

"Federation Corner" column
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Improving county emergency preparedness

by Jim Humphrey
member, MCCF Executive Committee

This week's Federation Corner column is a follow-up to a July 5 commentary. In it I asserted that the response of the county government to the "derecho" storm event on June 29 was inadequate and officials should consider improvements for responding to future emergencies.

Consideration of improvements was the approach taken by county Office of Emergency Management Director Chris Voss at a July 24 briefing to the Council on the county storm response. But in a letter to the editor printed in last week's Sentinel, Public Information Director Patrick Lacefield adopted a defensive tone stating the July 5 Federation Corner column I penned "was full of inaccuracies and misinformation..."

I now know of only one statement I made which was inaccurate. I stated that after County Executive Isiah Leggett was interviewed by the media at Springvale Assisted Living and Nursing Home in Silver Spring, which had lost its electrical power and air conditioning system, he left without offering to get a bus and take the elderly residents to one of the two county "cooling centers." I have learned Mr. Leggett made the offer but that the residents refused it.

The other facts in the July 5 column were taken from county email messages I received, when I could access them from my desktop computer after my home's electrical power was restored:

- the traffic lights were knocked out at 800 or so signalized intersections following the Friday night storm. (I have learned that many of those traffic signals have battery backup that lasts 8 to 10 hours--longer is there is a single signal light.)
- and, by noon on Monday the signals at 240 intersections were again dark and police were needed to direct traffic.

As Council member Marc Elrich stated, when we see the overtime cost for police directing traffic we might consider the purchase of the battery operated back ups a poor expenditure. It might have been more cost effective to buy generators to keep traffic signals functioning. But as Council member Phil Andrews reminded his colleagues, the battery back ups were bought for traffic signals along major county routes in order to get folks home immediately following an emergency, not to handle an extended power outage lasting for days.

Here are some comments about the county's emergency response to the June 29 storm that have been submitted to me by my neighbors or colleagues in the civic community.

Communication with the public is key, and I have heard two primary points regarding improvements in this area. First, the name you give something is important. When he addressed the Council this past Tuesday, Mr. Voss referred to county "emergency shelters" that were available following the storm. But at the time all information released by the county referred to "cooling centers." There is a difference.

The term "cooling center" sounds like a place you can go to seek temporary relief from the heat. But many county residents whose homes were uninhabitable due to the storm's destructive power needed "emergency shelter"--a place with a cot and a meal where they could stay temporarily. I have been told the county offered overnight shelter if residents knew to request it, but officials needed to clearly inform

residents that such facilities were available. And Council member George Leventhal remarked that he does not believe two "cooling centers" were sufficient for a county the size of Montgomery.

As to the second point regarding communication with the public, officials at the Tuesday Council briefing noted with pride the emails sent to residents over the internet and the instant alerts sent via hand held smart devices. But as Council member Valerie Ervin remarked, officials have to remember that some residents have no internet connection in their home or smart devices.

In his letter to the editor, Mr. Lacefield stated "transportation was available to cooling shelters and requests were made through 311." But how would residents have known this if their electrical and phone lines were down and they had no smart devices, especially given that the county's 311 telephone system was inoperable for a time following the storm event?

Voluntary water rationing was requested for a time following the storm, due to temporarily insufficient filtering capacity at the treatment plant. But consumption levels barely dropped, perhaps because so few residents knew of the request.

We need a basic emergency information system that doesn't rely on electricity, cell towers or satellites. And if any residents tried to get useful information over a battery operated AM radio during the power outage, they would have found as I did that the bands are almost entirely occupied by politically conservative talk radio stations. News you can use is, apparently, a lost art in the world of AM radio.

There is another related area where improvement could be made. In the July 5 column I mentioned the Japanese emergency response model. Neighborhood facilities throughout that country have been identified as places to which residents can go for information or help.

Following a particularly violent solar flare two weeks ago, the electromagnetic pulse (EMP) that hit the earth a day and a half later knocked out all radio and satellite communications in Europe for a few hours. God forbid some terrorists figure out how to create an EMP here like the one Europe experienced. Everyone's i phones and hand held smart devices will be rendered useless. It will be essential to have a system of neighborhood emergency shelters in place to dispense information and offer food or shelter, if needed.

Montgomery County is next door to the nation's capital. This is not just a local emergency response issue; it is a Homeland Security matter.

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

[Added note--In March 1989 a solar geomagnetic storm knocked out power to 6 million people in the Canadian province of Quebec and parts of the U.S. for nine hours.