

REPORTING A DISASTER

when it's where you live

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SO YOU'RE IN THE MIDDLE OF IT.

In eastern Kentucky on July 28, 2022, we woke up to find ourselves in a flood.

At the time, I worked at WMMT 88.7 FM, the local community radio station. That morning, I was stranded in a town nearby, but I came home to find that several coworkers had lost their homes, and 40 people across the region had lost their lives. My workplace, and station, had been washed away. We had no electricity, internet, or potable water for days. But as a reporter in the middle of a historic disaster, I was somehow supposed to make sense of it all.

I did not always deal with the stress in the best way. I spent hours frustratedly uploading radio stories on a weak hotspot. A lot of my hair fell out. I spent several nights filing spots with NPR with a handle of bourbon next to me. Missionaries from Texas continuously tried to feed me hot dogs from their cars. A lady from California, with a camera round her neck, asked me "where the flood victims were" and I might have been a little rude to her. But, I learned a lot.

SEVERE WEATHER PREDICTED?

- Know evacuation routes
- Keep an eye on severe weather alerts
- Pay attention to your surroundings
- Check on the people around you
- Fill up your gas tank and get extra food, water, etc.
- Write down observations as situations allow

STAY PREPARED & KEEP ON HAND:

- A "go bag" with essentials like toothbrush, toothpaste, first aid supplies, ID
- Mobile hotspot
- Emergency phone numbers
- Remember your safety comes first. The story can wait.

THE DAYS AND WEEKS AFTER

First off - if you touched debris, floodwater, building parts, anything, make sure your vaccinations are up to date, particularly hepatitis A and tetanus. If you're going into damaged buildings, wear a respirator and good boots. We had nurses running up and down the backroads in an ATV with their meds in the back. I hope you are so lucky.

It's time to start gathering information. So if you can, go to where the people are.

- Displaced people will be in shelters, warming centers, and community spaces like libraries. Many of these initial shelters are set up in local schools or community buildings. People will also gather where there's internet.
- Many impacted people may still be at home, either trapped, or not wanting to leave.
- Many of these community centers become makeshift mutual aid hubs. These hubs often know where the people are and will make effort to find them, even when FEMA or the National Guard may not have.
- Don't be afraid to put down your journalist hat and just help out. Muck out a house if you can. Deliver fire department spaghetti. Fold donated clothes. You'll learn a lot. You'll see your community in a new way. It'll mess you up. It will also be beautiful and make you remember why you do what

Newcomers will arrive.

- National media: They will not always comport themselves well and unfortunately people will confuse you with them. Some people will reach out to you to get the lay of the land. That in my experience was helpful, a chance for collaboration and to increase coverage.
- Helpers, often with a mission: That means church groups. It can mean decentralized mutual aid groups. Maybe individuals wanting to be helpful. It can mean Oath Keepers and other far-right quasi-militias. Everyone will try to give you a hot dog for their own reasons.
- And of course, if your disaster is big enough - FEMA: Locate their local offices and stay in touch. They often come out with important announcements and keep tallies of the aid they've given. Many people will be suspicious of FEMA. Take their concerns seriously.
- NGOS: Team Rubicon, the Cajun Navy, Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster, the Red Cross. Sometimes they act in good faith and sometimes not. Some remain for weeks, others remain for months and years, working closely with local government.



SOLUTIONS STORIES BECOME POSSIBLE IN THIS TIMEFRAME. THE POST-DISASTER WORLD IS FULL OF ORDINARY PEOPLE DOING EXTRAORDINARY THINGS. HERE'S A STORY I DID ON PEOPLE WHO ARE IN RECOVERY FROM SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS, WHO FOUND COMMUNITY AND STRENGTH IN ONE ANOTHER.

THE LONG HAUL

You'll see a shift in strategy as months pass.

- FEMA application deadlines will pass and services will be tightened. Follow up with people. Did your neighbors see the money they were promised? What was the application process like? Did they have to appeal? Was their debris taken care of?
- Relevant deadlines have passed. Maybe it's Christmas, or Easter. How have space uses shifted? Who's returned to their homes and businesses? What is happening to people as holidays pass, milestones (birthdays, funerals, etc.) happen? Elections - what are officials promising?

Some NGOs will stick around. They'll insert themselves into local government processes and try to help with recovery, sometimes with a contract. Who are they? Who works for them? What is their function?

Debris pickup and final FEMA deadlines will pass - keep track of these things & communicate to audience. Are the fixes happening?

...AND NEXT TIME

- Consider the rebuild. Will things be different next time? Once again, what preventative measures are being put in place? Is the plan to build back different, or the same? To build back at all, or, in the case of coastal Louisiana, to maintain a slow retreat from the floodplain?
- Consider hazard mitigation funding. Did your local government accept it?
- Do local officials believe and act as though it will happen again? Do experts think it will?

It will be tempting to consider what is bad and hard, and regard everything with suspicion. In my mind, mostly, no one's at the rudders, and for the most part, the community was both in shock and full of genuine desire and drive to help one another out of the mess. That's where considering solutions becomes important, so you can suss out what's working and what's not.

Your community will begin to recover. But it will also never be the same. It's hard to admit to yourself, but it's also how it is. Some empty houses stay empty and the For Sale signs go up, the old walk you used to take is bereft of the kids and dogs that used to. You may find yourself leaving - I did, though I stay in touch.

I hope disaster never strikes your community. But if it does, just stay prepared and alert, be kind to yourself and to the people around you, and remember to ask lots of questions. Good luck.



HOW ARE PEOPLE PUTTING THEIR LIVELIHOODS BACK TOGETHER?

THIS SOLUTIONS STORY WAS ABOUT TWO FARMERS WORKING TO GET READY FOR NEXT GROWING SEASON.



THINK ABOUT THE CUMULATIVE IMPACTS ON INFRASTRUCTURE, HEALTH, ECONOMY. THIS STORY FOR THE OHIO VALLEY RESOURCE FOCUSED ON ROAD, DAM, AND DOWNTOWN DAMAGE.