

NACO Emergency Management Awareness Month Q&A

Jim Davidsaver, Director

Lincoln-Lancaster County Emergency Management

1. What are some of the key elements involved in preparing a county or region for emergencies or disasters?

Emergency Mission Goals

Proactive

Prevention, Protection and Mitigation

Reactive

Response & Recovery

The best way to deal with an emergency or disaster is to prevent it. If you can't prevent it, attention is focused on what we can do to increase and enhance our protective and mitigation efforts to decrease and/or minimize the impact. This is an ongoing effort.

Public education and outreach are key to prepare for emergencies and disasters. There is a fine line between awareness and paranoia. The goal is the inform community members and increase their awareness about the potential threats and hazards. There is also a balance between 'possibility' and 'probability'. In the world today, just about anything 'could' happen but if we experience our potential 'worst day', what is that likely to be. We must prepare for 'everything' but increased attention should be focused on those disasters/emergencies that are more likely to happen. We must plan and prepare for both but we are more likely to be impacted by severe weather than we are an 'active shooter'.

Emergency Management takes an all hazards approach and must prepare for everything, but how should those efforts be prioritized? Common approaches include conducting a Hazard Vulnerability Assessment (HVA) and/or a Threat Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment (THIRA) with key community stakeholders. Emergency managers are responsible for convening and conducting these assessments and sharing the findings with all community residents. Good information leads to good decisions and well-constructed plans.

2. How might emergency management look different in your area compared to elsewhere in the state?

Common ground among all emergency managers: Every disaster is a local disaster. The state and federal systems exist to support and assist local emergency managers in all phases/mission areas.

Basic emergency management operation and organizational structure should look similar throughout the state.

Nebraska requires every county to have a Local Emergency Operations Plan (LEOP). The format, content and annexes are very similar. How, why and when the plan is activated, implemented and staffed may vary from county to county.

Emergency managers operate within National Incident Management System (NIMS) and Incident Command Structure (ICS). By design, the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) is staffed by Emergency Support Function (ESF) representatives who have the necessary skills, knowledge and abilities in their discipline/area of expertise. Each county is responsible for identifying who those local ESF reps are and when they are needed to participate in an EOC activation- disaster response.

In smaller jurisdictions, some reps may be required to 'wear multiple hats' and cover more than one ESF role. Pursuant to a local disaster declaration, help is available from the state (NEMA) to prevent an entity being overtasked or overwhelmed during response to and recovery from a disaster/emergency.

3. How do you work with other local agencies to coordinate emergency preparedness?

The environment in Lincoln and Lancaster County is based on cooperative, complementary relationships.

We live in a highly specialized world requiring subject matter experts (SME) to share their specific expertise as needed to increase/enhance our preparedness and/or address the current emergency/disaster. These SMEs are the ESF representatives who work with Emergency Management to build and test the necessary plans and staff our Emergency Operations Center (EOC) as needed.

As the local emergency manager, I don't tell any of them how to do their job. Rather, I ask, 'How can I help you do your job?'

Simply, my job is to convene these experts and ask two questions:

What is the problem?

What do **WE** need to do about it?

It is my responsibility to bring the necessary SMEs together and work to answer those questions.

4. What are some proactive measures your office takes to reduce risk before a disaster strikes?

Public education and community outreach focused on planning and preparation. Promoting situational awareness about the known risks and hazards through social media engagement.

Due to the frequency and impact of severe weather in the Midwest, everyone is encouraged to have a simple shelter plan in place at home, work and school when severe weather threatens. In Lancaster County, we test the outdoor

warning siren network the first Wednesday of the month at 10:15am. Reminders go out on Facebook and 'X' about these tests encouraging everyone to review and practice their shelter plans.

Taking it a step further, we have a Tornado Drill Participation Report posted on our county website. It is a simple online fillable form anyone can complete and submit to our office. We emphasize this each March during Severe Weather Awareness Week (SWAW) which includes the Statewide Tornado Drill (SWTD) but the form is available year round.

Since FEMA designates September as National Preparedness Month (NPM), we do everything we can to promote that locally. [Ready.gov](https://www.ready.gov) is a great resource for anyone interested in creating/revising/updating a preparedness plan.

SWAW and NPM are just two examples of our ongoing, continuous efforts to promote emergency planning and preparedness to all community residents.

5. What does a successful response look like when emergencies do happen?

The priorities are: 1) Life safety; 2) Incident stabilization; and 3) Property preservation.

If people are in harm's way, we need to get them out of harm's way and provide them a place to go.

If we are having a 'bad day', we need to do what is necessary to prevent that bad day from getting worse. If we are having a 'good day', we want to do everything we can to preserve and maintain that.

We never want to see people's property get damaged or destroyed. After the first two priorities have stabilized, attention can be focused on property preservation.

Another important consideration is continuity of operations (COOP). COOP efforts run parallel to the first three priorities. Each department/entity/agency should have a COOP plan which prioritizes its core critical essential duties. When impacted by a disaster or emergency and continuity of operations is compromised, the COOP plan should serve as a 'To Do' list and rank order who should do what to maintain essential operations until you are able to return to 'full speed'.

6. What are some common misconceptions the public has about emergency management?

A tenured Emergency Management colleague once told me, 'The best thing about this job is: Nobody knows what you do. The worst thing about this job is: Nobody knows what you do.'

In many places, the 1950's Cold War-era term 'Civil Defense' and 'Emergency Management' are interchangeable. That's not necessarily a problem. As long as those who need to know you, do and include you in the process, we have our bases covered.

Many community stakeholders I work with say, 'I'm not sure exactly what you do, but I know we need you to do what you do.' I liken Emergency Management's role to a sports umpire or referee. You are there, hidden in plain sight, doing your job. When you do your job properly/correctly, nobody notices. If you aren't there or fail to do your job, it could easily deteriorate into utter chaos.

Emergency Management is an emerging discipline. For a good number of today's emergency managers, emergency management is a 'second career'. Most are prior fire service or law enforcement (like me) who transitioned to emergency management. I think the next generation of emergency managers will be emergency managers by trade. Many universities offer undergraduate degrees. In the private sector, the current focus and/or job title in 'workplace safety' is transitioning to a broader 'emergency management' mandate.

7. How can residents better prepare themselves and support emergency efforts in their communities?

In today's internet-driven environment, there is no shortage of good information readily available. There is also a lot of 'misinformation' out there. Verify the information is from a trusted source.

Self-sufficiency is the primary objective. You cannot help others until you and yours are safe and secure. The '72-hour Rule' is a good one. Have what you need to survive on your own for 3 days without outside assistance. Your household plan should be for everyone under your roof including pets. Pay special attention to any household members with special needs and plan accordingly.

Have a plan. Start simple and add/update/revise your plan as needed. Exercise/test your plan. Remember key concepts mentioned earlier like: Situational awareness: Awareness vs. Paranoia; and Possibility vs. Probability. Give yourself the best opportunity to succeed.

NEMA administers Citizen Corps programs aimed at preparedness like Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT).

8. Are there any community outreach programs or initiatives you're particularly proud of?

I am very fortunate to have a good number of Emergency Management volunteers and community liaisons who donate their time and expertise for the good of the cause. They are my eyes and ears throughout Lancaster County to monitor current conditions and lend a helping hand should the need arise.

The Lincoln Amateur Radio Club (LARC) manages our network of certified Storm Spotters to support. These volunteers are ready, willing and able to deploy to pre-identified locations to monitor significant severe weather threats. This is only one example of the community service LARC provides to Lancaster County residents.

A Southeast Nebraska Emergency Management Planning, Training and Exercise (PET) Region project a few years ago secured funding to supply 120 NOAA Weather radios to each of the fourteen counties in our region. We partnered with our school systems and community centers to get these radios to those families and residents most deserving.

The annual NEMA/NWS-sponsored Severe Weather Awareness Week (SWAW) Poster contest open to all 3rd graders in Nebraska is an excellent example of a community outreach program. In Lancaster County, we enjoy strong participation from local students. Our school systems work with us to promote the contest and solicit participation. It is a great way to promote severe weather awareness among elementary school students.

9. What innovations or changes are you hoping to implement in the next few years?

Anything that will increase effectiveness and efficiency. Working smarter, not harder is the goal.

Emerging technology is always a priority. Two examples are: virtual meeting platforms that allow for a 'remote EOC activation'; and drones and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to provide real-time tracking and monitoring of activity.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is probably the most significant emerging issue looming on the horizon. I have not implemented anything specifically related to AI, but I am paying very close attention to AI's growth and development.

10. Can you share a story about a specific emergency that you helped prepare for and respond to?

Emergency Management has an 'all hazards' mandate. Anything that poses a risk to the health, safety and welfare of our community is on our RADAR.

We take the lead for severe weather (awareness, preparedness, notification, EOC activation and resource mobilization and deployment).

Friday, April 26, 2024: Tornado Outbreak in Lancaster County

The weather forecast for Friday, April 26, 2024 called for a high likelihood of a significant severe weather outbreak. We were actively monitoring these conditions and our EOC was activated and storm spotters were deployed early that afternoon before any warnings were issued.

During the outbreak, five (5) different tornado warnings were issued for parts of Lancaster County as the storm system moved through from southwest to northeast. Since this occurred during dismissal times for most Lincoln Public Schools (LPS) and Lancaster County schools, they activated their shelter plans.

When Garner Industries in northeast Lancaster County received notice of the tornado warning, it activated its severe weather plan moving 70+ employees to its shelter location. Moments later, the building was destroyed by a tornado. First responders established unified command at the scene to coordinate search and rescue efforts. Our Mobile Operations Center (MOC) was deployed to the scene to support their efforts. Garner employees were transported to the Sandhills Global Event Center and provided with necessary support and services. Only one injury was reported.

The after-action review validated our EOC activation process and operation in providing the necessary response and recovery support and resources.

- If you have any photos to accompany the story, that would be awesome!

Video shows April tornado demolishing Garner Industries facility

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZtDth0LVBRU>





Employees were sheltered in this pre-identified interior space.

