

"Federation Corner" column
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Inadequate county emergency response

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One meteorologist on a local television news show has declared the violent weather event which struck the area on Friday night, June 29, a "once in a hundred years event." The storm front, named a "derecho" (which I hear is Spanish for "straight forward"), moved out of the Midwest and smashed into communities along the east coast from North Carolina to New York, knocking out electrical power to over 1 million customers in the Washington region.

Within hours of the event, the Potomac Electric Power Company (PEPCO) and other local power companies were estimating that it might take as long as a week to restore power to all businesses and homes that had lost power. As I waited in line at my local grocery store to purchase a bag of ice, to keep from losing all the food in my refrigerator, a neighbor remarked "welcome to the third world." Another neighbor of mine, who has traveled the globe with their job and has lived in several third world countries, stated that in none of those countries had they gone without electricity for as long as a week.

Let's leave aside the response to the crisis from our local power companies. They could not call on repairmen from neighboring states to assist with repairs, as they usually do, because most of the surrounding states were also hard hit. Was it unwise for PEPCO to have downsized their work force starting in 2001, and now employ only half the number of linemen that were on their payroll ten years ago? It probably was unwise. Had they not done so, they might have shortened the response time to get power back on to all customers.

What is particularly disturbing, though, is the lack of effective response from our county government. By Sunday morning, County Executive Isiah Leggett had been interviewed by the media and declared PEPCO's response to the widespread power outage inadequate, stating the power company's customers deserve a better level of service. But what was Mr. Leggett and the county government doing to respond to the emergency at hand?

When the storm front blew through on Friday, it knocked out power to the traffic signals at 800 intersections in Montgomery County. That's nearly half of the signalized intersections in the county. This is not the first time that this has happened recently. The snow storms that paralyzed the region a couple of winters ago also knocked out half or more of the traffic signals in the county, yet the county has done nothing in the meantime to improve their response.

By noon on Monday, two and one-half days after the storm event, an email from county government announced traffic signals were still out at 240 intersections in the county (I'm not sure how they expected those of us without electricity who access the internet by personal computers to get this email). A short list of affected intersections included Connecticut Avenue at Randolph Road and at Veirs Mill Road and at Jones Bridge Road, Cabin John Parkway and MacArthur Boulevard, Colesville Road and University Boulevard, River Road at Wilson Lane and at Little Falls Parkway, and Rockville Pike/MD 355 at Jones Bridge Road and at Gude Drive.

Traffic signals along the county's major routes need to have emergency generators installed so that they continue to function in a power outage. Officers from a police force already stretched thin by the emergency were assigned to direct traffic at 90 of these "dark" intersections. And it is not sufficient to tell the public to "treat an intersection where the traffic signal is out like a four-way stop sign." Ask the

man on the street what that means and 9 of 10 drivers probably couldn't give you the proper answer. By the way, how do you treat a major roadway with 2 or 3 lanes in each direction "like a four-way stop sign"?

Now, let's examine the county government response in providing emergency shelter to those whose homes are uninhabitable, either due to the heat or trees falling on them. On Monday, County Executive Leggett was interviewed by a television news crew at a senior assisted living/nursing home in Silver Spring, where he bemoaned the fact that elderly residents were being forced to cope with the heat. But he did not offer to get a school bus there to transport those residents to the nearest emergency shelter, probably because there were only two open in the whole county--at Richard Montgomery High School in Rockville, and at the White Oak Recreation Center. By Monday, the one at Clarksburg High School had already been closed. I suppose the elderly folks at the nursing home could have tottered over to the Silver Spring Library to stay cool during hours of operation...oh, wait, it was closed, too. I guess the official county response to those folks in need is to "swelter in place."

Every resident in the nation of Japan participates in emergency drills on how to respond to earthquakes, typhoons, tsunamis, terrorist gas attacks, you name it. Probably every kid in every neighborhood of every city in Japan can tell you the name and location of the emergency shelter in his community.

Instead, in my neighborhood, I overheard two couples talking on their walk back home from enjoying dinner at a restaurant down the street which still had electricity. One of the mothers said, "If we don't get power soon, we're going to have to go to a hotel. Jeremy (their 11 year old son) just can't get along without his electronic stuff...his video games, and Facebook, and all." Dear God, has it come to that...the worst aspect of the crisis this couple has to deal with is a child who is bored and has no imagination? Teach him how to play cards, give him a book, or break out a board game and have fun as a family. But why bother. Come the "big one", poor Jeremy's a goner anyway, because mommy has probably never taught the pampered pre-teen how to boil water, let alone how to feed himself or do laundry without electricity. And there will be no county-sponsored local emergency shelter for him to escape to.

So, Mr. Leggett, before you go wagging your finger at the local power company and proclaiming their response to a "once in a hundred years event" as inadequate, maybe you should analyze the response of the county government you're running and ask if you did everything you could and should have to help the businesses and the millions residents under your care.

The members of the Flat Earth Society can stick their heads in the sand like ostriches and pretend the severe weather events occurring around the world are not the result of global climate change. But these disaster events will likely continue to occur with greater frequency. And every one of us needs to ask what we as individuals and as a society can do to better prepare for the coming emergencies.

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to theelms518@earthlink.net