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Lessons Learned Information Sharing

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LESSON LEARNED

Public Communications: Developing a Standard Operating Procedure for Disseminating Public Messages

SUMMARY

Public utilities departments should develop and implement a standard operating procedure (SOP) for vetting and disseminating public information messages during emergencies. This SOP should include a review process that allows incident commanders and public information officers (PIO) to review messages before their release.

DESCRIPTION

From December 13 to 27, 2008, the Puget Sound region of western Washington experienced an extended period of winter weather. Seattle received 11.3 inches of snow during the period, 9.1 inches higher than the city's normal December snowfall amounts. Continuous accumulation of snow, coupled with freezing temperatures, turned compacted snow into ice. This resulted in road closures, treacherous driving conditions, limited Metro bus service, and school and business closures throughout the city. The Seattle Department of Transportation coordinated response and recovery efforts with the Seattle Emergency Operations Center as well as with police, utilities, and public health agencies. Overall, the storm cost Seattle an estimated \$3.4 million in damages and response and recovery efforts, including snow removal, power restoration, and the delivery of critical medications and healthcare services to stranded individuals.



Seattle Skyline during the 2008 Storms

Seattle Public Utilities (SPU) personnel encountered difficulty maintaining solid waste collection schedules during the 2-week storm period. Poor road conditions prevented SPU crews from accessing certain neighborhoods. As a result, SPU could only provide collection services to a portion of its normal customers, and it had difficulty determining which customers still needed service during the storm period. Overall, SPU was unable to provide collection services to approximately 42% of the total city service area for 2 consecutive weeks.

SPU provides a water supply to more than 1.3 million customers in King County as well as critical sewer, drainage, and solid waste services to Seattle residents and businesses. For more information, visit the [SPU Web site](#).

SPU also experienced challenges communicating accurate messages to the public. In many cases, SPU provided Seattle citizens with unclear, inconsistent, or overly optimistic messages regarding solid waste pickup schedules, changes in pickup routes due to inclement weather, updated street conditions, and contractor capabilities. To address this issue, the Seattle after-action report (AAR) recommended that SPU develop a process to properly vet information before disseminating it to the public. The AAR also recommended that SPU consider utilizing real-time public communications channels, such as community blogs, media feeds, and automated phone messaging systems, to disseminate public messages.

Public utilities departments should develop and implement an SOP for vetting and disseminating public information messages during emergencies. This SOP should include a review process that allows incident commanders and PIOs to review messages before their release.

CITATION

Seattle Office of Emergency Management. *City of Seattle December 2008 Winter Storm: After-Action Report and Corrective Action Plan*. Feb 2009.

<https://www.llis.dhs.gov/docdetails/details.do?contentID=35495>

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