

* SPECIAL EDITION *

A Proactive Team Approach Defined FSSA Response to Indiana Storms Disaster

When he saw TV news reports that severe thunderstorms and tornados had ravaged several communities in southeastern Indiana March 2, **Rich Adams** knew immediately what Indiana Family and Social Services Administration (FSSA) needed to do: mobilize quickly. “I contacted Secretary (**Michael**) **Gargano** to plan



Southern Indiana was devastated by severe weather systems including multiple tornados.

how FSSA would begin providing disaster assistance to storm victims, and I started working the telephone to assemble our disaster response team,” recalled Adams, a deputy director with FSSA’s Division of Family Resources (DFR).

Adams called **Mary Medler**, a DFR regional manager in Liberty, Ind., who had significant experience with the One Stop Shop (OSS) concept – Indiana’s preferred way of providing multiple government services at a single location. Medler successfully managed DFR’s disaster food stamps program after tornado and flooding disasters in 2008, and FSSA needed a repeat performance. Without hesitation,

Medler volunteered: “My first step was to retrieve the ‘lessons learned’ document summarizing what had worked most effectively in 2008. Next, was recruiting. It was important to have a core team available for the long haul.”

In short order, Medler had commitments from 14 DFR team members in her region. DFR staffers from Vanderburgh and Clark counties signed on as well. All told, about 30 DFR employees from three regions worked the OSS anywhere from one to thirteen consecutive days processing 384 applications for replacement and disaster assistance food stamps. “The humility of the affected residents was unbelievable,” remembered Medler. Many victims, while eligible for disaster food stamps, were reluctant to apply



In addition to extensive property damage, at least thirteen Hoosiers lost their lives.

“ We were speechless. It was amazing how much damage there was, and how significant it was. I’ve never seen anything like it. ”

–*Mary Medler, DFR Regional Manager*

because they thought they weren’t as bad off as their neighbors. “They felt it would take away from someone more deserving,” said Medler.

Without **Dave Smalley’s** contributions, the food loss assistance would not have been an option. In

his role as DFR policy manager for SNAP (food stamps), Smalley submitted the necessary paperwork with USDA Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) so Indiana could implement its disaster food stamp programs. Within hours of the storms’ passing, Smalley was assessing damage reports, identifying which zip codes to include in the FNS applications. “You do what needs to be done knowing it’s an important step in getting assistance quickly to those in need,” explained Smalley. “Our process was essentially flawless, and the staff did a phenomenal job.”

Maggie Terp, FSSA strategic initiatives program director, was recruited by Governor Daniels’ office to assist with establishing the OSS at the Ivy Tech campus in Sellersburg. Terp managed OSS operations including acting as liaison between state agencies and FEMA, and coordinating supplies, staff, volunteers and resources. Maggie also attended community meetings to advertise the OSS and its available services. Terp (like many others) worked 12-hour shifts for 13 consecutive days, and always took the time to talk with storm victims and volunteers. “It was remarkable to see the community come together,” recalled Terp. “People came in saying ‘I lost a lot, but my neighbor lost everything, and I don’t want to take away from others.’ Our team assured them there were sufficient resources for all in need. Hoosiers really bonded.”

The selfless attitude exhibited by storm victims was a commonly held impression for on-site FSSA staff. So too, was their collective shock at witnessing first-hand the stunning brutality of Mother Nature. “The pictures of Henryville didn’t begin to tell the story,” recalled Medler. “We were speechless.

It was amazing how much damage there was, and how significant it was. I’ve never seen anything like it.” Rich Adams recalled a particularly poignant moment while driving along the storm’s path. “I saw a mailbox blown over, and my gaze followed the driveway to a concrete pad where a house had been. A neighbor confirmed there had been a fatality there. It was very moving,” said Adams.



FSSA staff were stunned by Mother Nature’s wrath.



More than 60 victims received help at the Holton Community Building in Holton, Indiana.
Indiana Department of Homeland Security

For **Drew Klatte** and a team of 30 crisis counselors from the Division of Mental Health and Addiction (DMHA), the challenge was helping survivors to move beyond their fears. Over a 15-day period, counselors met with nearly 2,700 people. “Because of the violent nature of the storms, many people really thought they were going to die,” explained Klatte, an FSSA emergency services expert. “In the aftermath, many people told us they were having trouble eating or sleeping – others reported problems with their children. The goal was to help people understand these were normal reactions to an abnormal event.”

Remarkably, just a week prior to the storm outbreak, DMHA counselors participated in disaster training including a session with their counterparts from Joplin, Mo., who experienced a similarly devastating tornado event last year. “Training often goes unnoticed until disaster hits – then it kicks in,” explained **Kevin Moore**, DMHA director. “Having just addressed this sort of event helped us to respond better.”

“ It was remarkable to see the community come together. Hoosiers really bonded. ”

–Maggie Terp, Program Director

At least 13 people were killed, and six counties were declared federal disaster areas. All who worked in southern Indiana agreed the experience helped to put their daily responsibilities into perspective. “It renewed a sense of purpose in what we do. It was very emotional for many of us,” offered Medler. “While it was difficult for volunteers to be away from their homes, they were glad they did it, if for no other reason, than to refocus on what we do and our agency’s mission.”

Adams, who wound up with more volunteers than needed, summed up FSSA’s response well: “They saw it as an opportunity, and an honor to help fellow Hoosiers.”

Special thanks to Mary Medler and Maggie Terp for photographs.



Six Indiana counties were declared federal disaster areas.