

First-Come, First-Served for Disaster Relief Funds *Emergency Management Plan Critical to Fast Initial Damage Assessment*

By Charlie S. Stone

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Because of very limited funding, the disaster relief process is often a race to the pot of gold, with the most assistance going to the cities and counties whose applications reach the end of the rainbow first. To beat the rush to disaster relief funds, cities must conduct an initial damage assessment before state and federal agencies arrive for a formal damage assessment. Often underestimated, this initial damage assessment, performed by a team of citizens, is perhaps the most important step in the application process and should be conducted with accuracy and without delay.

Most rural cities know that the Office of Rural Community Affairs (ORCA) is prepared to channel federal grant revenue, on a first-come, first-served basis, of up to \$350,000 as

funds of last resort or as matching funds to repair damaged infrastructure. This year, ORCA has allocated more than \$14 million for disaster relief from the Texas Community Development Block Grant Program, which is provided by the U.S. Department of Housing and Development. ORCA will continue to evaluate the amount of funding needed for the disaster relief program. The agency is also able to provide technical support by attending damage assessments, helping cities determine beneficiaries, and answering other questions to help cities apply for disaster relief. However, cities should not lose sight of the key to a fast and accurate initial damage assessment: their own emergency management plan. Using their emergency management plan as a guide, cities should

conduct their own survey of homes, businesses, and infrastructure as soon as possible after the disaster event.

Citizens designated in the emergency management plan as part of a local damage assessment team should be ready to conduct the initial assessment immediately following an event, saving the city valuable time often wasted assembling a team. The local damage assessment team should include a representative from the county and residents of the city who are able to quantify damages and estimate losses. City managers, tax assessors, building inspectors, council members, and county and city engineers are examples of individuals who may be able to best perform this function. It is also helpful to designate two team members to serve as liaisons to state and federal agencies.

Marble Falls: Emergency Management Plan Speeds Disaster Recovery

By Julie Vuris Kelly,

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Seven days after they began, local emergency response teams in Marble Falls completed their assessment of damages and concluded that the floods of July 2007 had dealt a serious blow to the city's infrastructure.

Although the disaster caused several thousand dollars worth of damage, Ralph Hendricks, fire chief and emergency management coordinator of Marble Falls, was upbeat about the city's ability to recover.

"Things are going very well for the magnitude of this disaster," said Hendricks. "We put the emergency management plan into operation quickly because we saw it would be a large-scale event. We called in neighboring departments and cities, and they were generous with time and equipment."

Marble Falls relies on an emergency management plan to guide its response during disasters, saving what Hendricks calls "vital hours" in the recovery process. These "vital hours" shave days and possibly months from the total recovery time, meaning that businesses

can open and employees can return to work sooner rather than later.

Hendricks said that the plan helped his team respond quickly to the city's safety and shelter needs. It also jump-started the recovery process, because numerous critical decisions, such as the location of an incident command post and the appointment of specific people to handle key tasks, were made well in advance of the flooding.

The emergency response team had completed the initial assessment of damage to the city and was well prepared to facilitate the official damage assessment when state and federal agencies arrived. Staff members from ORCA, the Governor's Division of Emergency Management (GDEM), the Natural Resources Conservation Service, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency were in Marble Falls on June 29 and July 5, 2007, to provide technical assistance in preparing damage assessment reports required by GDEM.

"Everyone (in Marble Falls) was up to speed on where they needed to be," said Margaret Hardin of Langford Community Management Services, a consulting firm specializing in Community Development Block Grant funds. "Disaster relief funds are first-come, first-served, so the community must get its application submitted in a timely manner, or the funds may not be available." ★

During their assessment, the local damage assessment team should take photos and prepare two maps showing affected areas, indicating whether the damages are to infrastructure, houses, or businesses.

To expedite the process, cities should document the assessment with the Public Property Site Assessment Worksheet (DEM-25), available from the Governor's Division of Emergency Management (GDEM) at www.txdps.state.tx.us/dem/pages/index.htm. The local damage assessment team should also determine, as accurately as possible, the percentage of insurance coverage for damaged homes and businesses.

Finally, the city should be ready to have available two large-capacity vehicles for use during the damage assessment by state and federal agencies.

Within 30 days after the event—and as always, the sooner the better—the stand-by team that performed the initial damage assessment should submit a disaster summary outline to the GDEM. ★



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