

PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS (PHEP) PROGRAM

STORIES FROM THE FIELD



CATASTROPHIC FLOODING IN WEST VIRGINIA

West Virginia is no stranger to floods. “It feels like we have a major flood every Tuesday,” said Jerry Rhodes, director of the West Virginia Bureau for Public Health Center for Threat Preparedness. However, this flood was different; by all accounts it was a catastrophe the state hasn’t seen the likes of in many years.

On June 23, 2016, 10 inches of rain fell in West Virginia over the course of a few hours, and rivers overflowed their banks by up to 27 feet, causing the third deadliest flood in the state’s history. The floodwaters washed out several towns, a shopping center, multiple roads and bridges, caused the evacuation of four nursing homes, left more than 500,000 people without power, and ultimately killed at least 23 people. However, due to training and infrastructure put in place by the PHEP cooperative agreement, the West Virginia health department’s threat

preparedness team integrated public health into the emergency response and, in collaboration with partners, led and coordinated the public health and healthcare sectors.

As the Center for Threat Preparedness played a coordinating role among the responder teams, the team’s knowledge of and experience using the Incident Command System was critical. This structure insured that the public health system remained intact to coordinate the response, including emergency medical services operations, food safety checks, boil water advisories and mold inspections by the Office of Environmental Health Services, control of a dermatitis outbreak, deployment of mobile health clinics, and tetanus vaccine distribution by the Office of Epidemiology.



U.S. Department of
Health and Human Services
Centers for Disease
Control and Prevention



THE INCIDENT

In June 2016, a catastrophic flooding event devastated several counties in West Virginia.



THE RESPONSE

The WV threat preparedness department, which is largely PHEP funded, coordinated the departmental, as well as state, local, and NGO, responses.



THE OUTCOMES

Due to previous training and familiarity with the Incident Command System, WV emergency officials conducted a coordinated response, including water rescues, building and food inspections, health communication messaging, and supply distribution.

West Virginia's Center for Threat Preparedness is entirely federally funded through PHEP and the Hospital Preparedness Program (HPP) and would not exist without these programs. The state provides 60 percent of its PHEP and HPP funds to the local health departments for the development of their community emergency preparedness programs and also funds nongovernmental organizations (NGO) and other partner organizations that were able to fill critical needs during the 2016 flood.

The Volunteer Organizations Active in Disaster is an NGO that manages feeding and housing for residents displaced in an emergency. In addition to these activities, the West Virginia chapter, which is supported by PHEP and HPP funds, accepted, stored, and delivered more than \$40 million worth of donated supplies during and after the flood. PHEP funding also supports the Access and Functional Needs Workgroup (AFN), which is typically involved in pre-emergency preparedness measures. AFN used its PHEP-funded information sharing process to disseminate critical health messages, translated those messages during the flood into American Sign Language videos, and used their networks to ensure they reached their target populations.

A final, less traditional, PHEP benefit that has developed over the last few years, Rhodes said, is the collaboration between PHEP directors in other states. According to Rhodes, every time there is a disaster, he receives a phone call from six or eight other PHEP directors whose states have experienced a similar incident, offering advice and help. This sense of community and support, while not often highlighted in the news or a grant report, embodies the spirit the collaborative agreement was meant to accomplish.

CDC's Public Health Emergency Preparedness (PHEP) cooperative agreement program is a critical source of funding, guidance, and technical assistance for state, local, tribal, and territorial public health departments to strengthen their public health preparedness capabilities. Since 9/11, the PHEP program has saved lives by building and maintaining a nationwide public health emergency management system that enables communities to rapidly respond to public health threats.

To learn more about the PHEP program, visit www.cdc.gov/phpr/readiness.