

Recovering from the 2018 Southern Wisconsin Floods

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By WEM staff

The devastating Wisconsin floods in August and September 2018 left many small communities in the western part of the state at a loss as to how to recover and rebuild. Most of these communities fall along two major watersheds: the Baraboo River and the Kickapoo River. All communities have been impacted by significant flooding in the past with the 2008 floods holding the previous record in most areas.



The 2018 floods surpassed previous records by several feet in flood elevation, in part because of numerous dam breaches. The worst impacted communities are not only small but tend to have lower than average incomes for the state and have higher percentages of elderly and disabled residents. They have also been hit by floods multiple times over the past ten years, and many times before that. That makes the recovery process even more difficult and the assistance of the Wisconsin Recovery Task Force (WRTF) even more critical.

Often these communities have very limited local resources and do not understand the process of recovery and how to improve their condition of repeated damages from these events. The WRTF assists these communities with planning and coordination of the long-term recovery process and improvement efforts. The WRTF is made up of six subcommittees (Agriculture, Economics, Health and Social Services, Housing, Infrastructure, and Mitigation) with members who primarily come from state and federal agencies, all of which play a role in recovery. However, the goals established and the outcomes realized are community driven.

Wisconsin Emergency Management (WEM) and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) have been working with the WRTF to assess unmet needs and provide as many long-term recovery planning resources for the impacted area as possible. The communities identified as primary targets for long-term recovery planning assistance include the villages of Ontario and Viola on the Kickapoo River, and the Village of Rock Springs on the Baraboo River. Other impacted communities have been contacted and provided with information and resources, but at this time are either not interested in or have no need for planning assistance through the WRTF.

This disaster has been compared to the 2008 floods many times, but after the 2008 floods, many more recovery resources were available through special congressional appropriations. Community Development Block Grants-Disaster Relief and Social Services Block Grants were two of the most highly utilized, along with extra U.S. Economic Development Administration appropriations. Additionally, in 2008, FEMA brought in a team of contractors that developed a long-term recovery plan for Gays Mills.

WRTF Activities

The WRTF convened September 14, 2018, for the first time for the August-September 2018 flooding. Discussion focused on currently available resources and means to obtain other resources. The extent of damages and unmet needs was not yet known. The next several meetings of the WRTF, held in October and November, were spent gathering data about unmet needs, available resources, and resources in use. All opportunities for possible collaborations among agencies were explored.



Presidential Disaster Declaration DR-4402 was issued October 18, 2018. This made available several new streams of funding from FEMA: Individual Assistance, Public Assistance, and Hazard Mitigation. Disaster Recovery Centers (DRCs) were planned and staffed in coordination with the WRTF, FEMA, SBA, and other partners. Information about many state and federal recovery programs was made available to the public. Visitors received individual counseling on their needs and resources available to them. The DRCs were open through mid-December in the flood-impacted areas of the state.

Currently, multiple local long-term recovery groups have been set up: one for Crawford, La Crosse, Monroe, Richland, and Vernon counties; one for Juneau County, and one for Sauk County. Dane County is in the process of developing one.

FEMA Community Planning and Capacity Building, WEM, and the WRTF have been heavily involved in the outreach to and recovery planning efforts for communities, individuals, and local long-term recovery committees.

The Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS), in partnership with WEM, applied for and received the Crisis Counseling Assistance and Training Program (CCP) grant. The grant is a federally funded supplemental program administered by FEMA to fund mental health assistance and training activities in areas included in a major disaster declaration. The Center for Mental Health Services in the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services works with FEMA through an interagency agreement to provide technical assistance, consultation, grant administration, program oversight, and training for state mental health authorities, U.S. territories, and designated tribal authorities.

The grant is being used to provide Immediate Crisis Counseling services and regular services in Crawford, Dane, Juneau, La Crosse, Marquette, Monroe, Richland, Sauk, and Vernon counties. The Wisconsin Community Action Program will serve as the primary contractor for services and will, in turn, contract with Couleecap located in Westby in Vernon County to provide crisis counseling services to individuals in the aforementioned counties under declaration DR-4402.

WEM, in partnership with DHS, is currently working on an application to FEMA to request access to Disaster Case Management Program (DCMP) grant funds to support recovery efforts for people affected by DR-4402. The State of Wisconsin and its local jurisdictions lack sufficient capacity to meet the remaining unmet needs without the assistance of DCMP funds.

In partnership with DHS and other state agencies through the WRTF, WEM will coordinate use of DCMP funds to support recovery efforts throughout our communities, working closely with the local recovery groups in the declared areas. This will also involve extensive collaboration with our active Wisconsin Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster coalition, comprised of groups such as Lutheran Social Services, the United Methodist Committee on Relief, the American Red Cross, the Salvation Army, and a range of other entities committed to helping our communities rebuild.

Wisconsin has experienced repeated flooding incidents in recent years, but the resulting disaster declarations have not included Individual Assistance (IA) until this year. For this reason, recovery assistance in past events has taken place predominantly at the local level under our home rule statute. Donations to support organizations were limited, due to the nature of flooding and competing disasters around the country vying for charitable support. We know that the households most significantly impacted by the 2018 floods will continue to experience hardship during the winter months and the spring thaws. Receipt of supplemental DCMP funds will facilitate coordinated assistance to those in need and focus local committee and charitable partner resources on the provision of direct survivor services.

Solutions

Buyouts: Many properties that suffered significant flood damage, both residential and commercial, will be purchased and demolished through FEMA's Hazard Mitigation Grant Program and/or HUD's Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program. CDBG can also pay for housing rehabilitation if that proves to be the best option for the homeowner and community. There may not be enough funding to buy out all properties that apply. WEM is working with the National Flood Insurance Program, the Public Assistance program, DNR's Municipal Flood Control program, and CDBG to make as much funding available as possible. All avenues for funding both the federal share of project costs and the required local match are being pursued.



Flood Resilience Scorecard: The Association of State Floodplain Managers and the Department of Health Services collaborated to develop a Flood Resilience Scorecard. This is a tool that can show where to focus efforts to make a community more resilient to flooding. It will be piloted in two communities -the Village of Viola (Richland and Vernon counties) on the Kickapoo River and the City of Middleton (Dane County). A UW-Platteville class will assist the Village of Viola in completing the Flood Resilience Scorecard during spring semester of 2019. Two graduate student

interns at WEM in the summer of 2019 will then work with the Village to develop long-term, cost-effective mitigation measures for which funding can be applied in the national 2019 Pre-Disaster Mitigation program. If the Flood Resilience Scorecard and subsequent mitigation project planning are successful, the same strategy can and should be used in other flood-vulnerable communities in the region and around the state.

Flood Mitigation Study: The Baraboo River has been a source of recurrent flooding for nearly all communities along its banks. A coalition of ten communities submitted a pre-application for the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) to study and improve the Baraboo River corridor by increasing the natural, upstream flood storage. The HMGP will not have enough funds from this disaster declaration to do this study and project. However, seeing the value of the project, WEM determined the study would be eligible under the US Army Corps of Engineers Silver Jackets program. WEM's Mitigation Section will work with the USACE and Wisconsin Silver Jackets Hazard Mitigation Team to apply for the study. When completed, the study should provide the information needed to submit a competitive application for FEMA's annual Pre-Disaster Mitigation or Flood Mitigation Assistance programs for the project. If this strategy is successful, it could be applied to other watersheds in the state.

Resources

FEMA developed a lengthy spreadsheet that identifies resources for businesses and local governments. This has been distributed to a wide audience.

US EDA and WEDC both may have some economic recovery planning funds that could be utilized by MRRPC or SWWRPC.