



FEMA

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## LESSON LEARNED

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### Public Information: Providing Accurate and Continuous Notification of Road Closures

#### SUMMARY

State emergency operations centers (EOC) need to be able to issue timely, accurate, and continuous press releases about the closures of Interstates and other major roadways during incidents.

#### DESCRIPTION

The state of Iowa experienced back-to-back winter storms of unprecedented severity over a 5-day span during February and March 2007. The first storm struck on February 24 with ice accumulation causing widespread damage to electrical lines, leaving as many as 124,000 residents without power. The destructiveness of the storm led President George W. Bush to issue a disaster declaration for 46 of Iowa's 99 counties. The second storm arrived on March 1, bringing record snowfalls in 7 Iowa counties, which caused "white out" conditions and made travel hazardous. The storm caused additional power outages for 10,000 customers and forced rural residents to seek refuge in towns or in one of the 265 emergency shelters activated during the incident. President Bush issued a disaster declaration for 23 counties after the second storm. Together, the 2 storms caused a combined \$65 million in state and federally reimbursed damages; this total was only surpassed by the destruction caused by floods in 1993.

Regularly during severe storms, the Iowa State Patrol and the Iowa Department of Transportation (DOT) jointly issue "no travel advised" warnings to protect motorists from hazardous conditions on the road. With the arrival of the second storm on March 1, DOT issued advisories of possible road closures at 10:00 a.m. via electronic message boards along Interstate 380 (I-380). The DOT and State Patrol also notified local authorities that they should begin considering alternative evacuation options for the nuclear power plant located at the Duane Arnold Energy Center in case I-380 had to be closed.

"No travel advised" warnings are based upon recommendations from the National Weather Service and are supplemented by road condition reports from State Patrol, DOT, and automated systems that record temperature and other climatic factors. These warnings are transmitted to the public through the 511 telephone hotline, automated message boards on the Interstate, and the Web sites of DOT, State Patrol, and [511](#).

A local media outlet reportedly broadcast the warning as an actual closure of I-380, despite the absence of a joint DOT-State Patrol declaration. The erroneous information caused significant concern and confusion among local authorities and disrupted the ongoing planning for alternative evacuation routes from the energy plant.

State emergency managers diverted valuable staff and administrative attention from the blizzard response to address the misinformation by sending corrective notifications to federal, state, and local authorities. As a result, the State EOC staff members faced unnecessary distractions during their coordination of response operations.

The State of Iowa's after-action report on the 2007 winter storms recommends the delivery of timely, accurate, and continuous public information via media releases that are coordinated by the Joint Information Center at the State EOC. When possible, the State EOC should assess the potential impacts of pending road closures on emergency plans and should notify the affected counties prior to notifying the general public. These media releases will represent official State decisions on road closures and will clarify changes in traffic routes for local and state agencies responsible for initiating emergency plans.

State EOCs need to be able to issue timely, accurate, and continuous press releases about the closures of Interstates and other major roadways during incidents.

#### **CITATION**

Iowa Homeland Security and Emergency Management Division. *2007 Winter Storm After Action Report: State of Iowa Response Coordination*. 02 Jul 2007.  
<https://www.llis.dhs.gov/docdetails/details.do?contentID=26358>

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