

When Disaster Hits Home

By Mike Stanzel, Circuit Rider

Well, after what seemed like the longest, snowiest winter in history, the first sign of spring for me is always our annual conference that I have worked at the past 11 years. In years past, most of the time the weather was perfect except for a blizzard or two out west or 50 mph winds to the east. However this year, the common conversation amongst the operators and staff was the threat of the incoming weather.

March of 2019 in good ole Nebraska will go down as one of the most devastating disasters in history with the double whammy, a blizzard to the west and historic flooding from central Nebraska to the land along the Missouri river.

By Tuesday evening at the banquet, a lot of guys' phones were blowing up with alarms and panic calls from back home. By Wednesday morning guys were bailing out either to beat the incoming blizzard or to take care of flooding threats in their home town so the decision was made to cancel the last session so everyone could get a head start home.

Like many of you, I wear several hats in my town of Valley, two of which are being on the Fire Department and President of our City Council. When I arrived home Wednesday evening, we started inspecting the rivers and followed up with a preplan meeting with all the fire and rescue personnel. Well, we didn't

have to wait long after the meeting ended to get our first flood related call, which came in shortly after midnight to assist with flood evacuations near Fremont.

Thursday was a day full of rescue and evacuation efforts and meetings with the emergency managers, law enforcement personnel, NRD directors, weather service personnel, as well as, city officials from our neighboring town of Waterloo

Friday was when things really started getting bad, the rivers were rising, the dikes were starting to fail and people were starting to panic. The decision to voluntarily evacuate was made and a command center was established at the Waterloo Fire Station. By late morning all businesses were closing and sending employees home. While essential personnel were working on evacuating our nursing home and our assisted living center, rescue calls for assistance began piling up. By Friday night Valley looked like a ghost town. A lot of people had left, water was continuing to rise and every road and highway in every direction was closed and impassable. We were literally trapped in our own town.

In the wee hours of Saturday morning, the rivers had crested and nearly every street in town had 2-4 feet of water. The sewer system was completely full. We had evacuees sleeping on the floor of our high school and gym and police officers sleeping in their cars. It was a sight I'd never thought I would see in my lifetime.

Monitoring the fire radio, I heard someone say the city of Valley was going to be turning off their water system in 1 hour. I immediately called our PeopleService operator to verify if he had stated that, which he had not. However, he was stuck in Omaha with no way to get into town. Fortunately we had a public works employee in town with keys that gave me access to the treatment plant wells and lift stations to ensure all were operating. We were lucky that our treatment plant and wells were not affected, but our lift stations struggled for three days to get caught up.

One thing we all learned from this disaster is you need to have an emergency plan in place. Communication is a must!! We are going to have a special city council meeting for a flood debriefing with all essential personnel to discuss what we did right, what we did wrong, what we can do better and what extra equipment we need such as barricades, cones, cots blankets, etc. While there is no way anyone can be totally prepared for a disaster of this magnitude, some simple preplanning can surely make a difference.