couldn't get through the debris," said Linwood City Clerk Karen Kane. "The Mayor was able to set up a command center at the fire station right off the highway. There was some damage in the City, but it missed a majority of the houses. The City was without power for two-and-a-half days and we did have a lot of debris deposited into the City's sewage lagoons and the National Guard brought in a generator to keep the sewage system operating."

Linwood didn't have an emergency plan in place.

"We had never put together any type of emergency management plan; we've never had anything in recent memory so close," said Brian Christenson, Mayor of Linwood. "Luckily, we had a lot of help. Our fire department had just completed some emergency training and we relied heavily on our fire department and they really took control and gave us a lot of instruction on what to do."

The phone calls started immediately — from people wanting to help, the news media, and agencies offering support.

"We had so many people call or show up to help," said Magaha. "We had agencies offering assistance from all over the metro area and Wichita even."

When a community is affected by a disaster of this magnitude, everyone wants to help in some way. Emergency



The tornado toppled trees and scattered vegetation across a 39-mile path through Douglas and Leavenworth County. The City of Linwood's water and septic systems were affected by the storm.

management professionals will tell you that help is good, but it must be the right kind of help. Donations to a local agency, like a community foundation or non-profit focusing on shelter or food, can be a great way for people to help and streamline the process.

"We had so many people show up with water, food, cleaning supplies, etc.," said Christenson. It was incredible to see the support, but it can be overwhelming, too."

Looking Back and Lessons Learned

In Douglas County, the Emergency Management Department, Sheriff's Office, and County administration staff came together quickly to start communicating with responding agencies and the public. For the past several years, the public information staff (PIOs), have trained for emergencies and even practiced setting up a Joint Information Center (JIC).

Kristin Channel, Lieutenant with Douglas County Sheriff's Office quickly arrived at the EOC and started to set up the JIC with Jillian Rodrigue. She was quickly joined by the Public Information Officer for the Sheriff's Office, Jennifer Hethcoat.



Jillian Rodrigue, Douglas County Emergency Management Assistant Director (center), meets with Governor Laura Kelly, Senator Tom Holland, and members of the Adjutant General's Office in the Joint Information Center (JIC).

“When Jenn and I first got into the JIC, we knew people were going to turn to social media immediately,” said Channel. “We knew right away we had to start getting out information to the public – the public needed to know there was someone else on the other side ready to give information.”

In this case, the PIO team decided that all messaging would come through the Douglas County Emergency Management channels including social media. Then, the supporting agencies would share the messaging to ensure consistency.

“I don’t think we would have been as successful had we not already been planning and preparing for this for years,” said Rodrigue. “We built the core functions within each agency and each agency knows their job. We all have agreed that we check-in with each other first and decide on a lead agency to manage messaging to keep communication consistent.”

Looking back, everyone working on this crisis felt the messaging was very clear, consistent, and easy to access.

“We were very careful to ensure that all the agencies working on the response were checking in with the JIC and sending their messaging to us for dissemination,” said Hethcoat. “The Humane Society, United Way, health department, etc. all sent their individual messages to us to share and then they shared that info. Having one channel that leads is really helpful to the process, and for the public and media.”

It may have seemed pretty seamless from the outside but Rodrigue noted that you shouldn’t forget about the simple things, too. For example, the media was calling her desk line trying to get information and none of the PIOs had her voicemail password to check messages.

“Ahead of time, think of all the simple things and mundane things that you think you’d remember; take time to write those things down and make a plan to easily hand that information off to another person because you will forget,” said Rodrigue. “Make

sure you have technology in place to accept multiple phone lines, follow multiple social media channels, and update websites.”

Another key to success, develop key messages ahead of time for certain issues including debris removal, volunteering, donations, utilities, and other issues.

“On the topic of volunteering and donations, make sure you tell people what they can do. Find an actionable item to tell them instead of just what they can’t do,” said Rodrigue. “For example, encourage people to not travel into the area but if they want to help victims, donate money to the Red Cross or the community foundation.”

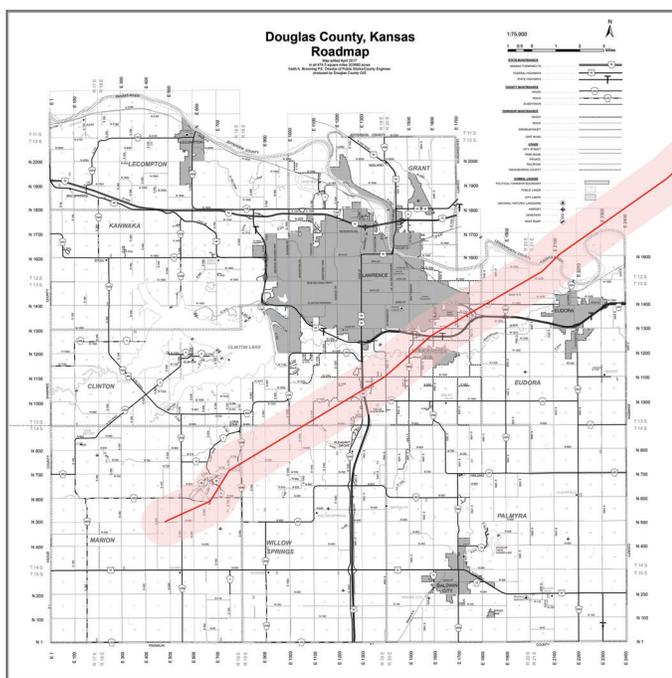
It is also very important that elected officials know their role in a disaster.

“Everyone wants to look to the mayor, county commissioners, and others in the public as a trusted voice. In order to be that trusted resource, make sure you are listening to your emergency management personnel and providing the same consistent information they are sharing with the public,” said Rodrigue. “You look informed, engaged, connected, and knowledgeable when you are sharing qualified messages with the public.”

Both Leavenworth and Douglas County representatives said that having an emergency plan in place ahead of a crisis is crucial. Elected officials can be part of that planning by encouraging an annual briefing on the Emergency Operations Plan. Ask staff to brief you on the plan and discuss how the plan would be put into action. Ask what role you can best play in a crisis and make sure you are prepared to do so when the time occurs.

Karrey Britt, Communications Specialist for Douglas County said it is important to know ahead of time what skills and assets each person or agency can bring to the table in an emergency.

“Make sure you know what talents or skills you can bring to the conversation and help others,” said Britt. “In Douglas County,



ABOVE: A commercial greenhouse complex located just north of the City of Linwood was flattened in the tornado. Debris from the greenhouse was found as far as the Kansas City International Airport.

LEFT: Douglas County used GIS capabilities to show various details about the tornado including the path of the storm and locations of debris and damaged structures.



Inside the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) in Douglas County, many agencies gathered to coordinate response and recovery efforts. The EOC is a required and essential function of the Incident Command Structure (ICS). ICS is a management system designed to enable effective and efficient domestic incident management by integrating a combination of facilities, equipment, personnel, procedures, and communications operating within a common organizational structure.

we have very good GIS capabilities. We also set up a website that was a great source of information. We're using what we learned in the 2019 tornado for our current emergency operations response for COVID-19. The work we did last year just helped build the foundation for the next emergency or challenging time."

Another issue emergency management personnel noted is the importance of pre-existing relationships with departments and agencies. Knowing other departments can help fill the gaps, and trusting them to do so, is immensely helpful when you're juggling many factors.

"In an emergency, we're bringing in many partners; people in similar roles and professions, and sharing ideas and suggestions," said Rodrigue. "We are never in this alone. There is always someone who can share information and help is there. When you find it, it makes all the difference." 🌻

🌻 **Megan Gilliland** is the Communications and Education Manager for the League of Kansas Municipalities. She can be reached at mgilliland@lkm.org.

The Governing Body Handbook

is available for purchase!

www.lkm.org/publications