

Twisters just latest of OH disasters

Responders worry where resources will be found to help survivors of tornadoes, wind storms, flooding

BY JOHN PAPE | June 15, 2010

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More than a week after tornadoes ripped through northwestern Ohio, residents are banding together to provide relief for their neighbors while local officials fear little in federal aid will be coming their way.

On Monday, Gov. Ted Strickland announced he was sending \$673,873 in state aid to three northwestern Ohio counties to help recovery efforts after tornadoes that ripped through Fulton, Ottawa and Wood counties.

“Everybody has focused on the tornadoes in Wood, Ottawa and Fulton counties, but there’s been flooding and wind damage in 12 counties”

—Mary Woodward, Ohio
VOAD

Still, that amount is only a small fraction of the estimated \$100 million-plus in damage sustained in the storm.

Strickland has sent a letter to President Barack Obama asking for a federal disaster declaration, freeing up federal money and resources to help in recovery efforts. So far, there has been no response from the White House.

Even if federal aid is ultimately received, however, residents in other parts of Ohio are left without state or federal help after a series of storms that brought tornadoes, wind damage and flooding to many parts of the state since Memorial Day.

Communities in northeastern and southern Ohio struck by the storms are relying on nonprofit and faith-based organizations, as well as friends and neighbors, to recover.

Mary Woodward, chairperson of Ohio Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster, said while the three counties are receiving some government aid, there have been a dozen counties in Ohio impacted by recent weather-related disasters.

“Everybody has focused on the tornadoes in Wood, Ottawa and Fulton counties, but there’s been flooding and wind damage in 12 counties,” Woodward said.

She said some 200 families were displaced by flooding sparked by Memorial Day storms that raced across southern and northeastern Ohio, but the damage in those areas was not considered serious enough for a state or federal disaster declaration. In those areas, VOAD “is responding to all needs,” Woodward said.

“There’s been storm after storm rolling through Ohio, but the impact to local communities, although devastating to those communities, has not been great enough to trigger federal aid or assistance from FEMA,” Woodward explained.

Organizations such as the American Red Cross, Salvation Army and a number of faith-based groups, partnering with local churches and nonprofits, have stepped in to fill the need, providing food, shelter and assistance to those impacted by the storms.

While most immediate needs are being met, Woodward said donations are being

accepted to help residents replace household goods and furniture, as well as make needed repairs to homes. Those wanting to donate can do so by going to the Ohio VOAD website at www.ohiovoad.org.

In tornado-devastated northwestern Ohio, VOAD is also forming long-term recovery committees in Wood, Fulton and Ottawa counties and accepting referrals of families whose losses are not covered by insurance. The Calvary Lutheran Church in Northwood is helping to coordinate case management.

Additionally, Adventist Community Services is coordinating donation management, using semi-trailers in the hard-hit community of Millbury. Volunteer teams are being assigned to help uninsured families.

Spiritual and emotional care is being provided through VOAD members in Wood County, including Calvary Lutheran Church and St. Jerome Parish.

Tamara McBride with the Ohio Emergency Management Agency said, other than the tornadoes in northwestern Ohio, damage from the storms in the state do not meet the requirements for a federal disaster declaration.

To provide assistance in those areas, McBride said the state was relying "on state agency partners." Among those partners are VOAD, the Red Cross, Salvation Army and United Way. Those agencies are meeting the immediate needs of residents in those areas, she said.

"They are stepping up and helping those in need in those areas," McBride said. "In addition, aid is coming from area companies and corporations, as well as local communities."

As far as the federal disaster declaration for northwestern Ohio, McBride said Gov. Strickland's formal request has gone to the White House, but there has been no federal response.

"We have not heard back from the White House yet," she said.

A decision on the federal disaster declaration may come "in the next day to several weeks," McBride said.

In many of the impacted areas, local businesses and civic groups are holding fundraisers and collecting nonperishable food, clothing and other necessities for storm victims.

In Chester Township, where a number of homes and schools were flooded and streets were badly damaged by the Memorial Day flooding, local leaders are relying on their own resources in the recovery effort.

Township Vice Chair Judith Caputo said about 85 homes were damaged by floodwaters in the community of 11,000 people. While homeowners who were insured are relying on their insurance company to make repairs, those who were uninsured are receiving help from neighbors, the United Way, churches and other faith-based groups. Self-reliance is simply part of the character of Chester, she said.

"A lot of people just cleaned up; you do what you need to do," Caputo explained.

The township will absorb the cost of repairing damaged roadways, she added.

"About 75 percent of our roads had some type of damage. The total damage estimate is about \$200,000," Caputo said. "Because of the situation of our road department's budget and not being able to get federal funding, we've purchased about \$60,000 to \$62,000 of materials and we'll have our road employees making the repairs as their primary assignment."

In northwestern Ohio, six people lost their lives and more than 50 homes were destroyed when the June 5-6 tornado outbreak tore through the area. Local officials said the loss could have been worse if the twister had hit the nearby southern suburbs of Toledo.

In the tiny community of Millbury, the local high school was completely destroyed a day before scheduled graduation ceremonies. The father of the valedictorian of the graduating class was one of those killed.

Nearby Lake Township lost its police and emergency services building, along with five police vehicles – half of the township's police fleet – and one fire truck. The roof and one wall of the Lake High School gymnasium were lost to the storm.

The tornado, part of a line of storms that moved through the Midwest over the weekend of June 5-6, was one of the strongest to hit Ohio in almost a decade, according to the National Weather Service. The tornado had winds topping 165 mph, rating a 3 on the 0-5 scale for measuring tornadoes, according to meteorologist Will Kubina from the Cleveland National Weather Service office. It was one of four confirmed tornadoes to move across northern Ohio during the outbreak.

Damage in the three-county area is estimated to top \$100 million.