



Kansas RTAP Fact Sheet

A Service of The University of Kansas Transportation Center for Rural Transit Providers

Disaster Response: Lessons Learned in Kansas

by Tom Worker-Braddock

Natural disasters that struck Kansas the past year should remind Kansas transit agencies they serve a vital role in their community's disaster response.

A community transit provider is often the one agency that knows both where vulnerable populations live and has the logistical ability to transport those vulnerable populations to safety in the event of a community-wide emergency. Kansas-area transit agencies that responded to the Greensburg tornado, Coffeyville flooding, and north-central ice storms have come away with their own experiences and lessons learned on what went well, and what didn't.

Greensburg tornado

The tornado that hit Greensburg came suddenly and caught everyone unaware. The local senior center had the only transportation service in the vicinity, and was not part of the Kansas DOT transit network. The senior center did not have a disaster response plan regarding transit, and even if they did, one of their vehicles was destroyed by the tornado.

Transit agencies in neighboring counties stepped in. The Pratt Coalition on Aging and Sunflower Diversified Services sent vehicles to the KDOT building in Greensburg at the request of Pratt County law enforcement officials.

The overall response went fairly smoothly, said Tiffany Brown with the Pratt Council on Aging. The site of the destroyed Dillons grocery became the gathering point for Greensburg's residents, and the donated transit vehicles spent the night shuttling those



without access to cars to the Pratt Hospital and Haviland shelter, and then later, from the hospital to the shelter.

Coffeyville flooding

In early July of last year, one quarter of Coffeyville flooded. Flood waters were only a block from Senior Services of Southeast Kansas's (SEK) offices. Sandra Nielson, chief financial officer for SEK, used their ramp-equipped minivan and wheel-chair accessible van to shuttle residents from overcrowded shelters to less crowded shelters.

This service was volunteered by the executive director of Senior Services SEK, but two days later, KDOT gave the official approval to use the KDOT-funded vehicles for emergency response. SEK was informed that KDOT would refund any emergency-response related expenses, such as gas and wages, out of state funds, to prevent agencies from going bankrupt while responding to disasters for which the agencies may not have budgeted.

Senior Services SEK opened their doors for the fire department to store supplies, used the back of their facilities for emergency response, and arranged with vendors that supply ingredients for the SEK's meal program to bring extra bottled water. These responses did not follow a specific response plan; instead SEK relied on the local fire station across the street for response coordination.

To prepare for the next disaster, Sandra Nielson recommends making sure that your transit agency's regular and emergency contact information are on the correct lists for both KDOT and the local emergency response crews. She also said that it would be a good idea to sit on local emergency response boards, although SEK is currently not doing that.

"Natural disasters," says Nielson, "are something you never expect, but should always be in the back of your mind to prepare for, in order to be a

better agency.”

Ice storms

Riley County experienced severe ice storms this past December. According to Laurie Harrison, the county’s assistant emergency management director, emergency officials were in contact with the local transit agency,

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Riley County ATA, which informed them that the agency had the capability to take people to shelters if needed.

While transit was not used for disaster response during the ice storms, the emergency management office does keep in close touch with transit area providers, including Riley County ATA and the three areas school districts, and has emergency contract numbers for those entities’ top officials.

Currently, Riley county is reviewing their emergency operations plan and will be inviting area transit agencies for their input and comments. By statute, every county must have an emergency operations plan. Harrison recommends that transit officials stay involved with these. Get in touch with the emergency management director so the director knows the transit agency’s resources and capabilities. That way, in the event of an emergency, the director can call the transit agency when disaster hits with knowledge about the capabilities of the agency.

The state and federal role

The state and federal governments are limited in their ability to provide transit during emergency response. Dan Hay, from the Operations Office of the Kansas Division of Emergency Management, says that the state and federal government don’t actually own any transit vehicles in Kansas, and is very difficult for the state to require transit agencies, vehicles, or personnel to go into a disaster site.

Hay recommends cities and counties with transit agencies take the

initiative and plan for disaster response in one of three ways:

1) communities can set up mutual aid agreements with each other, with agreements to donate aid without any monetary compensation;

2) cities or counties can create agreements to contract with other transit agencies during a disaster; and

3) a city or county can use its own vehicles. If a county does not have a transit agency housed in their jurisdiction, the local

emergency planning agency could work with the Coordinated Transit District (CTD) in their area to identify potential transit-related resources.

If a county or city hires a transit provider to come in and provide services during a disaster, the disaster-stricken city or county can ask for 75 percent reimbursement of transit-related expenses from FEMA with an additional 10 percent from the state. It’s important to note that only city or county governments experiencing the disaster can be reimbursed for disaster-related expenses; transit providers would have to submit for reimbursement by going through city or county government.

Recommendations

Dan Hay recommends transit agencies proactively identify their own role in county and community disaster plans. Communities need to keep in mind that disasters might leave vehicles unaffected, but might prevent drivers, mechanics and other personnel from performing their duties. Everyone remembers rows of driverless school buses in New Orleans. Therefore, agreements might be for an agency to provide vehicles, personnel, or both to a community.

Hay also recommends communities arrange for alternative fuel sources ahead of time. Most fuel pumps run on electricity, and if the entire community is without electricity, emergency generators might be needed in other places. Communities should contract-out ahead of time with petroleum companies that can provide

a tanker of fuel on short notice that would stay in the disaster area until no longer needed.

Waiting until a disaster strikes before planning the response is too late to suddenly figure out who needs to be called for what services. Transit agencies need to identify their own role in disaster response, and make sure that county and city governments are aware of what transit agencies can provide, and would need, during a disaster.

Sandra Nielson’s words are worth repeating: “Natural disasters are something you never expect, but should always be in the back of your mind to prepare for, in order to be a better agency.”

For more information, contact your local emergency management director. A listing can be found on the Kansas Division of Emergency Management’s Web site at www.kansas.gov/kdem/contact_us/cocoordinator_lepclisting.shtml.

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