

METROPOLITAN WASHINGTON COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS

Leadership Forum on Snow Response:

Action and Implementation To-Date

September 8, 2010

After the Blizzards of 2010 buried the region under more snow than it had experienced in 100 years, COG Board Chairman Kwame Brown called for an After-Action Leadership Forum on Snow Response to begin collecting important lessons-learned from the experience. The April 5 program examined the region's expectations and performance in clearing roadways and railways, and how well local, federal and state government officials worked together to manage the response to the storms. On April 7, the Chief Administrative Officers Committee reviewed the recommendations made during the Forum and added several of their own after a high-level discussion of the experience of managing the storms. A number of COG committees were tasked with addressing several recommendations deemed as critical to improving snow response operations across the region. The following is an update of the actions taken in response to those recommendations, and efforts to improve the region's performance during major storms.

REVIEW AND REVISE SNOW PLANS

Recommendation: Local review and revision of snow response plans, including plans for snow accumulation above 15 inches. Uniform policies for sharing software and/or systems for identifying power outages and the status of plowing operations were encouraged.

Status: Nearly every jurisdiction in the region has conducted a review of their snow operation response during the 2009-10 season, which included an evaluation of snow plans. Of the 67% of jurisdictions responding, all have indicated that there will be changes and adjustments made to procedures and/or ordinances (i.e. sidewalk clearance, improved communications with public, towing enforcement, etc.) based on lessons learned.

UNIFORM PARKING PRACTICES AND COORDINATION

Recommendation: Adoption of uniform parking practices during major snow storms. The CAOs committee and participants in the after-action forum suggested that requiring residents to park vehicles on a particular side of the street would, in most cases, help facilitate snow clearance. The Metropolitan Development Policy Committee (MDPC) should draft and coordinate this proposal.

Status: A team from COG's Institute for Regional Excellence (IRE) addressed parking practices and coordination during snow events as their required policy project this year and developed a set of comprehensive parking recommendations for localities to facilitate more effective snow removal operations..

1. Adopt a "snow parking alert," which would initiate jurisdictional snow parking regulations.

2. Adopt an “alternate-side of the street” parking policy, whereby vehicles park on odd numbered sides of the street on odd dates, and even numbered sides on even dates. In high density areas, jurisdictions are urged to develop agreements with local parking garages, and/or identify alternative locations for vehicle relocation during a storm.

COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLIC MESSAGING

Recommendation: Public Information Officers should develop public messages to improve communication about safety, health concerns, travel, sidewalk clearing, and power outages during snow emergencies; a well thought-out set of messages would improve public compliance with rules and help set realistic expectations for government actions. The messaging system should be tailored to traditional and new social media outlets and specifically address non-English speakers and cultural differences. The PIOs should work closely with emergency managers and transportation officials to draft the messages.

Status: R-ESF 15 developed an extensive Winter/Snow Standard Emergency Messages Template. The messages were developed to improve communications about safety, health concerns, travel, sidewalk clearing, and power outages during a winter or snow emergency. The Template is in final draft and needs further coordination to obtain consensus from the different groups.

REGIONAL POOL OF EQUIPMENT AND STAFF

Recommendation: The region should assess the feasibility of establishing a pool of all-hazards equipment and staff, including the support of contractors, to handle extended operations during snow storms. Jurisdictions are encouraged to have contractors in place before the next snow season and, when their plowing is done, plan to share those resources with other governments. R-ESF 1 and 7 should discuss the local coordination needed and methodology.

Status: The Region’s Chief Purchasing Officers concluded that limited resources restrict a jurisdiction’s ability to share equipment and personnel with its neighbors and concluded that a Regional Pool of Equipment and Staff is not feasible at this time. Further, the Chief Purchasing Officers also noted that their national organization had an initiative a few years back to catalogue snow removal equipment in snow prone cities throughout the country that could be shared. The initiative was never put in place because of a lack of support.

DEVELOP FEDERAL AID AGREEMENTS IN ADVANCE

Recommendation: Document the kinds of federal assistance that can be requested and/or expected during snow emergencies; develop appropriate written agreements. R-ESF 7 and COG’s legal team should work with the Office of National Capital Region Coordination within the Department of Homeland Security to clarify federal regulations about assistance that can be provided to local jurisdictions.

Status: Several federal agencies indicated an inability to assist localities due to limited resources. Joint Forces Headquarters-NCR does not have snow removal equipment that would

be available for use. Department of Defense does not have excess capacity; and during a snow event, their equipment will be fully engaged in clearing the DOD facilities and military airfields. The Office of National Capital Region Coordination noted that many of the other federal departments and agencies in the National Capital Region use contractors for snow removal; thus, federal aid agreements for equipment are not an option.

RE-COMMITMENT TO TELEWORKING

Recommendation: Local governments and businesses are encouraged to increase the capability for employees to telework, especially during snow storms and other weather emergencies. Governments may need to better define policies for telework and administrative leave. Public and private human resources offices should be encouraged to address the issue. COG's Commuter Connections/Telework program in DTP is a resource on this issue.

Status: In order to determine the status of teleworking among local jurisdictions in the National Capital Region, the Personnel Officers Technical Committee (POTC) conducted an informal survey of POTC members in the region. They asked jurisdictions if they had a telework policy, if they had a FY 2011 goal for the number of employees who would have the capability to telework, and if they had any special plans for using telework in an emergency situation. Responses to each of the questions varied significantly from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. Some jurisdictions indicated that they had no telework policy, while others had made significant progress in this area, including one jurisdiction that had met a 20% goal. POTC members noted that during this period when employees are being terminated or furloughed because of limited budgets, it is difficult to dedicate resources to a telework program.

The U.S. Office of Personnel Management indicated that it cost the federal government approximately \$80M a day when it closed federal offices in the National Capital Region for a snow emergency. They have established a goal of having 80% of the federal work force with the capability to telework in future snow events when government offices are closed.

APPEAL OF FEMA'S 48-HOUR RULE

Recommendation: FEMA's 48-hour rule which states that the government will only reimburse jurisdictions for snow removal during a designated 48-hour period when a record or near-record snowfall impacts a state and the President issues a disaster declaration must be revised to include a shorter timeframe. The rule limited the assistance available in February because the operations included the time needed to clear, and then haul away snow.

Status: In April, the COG Board sent a letter to Members of Congress requesting reconsideration of the revisions of FEMA's Disaster Assistance Policy. Currently, the 48-Hour Rule remains in place, and local jurisdictions have indicated that the policy has reduced the amount of federal reimbursement from the storms..