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## LESSON LEARNED

### Shelter Operations: Ensuring Communications Processes with Emergency Operations Centers

#### SUMMARY

Shelter managers should work with emergency managers to establish communications processes between each shelter and the local emergency operations center (EOC) during activations. This will enable the shelter and EOC to share critical information about the incident status, resources, and other issues to help facilitate effective operations.

#### 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. The storm moved through western New England before being absorbed by a weather front over northeastern Canada on August 30, 2011.

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, an estimated \$7 billion in damages, and 4 million homes without power from Puerto Rico to Maine.



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

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 commonwealth. The damage was greatest in the western Massachusetts counties, particularly Franklin County.

Western Massachusetts counties have limited county government and exist primarily as historical counties. For example, Franklin County residents elect a county Sheriff

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

and regional officials to perform specific duties. Cities and towns in Franklin County provide local government services to their respective residents.

Hurricane Irene caused significant flooding throughout western Massachusetts where rivers overflow, damaging bridges, washing away sections of roads, and isolating some towns for several days after the storm. Local governments and voluntary organizations conducted response operations, including opening shelters for residents displaced by the storm and subsequent flooding.

Shelters throughout Franklin County encountered challenges in their efforts to communicate with their local EOC. Many localities had not included processes for communicating with shelters in their emergency plans. In some cases, the shelters lacked the necessary equipment that would have enabled them to communicate with their EOC. Further, many managers did not designate a shelter liaison within their EOC.



**Damage in Franklin County from Hurricane Irene (Source: FEMA)**

These communications issues affected shelter operations in a number of ways. Shelter managers often did not have accurate information about the length of time the shelter would need to be open or about the voluntary and other resources available to them. Shelter managers also lacked information about the incident and response operations sought by people in the shelter. Finally, lacking accurate information, some shelter managers did not follow their plans and had difficulty securing the necessary resources. The Western Massachusetts Regional after action report (AAR) recommends that local emergency managers should include processes for communicating with shelters in their emergency plans. It also recommends that shelters should possess communications equipment that enables them to communicate with EOCs. Finally, the AAR notes that EOC managers should designate a shelter liaison during activations.

Shelter managers should work with emergency managers to establish communications processes between each shelter and the local EOC during activations. This will enable the shelter and EOC to share critical information about the incident status, resources, and other issues to help facilitate effective operations.

### **CITATIONS**

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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