

METROPOLITAN WASHINGTON COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS
Board of Directors
March 9, 2011

Proposed Regional Snow/Ice Incident Response Action Plan

Purpose

The COG Board will be asked to adopt Resolution R19-2011, approving an action plan, steering committee and schedule for identifying and seeking improvements to regional incident management arising from the January 26 snow/ice event and the implications for other events in the National Capital Region.

Background

Public officials, business leaders and area residents have voiced concern with preparedness and response to the January 26 snow/ice storm that left thousands without electric power and triggered hours-long commutes for many drivers. COG has invited several of its policy boards and committees to provide input on this issue, including the Chief Administrative Officers Committee (CAOs), the National Capital Region Transportation Planning Board (TPB), and the National Capital Region Emergency Preparedness Council (EPC), among others. COG staff has also compiled initial information on local and regional actions associated with the January 26 snow event.

January 26 Observations

- Weather forecasts were largely accurate. Weather changed quickly from rain to sleet and then snow during the afternoon and evening rush hour, causing rapid icing of roadways, making travel very difficult and impeding ice/snow treatment and clearing.
- The Federal government authorized the early release of its workforce (two hours earlier than normal departure). Similar actions by local and state governments and private sector were inconsistent or not clearly communicated. Reportedly, some federal workers were not informed of the early release. Others did not leave the office early because the weather initially appeared non-threatening until later in the afternoon.
- COG held a regional snow conference call on January 26 at 10:00 a.m. Response vehicles, snow plows and salt trucks were pre-positioned. Early road treatments were washed away by rain and road crews quickly found it difficult to access and move on highways and roads due to poor weather conditions and disabled/abandoned vehicles.
- Metro rail provided reliable transit service throughout the January 26 snow/ice event, although single-tracking caused some minor delays. Metro bus operations encountered hazardous road conditions and many buses became stuck or were unable to complete their routes.
- Area public information officers used traditional and social media and alert notification systems to advise residents of the Federal government early release and deteriorating conditions on area roads. Conditions worsened quickly and there was no easy way for drivers to learn about real-time travel conditions or the need to shelter in place until conditions improve. Radio stations played a key role in keeping individuals informed during the weather event.

Frequent Questions

Wasn't January 26 just an exceptionally difficult and unique storm and the region couldn't have done much different?

This storm was unique in that it hit hardest in the afternoon/evening commute when rain washed away road treatment chemicals and then froze. The forecast of accumulation of up to five inches of snow may not have initially triggered the concern that the storm subsequently justified. Lots of actions or decisions, some by individual motorists and others by local, state or federal government agencies, contributed to the situation on January 26. Solutions for the future will require review and action by lots of stakeholders. There are lessons that can be learned that can point to improvements for the future.

Doesn't the experience on January 26 point to the region's shortcomings in an evacuation in the event of a terrorist attack or incident?

January 26 wasn't an emergency evacuation. It was an evening rush hour commute, for some begun earlier than normal, during extremely adverse weather conditions, on a transportation network that was stressed to the max. The region has very congested roadways in normal traffic and sunny weather. Local governments in the National Capital Region have developed evacuation and shelter-in-place plans. Emergency managers acknowledge that very few circumstances would warrant a large, regional evacuation to outlying areas. Most scenarios involve either shelter-in-place or evacuation of a specific sector or neighborhood. Also, had January 26 been an emergency or incident necessitating an evacuation, it would have been accompanied by local emergency declarations, followed by possible state and/or federal declarations, and many resources, personnel and assets would have been immediately put into place.

Why can't the region decide to put some agency or organization in charge of making decisions for all local and state government actions during events or emergencies?

Creating a single organization that can direct action across two states and the District of Columbia and among multiple local governments with their own sovereign authority is not impossible, but it would be difficult and more achievable actions need to be quickly pursued while that option is examined. The COG region is more than 3,000 square miles and many workers commute from points even further out. The large size of the region often means that there is adverse weather in one portion of the region, while conditions are much less severe in another. Existing laws and statutes clearly define who has the authority to take actions on behalf of a local or state government. In the absence of new laws or statutes, a local or state government cannot easily transfer or delegate that authority.

What is COG's role in assisting the region with assessing the January 26 response?

COG is a voluntary association of 250 local, state and federal elected officials in the National Capital Region. COG has well-defined responsibilities for planning in key areas like transportation and air quality, and significant capacity to aid in regional planning and coordination in a number of other areas, including emergency management and homeland security. The COG Board of Directors has directed staff to solicit the input on the January 26 snow/ice event and possible improvements for the future from several of its policy and advisory committees, including the Chief Administrative Officers Committee, the National Capital Region Transportation Planning Board, and the National Capital Region Emergency Preparedness Council, among others. These groups have many years of experience and

knowledge and include representatives of local and state governments that are operational or have response authorities. The COG Board is seeking to engage these regional groups and stakeholders and ask that they examine and respond to recommendations outlined in this action plan. The COG Board will appoint an ad hoc steering committee to oversee and monitor this effort, culminating in an October 2011 report identifying actions taken to improve incident management in advance of the 2011 – 2012 snow season.

This seems like it is all about transportation. What about all of the people who lost electric power on January 26 and recently in other storms?

Thousands of homes and businesses lost electric power on January 26 and during several other storms in recent years. Loss of electric power to traffic signals compounded an already difficult traffic situation on January 26. Regulation of utilities, including electric power companies is principally the responsibility of state government, and the District of Columbia, Maryland and Virginia each has a regulatory oversight body that monitors performance and sets the rates that utilities can charge for electric power to residences and businesses. States are now considering new legislation that would set performance standards and penalize utilities that fail to meet standards, among other measures. Staff recommends that COG invite utility regulatory representatives from the District of Columbia, State of Maryland and Commonwealth of Virginia to provide information on current performance standards as well as any new proposals or recommendations as part of this action plan.

Action Plan

There are four focus areas identified in the proposed action plan. These focus areas and the proposed tasks were suggested by participants in recent briefings held by the Chief Administrative Officers Committee, the National Capital Region Transportation Planning Board and the National Capital Region Emergency Preparedness Council.

The steering committee will refine focus areas and tasks at its organizational meeting. Steering committee recommendations on implementation will be directed to local, state and/or federal agencies, other regionally-serving organizations such as MATOC, and COG.

Consistent with the proposed schedule, the steering committee will advise the COG Board of implementation progress to date in July 2011 and implementation outcomes in November 2011 prior to the 2011 – 2012 snow season.

Focus Area One: Improving Real-Time Information or Situational Awareness Among Local, State and Federal Government Agencies with Operational Authority or Responsibilities

- a) Strengthen the use of Web Emergency Operations Center (WebEOC) to provide real-time situational awareness on regional events or incidents, such as severe winter weather.
- b) Strengthen emergency management and transportation agency protocols and training to ensure that key staff monitor and provide input on the regional impact of local events, incidents or weather and traffic conditions.

Focus Area Two: Improving Real-Time Information to the Media and the Public

- a) Establish a Virtual Joint Information Center (V-JIC). The V-JIC would support the rapid release of real-time information to the media and the public during a storm or other event or incident that develops rapidly.
- b) Improve the timeliness, clarity and mode of information delivery to the public concerning adverse winter weather and its impact on transportation infrastructure.

Focus Area Three: Improving Regional Coordination and Decision-Making

- a) Expand operational support and provide more consistent funding for the Metropolitan Area Transportation Operations Coordination (MATOC) Program, including strengthening its technical support for the Regional Integrated Transportation Information System (RITIS).
- b) Improve policies and protocols for the regional snow calls coordinated by COG.
- c) Improve the consistency and clarity of employee release policies and practices for both government (local, state, and federal) and the private sector.
- d) Establish or clarify policies to prevent and/or quickly remove abandoned and disabled vehicles from roadways

Focus Area Four: Examining Best Practices or Alternative Models for Regional Incident Management and Decision-Making

- a) Identify alternative regional models of incident management and decision-making used in metropolitan areas in the United States or Europe. Examine their feasibility, especially in a multi-state and multi-jurisdictional region and what authority would be needed to allow local and state jurisdictions to enter into such an agreement or compact.

Resources

COG has already begun to compile and organize information and research pertinent to the proposed action plan. Key information includes:

- Chronology of Regional Incident Communications and Coordination System (RICCS) notifications sent before, during and immediately after the January 26 event.
- OPM federal employee release plan (1996) that recommended release based on employee residence.
- OPM closure/telework policy (2011) developed following the 2009-2010 winter storms.
- Major highway system performance data from January 26.
- COG and local, state and federal government after-action review reports and recommendations following the 2009-2010 winter storms and the January 26 snow/ice event.

Ad Hoc Steering Committee

Staff recommends that the COG Board authorize creation of an ad hoc steering committee for a period of eight months to oversee and monitor progress in addressing the four focus areas and associated tasks.

The steering committee will look to existing policy boards and committees and technical committees to support the proposed areas of focus, with the steering committee performing a coordinating and oversight role. The steering committee will be chaired by Councilmember Phil Andrews, who chairs the National Capital Region Emergency Preparedness Council (EPC). Other members will include representatives from the following committees or groups, which will be called on to provide policy or technical support to action plan implementation:

- Representatives, District of Columbia, Maryland and Virginia Departments of Transportation and WMATA
- Representative, Metropolitan Area Transportation Operations Coordination (MATOC) Program
- Representative, Chief Administrative Officers Committee
- Representative, Office of the City Administrator, District of Columbia
- Representative, Senior Policy Group (Mayor, District of Columbia and Governors of Maryland and Virginia Homeland Security Advisors)
- Representative, Emergency Managers Committee
- Representative, Public Information Officers Committee
- Representative, Regional Attorneys' Committee
- Representative, U.S. Office of Personnel Management
- Representative, Greater Washington Board of Trade or business community

Schedule

- COG Board adoption of Resolution R-19-2011, approving an action plan, steering committee and schedule, March 9, 2011
- Organizational meeting of Steering Committee, April 2011
- First "check-in" meeting of Steering Committee, June 2011
- Steering Committee briefing for COG Board, July 2011
- Second "check-in" meeting of Steering Committee, August 2011
- Steering Committee develops draft report on action/implementation; draft report circulated for review and comment, September 2011
- Steering Committee adoption of final report, October 2011
- Steering Committee briefs COG Board on report and actions/implementation, November 2011

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