Johnson County Phone Service Alerts Residents of Possible Risks

Johnson County, KY - Paintsville, located in primarily rural Johnson County, Kentucky having experienced difficulty in the past notifying residents of emergencies, decided to take action to save lives in the future. With a population of 5,300 and approximately 27,000 countywide, notification by way of emergency sirens, or going door to door, was extremely challenging.

Gary McClure, Emergency Manager for Johnson County and the Town of Paintsville, with assistance from the Big Sandy Area Development District (ADD), Paintsville and Johnson County, submitted an application in 2009 for grant assistance through the Department of Commerce and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to purchase an emergency notification system, sometimes referred to as Reverse 911. The grant was approved and the system put in place in 2010.

The emergency notification system is a web-based program that is controlled from a computer in the Paintsville emergency management center. Names and phone numbers of residents throughout Johnson County are added to a database, and when the system is activated, a series of phone calls are made to warn citizens of impending danger. While the majority of numbers are typically landlines, citizens have the option of signing onto the system through the internet and adding up to two additional numbers for the system to contact.

"We can send calls out to the entire county," said McClure. "But it also has a mapping capability. For example, if there was a train derailment or similar accident that only affected a specific area of the county, we can specify the area we want called by drawing a circle or rectangle on the map, and the system will only call numbers that are within that designated area."

On the morning of March 2, 2012, emergency managers and county personnel from across Kentucky held a conference call to discuss a looming crisis. Just two days prior, a tornado rated at EF-2 on the Enhanced Fujita scale had touched down in the small community of West Liberty, causing significant damage. Now, according to all reports coming out of the Jackson, KY Weather Center, an even worse storm front appeared to be moving in.

"I've been the Emergency Manager for Johnson County and Paintsville since 2003," said McClure. "Sometimes I feel like the weatherman, I've gotten so used to watching that radar. There was something in the back of my mind that Friday. I was watching that storm front, and it just kept moving east. I called the weather service at 4:00 P.M., and spoke directly to a meteorologist. He told me he'd never seen anything like what was coming our way."

Later that day disaster struck eastern Kentucky once again. Two tornadoes rated at EF-3 smashed into West Liberty and the town of Salyersville, causing extensive damage to both communities and unfortunately taking a number of lives. The tornado that devastated West Liberty stayed on the ground for 96 miles as it traveled east, shearing through the northwestern part of Johnson County. It was followed 15 to 30 minutes later by the tornado that struck Salyersville, which crashed through the southern portion of the county.

Once an official tornado warning was issued for Johnson County, McClure activated the notification system, and the calls began to go out. In total, a series of three calls were made to Johnson County's current database, contacting more than 7,000 residents. Many of those people who were not reached directly by the notification system were informed by neighbors or friends who got their calls.

The Salyersville tornado impacted a residential area of southern Johnson County, damaging 400 structures, a large number of which were completely destroyed. The tornado also sadly caused two fatalities. McClure feels strongly that the number of injured or dead could have been significantly higher if not for the warning system.

Though the original grant from NOAA and the Department of Commerce runs out at the end of this year, McClure is confident that funding for the system will continue one way or another. Since the storms of March 2, he has been approached many times by Paintsville or Johnson County residents who received calls, many of whom feel that if they hadn't gotten that warning they might not have taken the situation as seriously.

McClure's feelings about the emergency notification system are definitely strong, and when asked why someone in his position from another community should look into a service like Reverse 911, his answer is firm. "You're buying an insurance policy for your citizens," said McClure. "That's as plain as I can say it; you're taking out insurance. If it saves one life, whatever your system costs to operate, what kind of cost do you put on that one life you've saved? And from the reactions and comments I've received from the public over the past few weeks, I think our system saved a lot of lives."

Paintsville/Johnson County emergency notification system.