

How can county help in an emergency?

by Victoria Reinhardt

The severe weather of late June and July 1997 caused extensive damage to the homes, cars and personal property of many residents throughout Ramsey County. The Municipal government takes the lead in this type of emergency, however County Government can and does assist. Outlined below are the actions taken by Ramsey County in regards to this type of event.

Ramsey County Emergency Services - This department supports the efforts of the Municipal government where the disaster occurred. Emergency Services assesses homes for damages throughout the County. In addition, Ramsey County Emergency Services acts as the focal point for all Municipal government damage assessments and as the liaison to the State of Minnesota. In this regard and for the most recent storms, Ramsey County Emergency Services and the Minnesota State Department of Public Safety, Emergency Management Division worked together to notify and invite FEMA personnel to Ramsey County to complete a Preliminary Damage Assessment. The Preliminary Damage Assessment is the first step in obtaining a Presidential disaster declaration for the entire County for the period of June 28, 1997 through July 25, 1997. The Ramsey County Board of Commissioners, in conjunction with Congressman Bruce Vento, formally petitioned Governor Arne Carlson to request a Presidential disaster declaration for all of Ramsey County for the period noted above. On August 7, 1997, Governor Arne Carlson formally requested that the President declare a major disaster for Ramsey and six other counties.

Ramsey County Community Corrections - Sentence to Service work crews were developed in 1991 as an alternative to incarceration. Rather than spend days in the workhouse, the offender can work on a supervised crew for a specified number of days. I requested that persons remanded to Sentencing to Service be provided to assist storm victims in removing debris, insulation, damaged building materials and disinfecting damaged areas. These services can be made available to any municipality in Ramsey County as scheduling permits.

St Paul - Ramsey County Department of Public Health - The Department provided tetanus shots to residents and also assisted residents with the disposal of household hazardous waste (HHW) by providing free pickup.

Ramsey County Department of Public Works - Public Works loaned equipment such as bobcats and trucks to both the City of St Paul and to Ramsey County Emergency Services to assist residents with cleanup activities.

Ramsey County Assessors Office - At my request, the Assessors office researched any forms of property tax relief that could be extended to residents impacted by this disaster.

The "Reassessment of Homestead Property Damaged By A Disaster" statute can be applied to properties within the County when a local emergency is declared by the Chair of the Ramsey County Board. A local emergency was declared by the Ramsey County Chair and passed by the Board on July 22, 1997. This will affect 1998 property taxes. The Ramsey County Assessors Office is currently conducting surveys of damaged properties. In addition to this property tax relief measure, the Ramsey County Board requested emergency loans be made available through the Small Business Administration.

Ramsey County Human Services Department - The Department passed out information on available County assistance and provided adult mental health crisis workers to assist storm victims.

Many issues have come to light about events of this nature. As residents impacted by the torrential rains of June and July are now painfully aware, private homeowners insurance does not cover "flooding". Federal Flood Insurance is available only if your city participates in the Federal Flood Insurance Program. Some private insurance companies also offer addendum's to homeowners policies to cover flood, or surface water, damage. The coverage is costly. However, as we have seen, the lack of coverage can be devastating.

City, County and State government worked together effectively in dealing with the June and July storms. However the range of government services is limited in this type of event. We need to work harder to enable citizens to protect themselves and their homes. This may involve a combination of legislation and education.