

TOWN OF SHELBURNE



COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS

EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

The following is a report of the Emergency Management Committee's After Action Review (AAR) of the effects and responses to the March 13-15, 2023 snow storm. This northeaster brought heavy wet snow to Franklin County to depths up to 40" in some towns. Shelburne received somewhere around 36" of the heavy wet stuff over the three day period which resulted in many blocked roads and significant power outages due to down trees.

This report is a compilation of the comments brought forward by committee members and other concerned residents at the committee's meeting on March 15th. This report follows the format of stating the issue followed by a brief discussion of that issue and finally recommendation(s) to act on the issue.

ISSUE: Fifty-six hours passed before a section of Taylor Road was cleared of downed wires and trees and electric power was restored; about eight residences were isolated during that period.

DISCUSSION: Due to a lack of coordination among the parties responsible for a coordinated effort to clear the road of snow and fallen trees and restore power, the neighbors in the area of the intersection of Taylor Road and Guy Manners Road were isolated for an extended period of time. The Fire Chief requested Eversource prioritize "cut and clear" (over a full restoration of electricity) but the utility's response was that power would be restored according to their priority system in this emergency (without acknowledgement that opening a road was a priority at all). Multiple tree crews showed up ready to begin their work, but the lines had not been "made safe" by Eversource. Consequently, they would depart and go to an area where they could directly go to work. Additionally, since the Highway Department could not access the road to remove snow due to trees and wires down in two sections of Taylor Road, Eversource crews would not have been able to access between Guy Manners Road and Hawks Road had it not been for Town reps stepping in to communicate between the line crew, tree crew, and Highway Department, and the willingness of the Highway Department to send in a crew at about midnight of the second day.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1) In order to ensure a coordinated effort at this site and other disaster sites throughout the town limits, an overall plan that coordinates material, personnel and time is required. This plan should be the responsibility of a planning team at the fully functioning emergency operation center.
- 2) Review with Eversource the concept of "cut and clear" to determine if they continue to use that practice to open roads to create access even if they are not able to restore power at that same time.

- 3) The EOC must prioritize and coordinate with utilities about the Town's priorities in real time during an event. The Emergency Management Director must serve as the point of contact to Eversource as they have stated that communication from any other source is merely informational and has no authority except if received from the EMD.

ISSUE: There was a lack of established warming centers.

DISCUSSION: There were a few calls from residents asking about the availability of a warming center. The Senior Center on Main Street was available on a limited basis. The fire stations on State Street and in Shelburne Center were also available on a limited basis. Local schools within the Mohawk School District are possible locations for warming centers, as mentioned by the Mohawk School Superintendent. However, the main question here is which locations have emergency generators capable of providing electrical power when needed. Mohawk High School does have an emergency back-up generator.

RECOMMENDATION: Conduct a survey of the town residents to determine the extent of the needs for warming/cooling centers. Then develop/refine plans for the establishment and operation of warming/cooling centers throughout the town; perhaps in joint effort with Buckland. These plans need to include:

1. MOU/MOA with owner
2. Personnel to operate center to include overall supervisor(s)
3. Operating hours
4. Accommodating people with access and functional needs(AFN)
5. Meals? Water?
6. Transportation for those who have none?
7. Building requirements such as walkway ramps, emergency power, toilet facilities, etc.

ISSUE: Inability of effectively communicating to town residents key information such as road closures, open roads to out of town locations, open warming centers and other key information before, during and after the storm.

DISCUSSION: There were many phone calls to a variety of people from many different individuals looking for information on many different aspects as a result of the storm, most notably was inquiries on the availability of warming centers. Officials of the Mohawk School District were included in this issue. Instead of calling around to the nine individual towns for a report on current road conditions, they would prefer, for obvious reasons, to get their information from one source.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Establish a section on the Emergency Management page of the town website that maintains up-to-date information during times of disaster. Perhaps this is one of the duties of the Public Information Officer.
2. Re-evaluate the Town's Existing Blackboard (ConnectCTY) and "flip" how the system is used. Re-educate residents to sign up for emergency messaging as the perception is that some have disconnected due to numerous non-emergency messaging. Then, create a sub-list of those residents who are interested in informational, non-emergency messaging for routine use.
3. Check into the feasibility of utilizing social media, such as Facebook, to provide immediate communications to local residents.

ISSUE: Cellular communications went down.

DISCUSSION: Mobile data has become such a vital means of communication that we greatly depend on it for voice and data, especially in times of emergencies, to keep us apprised of the current situation and warn others of coming dangers. It also provides us the means to call for and respond to help when needed. Our dependency on mobile data has become a point of no return when it comes to means of instantaneous messaging. When mobile data (specifically AT&T service from Mt. Massamet) went down during this storm it created a crippling effect for our Police, Highway Department and other First Responders.

RECOMMENDATION: Local town officials should call AT&T and request a face-to-face meeting to provide an explanation to the cause of the outage and what is being done to prevent such occurrence in the future. A face-to-face meeting, to include the Police Chief, Fire Chief and the EMD, is highly recommended rather than an email or phone call in order to emphasize the seriousness of our concern. Including those seriously affected by this outage (PD, FD, & EMD) in this meeting will provide an opportunity for AT&T to hear first-hand of the gravity of the situation this outage placed on our emergency response capabilities.

ISSUE: Route 2, a major roadway, closed in several locations.

DISCUSSION: Route 2 is the area's major east-west transportation route. Closure of this main thoroughfare obviously impedes the movement of emergency vehicles during a high need.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1) Complete the pre-plan of detour routes that would be needed to divert traffic if Mohawk Trail (Route 2) was closed in Shelburne, and practice the plan.
- 2) Conduct a study to determine what exactly caused the road closures and develop a plan that puts priority on quickly responding to incidents that block this major roadway in order to keep it open.

ISSUE: Police Force under staffed.

DISCUSSION: The Police Department (PD) was called upon to perform many wellness checks that stretched its existing force.

RECOMMENDATION: Establish a group of volunteers who have the capabilities (4-wheel drive vehicles for one) to perform wellness checks; perhaps a CERT Team whose members are also trained as first responders. This group would perform the wellness checks instead of the Police Department. All requests for wellness checks would be relayed to the EOC and thus coordinated by the EOC.

ISSUE: Need more detour signs.

DISCUSSION: Insufficient detour signs may cause vehicular traffic to get lost when attempting to circumvent a blocked road. This storm had many roads blocked. The existing inventory of detour signs was insufficient.

RECOMMENDATION: Pre-plan alternative routes for each scenario where a main road is blocked. Then identify spots where detour signs would be required to effectively maintain good traffic flow. After all

alternative routes have been identified a count of required detour signs can then be determined. Order the additional number required.

ISSUE: The Emergency Operation Center was not activated.

DISCUSSION: Without the Emergency Operation Center up and running there was no focal point to receive situational information to give us an overall view of the extent of the damage within town limits. Without this timely information and a centralized location to gather it and paint the big picture of our situation, we were unable to provide any efficient coordinated response when and where needed. A coordinated effort of providing personnel and equipment to different sections of town in a timely manner would have resulted in the opening of roads and the restoration of power much sooner in many instances.

RECOMMENDATION: Obtain the necessary funding to relocate the two EM radios from the fire station to the new EOC. Then immediately begin the training necessary to have a fully functioning EOC ready for the next emergency event.

ISSUE: The emergency generator for the Highway Department radio repeater did not function.

DISCUSSION: For obvious reasons the Highway Department benefits from a fully functioning radio system in order to carry out their response duties. The radio system also serves as an important link among all town departments and responders.

RECOMMENDATION: Immediately initiate repairs to the generator on Mt. Massaumett. Establish and execute a periodic schedule of cycling the generator through a full testing procedure.

ISSUE: The Emergency Operation Center (EOC) was not activated.

DISCUSSION: There were many instances where one central coordinating body, such as an EOC, would have prevented lost time with emergency crews standing around waiting for another crew to complete their preliminary work so they could begin theirs. For example, utility crews could not begin their work until fallen trees were moved to allow those crews access to the downed wires. Consequently, after waiting for an extended period of time unable to accomplish anything the utility crew would move on to another assignment. There were many examples of this type of mismanaged coordination.

A central coordinating point would have also assisted Eversource with establishing work priorities for their repair crews in our area. Our local Eversource service rep was receiving calls at his EOC from many different individuals here in Shelburne with their own individual priority. At one point he became so frustrated with all these “priority one” calls that he demanded that all these requests flow through one point of prioritization; that being the EMD. In order for the EMD to make quality decisions on what order would be given to the work needed to clear roads and restore power, a clear picture would be required of the situation in the entire town. The meant a system of gathering information and analyzing it would have to be in place and utilized. This system is one of the prime responsibilities of an effective EOC.

RECOMMENDATION: We should not hesitate to activate the EOC in the future. Yet, in order to do so we must continue to work toward a fully functioning EOC with a well trained staff.

ISSUE: “We get desensitized about the intensity of a storm.”

DISCUSSION: This is an actual quote from one of the participants in the after actions review (AAR) session. The concern is the complacency we seem to lull ourselves into, and this is true not just for responders but all residents. Whether it be the meteorologist that predicts the “big one” that falls flat or the infrequency of these big storms, we tend to think that it won’t be that big of a deal this time. When we finally realize it is a big deal we can often find ourselves behind in our response.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Local leadership within emergency management (both inside and outside the EM Committee) must remain vigilant of such complacency and react accordingly. Some corrective actions could include:

1. More rehearsals of responses to various emergency events to include mandatory response triggers.
2. Increased informative communications from local key leaders conducted in a timely manner beforehand. This information should come from reliable resources such as the National Weather Service, Eversource’s frequent storm updates and MEMA’s regularly published situation awareness reports; to name a few.

ISSUE: “Town should realize that it’s on its own for the first 24-48 hours of a storm.” A comment made in response to the knowledge that MEMA now has a regional warehouse of supplies and equipment that it can lend out to communities to supplement/support their efforts in response to an emergency.

DISCUSSION: A point was made that although MEMA has stepped up its efforts to support local communities by building a regional warehouse and stocking it with the supplies and equipment that communities may need to supplement what they may be lacking to respond to an emergency event, we should not count on any of that logistical support in the first 24-48 hours of that emergency event. The time it takes to ascertain the need, requisition it and then have it delivered could take up to 48 hours or longer.

A required skillset of emergency planners and operators is to be able to recognize early on what assets may be required and compare them to what are available. This realization then enables for the early initiation of obtaining those needed supplies and equipment. This skillset is gained through hands-on experience either from real life events or, a more preferred method, through realistic training events.

RECOMMENDATION: Develop a training plan that firsts improves individual skills and then advance to simulated exercises that employs those individual skills in a collective setting with other operators.

CONCLUSION

Unfortunately what this report does not include are the many positive aspects of our response to this storm. All too often after action reviews seem to concentrate on what went wrong and where improvements are needed. We fail to remember that those actions that proved beneficial are good learning points as well, for they are to be noted and repeated in future events. Members of the Highway Department spent many, many hours of the day and night behind the wheel of the snowplow trying to keep the roads open. There were relatives hiking significant distances to check on shut-ins. Many others spent countless hours on the phone coordinating response activities. These examples and much more should have been included in this report.

The Emergency Management Committee welcomes, actually encourages, any and all comments to this report. I'm sure there are many other examples of what went well and where we can improve. Please feel free to send those comments, suggestions or whatever you like to me at EMD@townofshelburnema.gov so that we may continue to improve in our efforts to respond to effectively and efficiently to any emergency incident that comes our way.

This report submitted on behalf of the AAR team by

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