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PRACTICE NOTE

Emergency Public Information: Mecosta County, Michigan's Use of Social Media for Communicating with the News Media and Officials During Disasters

PRACTICE

The Mecosta County, Michigan, Emergency Management director used social media to share images and video of damage caused by flooding in April 2011. County officials and the news media followed Mecosta County's social media platforms to get real-time damage information from the director.

DESCRIPTION

On April 4, 2011, Mecosta County experienced extensive rainfall that caused flooding throughout the county. The flooding washed away roads and culverts, covered roads in water, and affected homes. On April 5, Mecosta County officials declared a local state of emergency.

From April 4–8, the Mecosta County Emergency Management director surveyed the damage caused by the flooding. He used his cellular phone to photograph failed and failing roads and culverts, as well as the resulting damage. He then posted the photographs to Mecosta County's Facebook and Twitter pages. On one occasion, he used his phone to capture a failing culvert on video and shared it through the county's social media platforms.

The director's decision to upload photographs and videos of flooding damage to Facebook and Twitter improved the county's damage assessment and disaster declaration processes. County officials reviewed the photographs and video as the director uploaded them and completed preliminary damage assessment reports. Based on these reports, the Chief Elected Official, who directs Mecosta County's Board of Commissioners, declared a local state of emergency before the director returned from the field.

The director's use of social media also impacted the way he released information to local news media outlets and county officials. Before he began using social media, the director would share disaster updates by creating a press release, attaching photos, and sending an

Mecosta County is located in central Michigan. It has a population of more than 40,000 people and an area of approximately 570 square miles.



Map showing Mecosta County's location in Michigan

e-mail out to a distribution list. The director would also have received calls from the National Weather Service, county commissioners, Ferris State University, and other county leaders requesting damage updates.

During the 2011 floods, the director used social media to share photos and video directly from the field with county officials and news media outlets. These officials and outlets received information as soon as the director observed it, rather than having to wait several hours to receive it in a press release. Consequently, these officials and outlets could use information immediately to inform government decisions or for inclusion in broadcasts. Finally, sharing information through social media was less time consuming for the director than sending e-mails or receiving numerous phone calls.



Photograph of a washed out road in Mecosta County that the director posted to Facebook

CITATIONS

Buttleman, James. Director, Mecosta County Emergency Management. Interview with *Lessons Learned Information Sharing*, 22 Nov 2011.

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