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LESSON LEARNED

Community Preparedness: Preparing Local Officials For Their Emergency Roles and Responsibilities

SUMMARY

Elected and appointed officials from local jurisdictions should be engaged in emergency preparedness planning and participate in trainings and exercises focused on their roles during an emergency. This can help these officials become familiar with their assigned responsibilities and fulfill assigned tasks during incidents.

DESCRIPTION

On August 27, 2011, Hurricane Irene made first landfall near Cape Lookout, North Carolina, as a category 1 hurricane. Irene then tracked north to the Hampton Roads, Virginia region before moving back over the Atlantic Ocean. The hurricane made a second landfall near Little Egg Inlet, New Jersey, on August 28, 2011. Weather forecasters downgraded Irene to a tropical storm before it made its third landfall in the Coney Island area of Brooklyn, New York, and continued to track through the Northeast. Heavy rains impacted New England ahead of Irene's landfall, leading to severe flooding and wind damage in some areas along Irene's path. The storm moved through western New England before being absorbed by a weather front over northeastern Canada on August 30, 2011.



**Satellite Image of Hurricane Irene
(Source: NASA)**

Hurricane Irene's high winds and heavy rains caused extensive flooding and storm damage that spanned four Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Regions, 12 States, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. President Barack Obama issued 14 emergency declarations and 13 major disaster declarations for the hurricane. Irene resulted in 49 deaths and 4 million homes without power from Puerto Rico to Maine.

As Hurricane Irene made second landfall on August 28, 2011, Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick declared a State of Emergency for the commonwealth. Wind gusts at up to 80 mph and 10 inches of rain left 657,000 homes and businesses without power and caused extensive damage in many counties across the

Federal Reimbursement to Massachusetts as of 6 September 2012

- Total Individual and Households Program, Dollars Approved: \$5,529,912.57
- Total Housing Assistance, Dollars Approved: \$5,274,525.61
- Total Other Needs Assistance, Dollars Approved: \$255,386.96

commonwealth. These damages were greatest in the western Massachusetts counties of Berkshire and Franklin. Each of these counties has a limited county government and exists primarily as a historical county. For example, Franklin County residents elect a county Sheriff and regional officials to perform specific duties. Cities and towns in Berkshire and Franklin counties provide local government services to their respective residents.

With approximately 700 square miles and a population of 72,000 people, Franklin County is the most rural county in the state.

Irene caused significant flooding in Franklin County where several rivers overflowed, damaging bridges, washing away sections of roads, and isolating some towns for several days after the storm. Many elected and appointed town officials within Franklin County were unfamiliar with their emergency roles during response operations. In addition, some town officials were unaware that emergency plans assigned them responsibilities during an emergency. This lack of familiarity caused confusion and hindered the ability of these officials to perform their assigned responsibilities and tasks in an effective manner.

The Franklin Regional Council of Governments conducted a countywide review of preparedness and response operations for Tropical Storm Irene. The [Tropical Storm Irene: Western Massachusetts After Action Report/Improvement Plan](#) (AAR/IP) notes that "It was apparent from this disaster that officials have not been properly prepared for their roles or included in enough drills and exercises to make them confident in their responsibilities." The AAR recommends that local officials participate in exercises focusing on their roles and responsibilities during various emergencies and disasters. In addition, local officials should participate in financial and legal disaster training, including the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), Emergency Management Institute's (EMI) [Recovery from Disaster: The Local Government Role](#) course. Finally, the AAR recommends that local emergency plans include specific job action sheets for elected and appointed officials.

The [Franklin Regional Council of Governments](#) provides a variety of services to the 26 towns in Franklin County. This voluntary membership organization employs 40 staff that manage 12 programs ranging from regional health and town accounting to emergency preparedness.

The FEMA EMI's [Recovery from Disaster: The Local Government Role](#) is designed for local disaster recovery teams and planners. It focuses on the roles and responsibilities of each team member, and provides guidance on developing a local disaster recovery plan.

Elected and appointed officials from local jurisdictions should be involved in emergency preparedness planning and participate in trainings and exercises focusing on their roles during an emergency. This can help local officials become familiar with their assigned responsibilities and fulfill assigned tasks during a response.

CITATIONS

Federal Emergency Management Agency. *Massachusetts Tropical Storm Irene*.
<http://www.fema.gov/disaster/4028#tabs-1>

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United States Census Bureau. *State & County QuickFacts*.

<http://quickfacts.census.gov/>

Western Massachusetts Regional Homeland Security Advisory Council. *Tropical Storm Irene: Western Massachusetts After Action Report/Improvement Plan, August 27-28, 2011*. 30 Apr 2012.

<https://www.llis.dhs.gov/docdetails/details.do?contentid=55962>

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