



FEMA

Sharing Information
Enhancing Preparedness
Strengthening Homeland Security

**Lessons Learned
Information Sharing**
LLIS.gov

PRACTICE NOTE

Emergency Public Information: Montgomery County, Maryland, Fire and Rescue's Use of Social Media to Engage the Community After Consecutive Snowstorms

PRACTICE

The Montgomery County, Maryland, Fire and Rescue Service (MCFRS) used Facebook, Twitter, and a blog to request that the community uncover fire hydrants buried in snow after consecutive February 2010 winter storms. MCFRS personnel used social media to share information with, and provide guidance to, the community. This effort resulted in the effective participation of the community in recovery operations after the snowstorms.

DESCRIPTION

From February 5–6, 2010, a severe winter storm impacted the Mid-Atlantic region, bringing 20 to 35 inches of snow to the area. A second winter storm affected the same region from February 9–10, bringing an additional 10 to 20 inches of snow. The heavy snowfall crippled the region, resulting in widespread power outages and collapsed roofs, and forced the closure of businesses, schools, roads, and transportation services.

Prior to the first storm, MCFRS personnel became concerned that the amount of snow forecasted would bury fire hydrants and thus impede their responses to fires. On February 4, personnel began using the department's social media accounts and blog to request that community members clear fire hydrants of snow. Personnel included safety tips with these requests. On February 8, personnel posted a photograph of a properly cleared hydrant on the MCFRS blog for reference by community members.



Photograph showing a properly uncovered fire hydrant (Source: MCFRS)

In the days following the first storm, MCFRS personnel monitored social media platforms and responded to comments and questions from community members. For example, community members used social media to request guidance on how to locate buried fire hydrants. In response, MCFRS personnel provided a link to an online Geographic Information System (GIS) program that the public could use to find their fire hydrant. Several community members commented on the MCFRS blog that the online GIS program was too complicated to use. Consequently, MCFRS personnel developed a 5-minute Microsoft® PowerPoint® tutorial that explained how to use the online GIS program. These personnel also used Screenr to record the tutorial and posted a link to

[Screenr](#) is a Web-based program that allows users to make a recording of activity on their computer screens.

the tutorial on the MCFRS social media accounts and blog.

During this process, a former volunteer firefighter living in Germantown, MD, submitted a YouTube video to MCFRS personnel explaining how to uncover a fire hydrant. He demonstrated the proper technique for shoveling snow from the hydrant in a way that would make the hydrant usable by fire fighters. MCFRS personnel reviewed the video and provided a link to it on the department blog and social media accounts.

The MCFRS social media campaign requesting that community members uncover their fire hydrants had a noticeable impact in the area. Firefighters driving through the county observed hydrants had been shoveled properly and were ready for use in an emergency. In addition, residents posted photographs of their shoveled hydrants on the MCFRS Facebook page. This effort by MCFRS personnel demonstrated an effective use of social media to leverage community participation in recovery operations. The use of social media in this manner mirrors the Federal Emergency Management Agency's initiatives to engage the public in a two-way conversation through social media. The campaign also represented a Whole Community approach to recovery efforts in which traditional emergency management partners worked alongside community members.



A former volunteer firefighter demonstrates how to find fire hydrants in the snow in a YouTube video (Source: MCFRS Blog)

The [National Level Exercise 2011 Whole Community Quick Look Report](#) is available on [LLIS.gov](#).

CITATIONS

Delaney, Bill. Program Manager, Community Life Safety and Social Media, Montgomery County Fire and Rescue Service. Interview with *Lessons Learned Information Sharing*, 15 Dec 2011.

Hoover, Nicholas J. "FEMA to Use Social Media for Emergency Response." *Information Week*, 19 Jan 2011.

<http://www.informationweek.com/news/government/info-management/229000918>

DISCLAIMER

Lessons Learned Information Sharing (LLIS.gov) is the Department of Homeland Security/Federal Emergency Management Agency's national online network of lessons learned, best practices, and innovative ideas for the emergency management and homeland security communities. The Web site and its contents are provided for informational purposes only, without warranty or guarantee of any kind, and do not represent the official positions of the Department of Homeland Security. For more information on *LLIS.gov*, please email feedback@llis.dhs.gov or visit www.llis.gov.