

How to cope with disasters

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Preparing for disaster before it strikes can be a real learning experience. The Iowa Tribe of Oklahoma found this out first hand when they recently conducted three emergency preparedness exercises.

The three exercises included a wildfire drill May 2 and a massive tornado and resulting hazardous material spill June 26. Coordinators of the exercises decided to run the last two drills in conjunction with each other to better facilitate an extreme disaster.

"Initially the last two exercises were scheduled to be separate," said Lt. Brian Rowe, who coordinated the project as the Iowa Tribal Emergency Manager, "but we decided to go ahead and combine them."

"It served double duty to run the two exercises together," said Rene Spineto, spokesperson for the tribe. "They not only had to contend with a theoretical tornado destroying the Tribal Headquarters, but then they also had to deal with the aftermath, which included a hazardous material spill."

There were several purposes of these exercises. One purpose was to better prepare for dealing with extreme disasters in a rural area. Another purpose was to recognize areas that needed improvement in their emergency contingency plan.

"Once we get this plan in place, we'll be able to work better with the counties and the local municipalities," Rowe said. "Our emergency contingency plan will be more soundly structured."

The Iowa's wildfire exercise was dealt with fairly efficiently, because they are already prepared to deal with that kind of emergency. The only problem they encountered during the exercise was a lack of communication, which seemed to be improved enormously with the tornado/hazmat exercise.

"Our wildfire drill went really well, of course, our mutual aid partners, Perkins and Merrick, have worked together before," said Rowe. "We didn't have very many problems, although some communications problems did come up. We had set up triage for victims and the communication just wasn't there. They didn't know what kind of injuries they were going to be dealing with or how many victims would be coming in. But, that was a good thing to find out now; safe mistakes are so much better than mistakes during an actual emergency."

"Because we do get so many fires, it's so critical in the rural areas to be prepared, especially for the early responders," said Spineto. "They have to keep it from becoming an even bigger disaster than it already is and keep it from spreading, which fires can do very rapidly, while they await further help. We're all prepared for that in the environment that we live in out here, so the exercise went really well."

During their dual-emergency exercise, communication had definitely improved, however other areas of concern did arise. The drill simulated the destruction of the Tribal Headquarters and assessed the Tribe's actions in safeguarding lives and reestablishing Tribal operations. Then, as a result of the tornado, a tanker-truck carrying a hazardous substance collided with another vehicle, pinning a motorist in the wreckage and causing a hazardous spill.

“In a training exercise, you get to see where you do well and see where you need to improve,” Spineto said. “We did really well in the tornado exercise, however the hazardous material exercise pointed out that the staff needed more training in that area. Because the hazmat situation doesn’t occur very frequently in our area, it was so important to know how to handle it if that situation were to arise. We’ve realized that we’ll need to call on other authorities to give us a hand.”

“Typically, in any given emergency in any rural area, what the first responder does to help with the emergency is very important,” she said. “They have to be able to immediately handle the situation and then go get help. You can’t do it all yourself.”

To ensure that their drills were properly planned and executed, the Tribe collaborated with the Center for Preparedness Training, Inc., a consulting firm out of Colorado.

“We hired CPTI and together we talked about what we were at most risk of seeing,” Rowe said. “We did a risk assessment that showed us what might occur in and around our community, provided input on what we wanted to do, wrote scripts and went through several rough drafts to get a final draft for the drills. We choose fires, because we are out in a rural community; tornadoes, because they are so abundant in Oklahoma; and hazmat, because we are out on the highway, which can put us at risk because of all the traffic.”

“Several people, including seven emergency coordinators assisted me throughout the project. Chief of Police Bobby Fields, who is the Director of Public Safety, Darren Shields with the Iowa Tribe Environmental Services and Gary Cattrell with Roads and Building Management all incorporated these offices. We all thought it was pretty important to have an emergency plan in place not only to assist our community, but also the entire rural community.”

The Iowa Tribe received a \$100,000 grant from the Federal Emergency Management Administration to fund the project, which allowed them to develop their Tribal Emergency Operations Plan and test the plan through the three emergency simulations. The purpose of the plan is to have a course of action to respond to emergencies that may turn into disasters.

“With a major emergency like a double disaster, we would need to call on outside help dealing with it,” said Spineto. “Everything we learned were all things that we needed to know and the point of the exercise was to learn what we knew and what we needed to work on and improve.”

With all this extra training under their belts, the Iowa Tribe is now better prepared to deal with a variety of disasters, thus helping avoid real tragedy in the future.

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