

Last week, Geauga County experienced severe weather to include widespread high winds and an EF1 tornado touchdown.

The largest impact was to the electrical grid which caused loss of power to many residents. This was due to the large number of fallen trees and branches which took down power lines.

So....why wasn't a disaster declared?

Allow us to walk you through the process.

First step: Local agencies must be overwhelmed and need outside assistance to handle the given emergency. Our office was in contact with impacted jurisdictions a short time after the storm passed and most cities/townships/villages reported that they were able to handle the aftermath with no assistance needed. We had a few Fire Departments that needed portable generators for their residents with Medical Equipment, and those needs were met.

Second step: The local Emergency Management Office (Us), conducts damage assessments surveys in the impacted areas to determine the level of damage sustained. FEMA guides us in this process and has a system to determine what will be reported.

1. Affected:
  - a. Cosmetic damage, such as paint discoloration or loose siding.
  - b. Minimal missing shingles or siding.
  - c. Damage to an attached structure (e.g., porch, carport, garage, or outbuilding, etc.), gutters, screens, landscaping, retaining walls, or downed trees that do not affect access to the residence.
2. Minor:
  - a. Nonstructural damage to roof components over essential living spaces (e.g., shingles, roof covering, fascia board, soffit, flashing, and skylight).
  - b. Nonstructural damage to the interior wall components, to include drywall and insulation.
  - c. Nonstructural damage to exterior components.
  - d. Multiple small vertical cracks in the foundation.
  - e. Damage to chimney (i.e., tilting, falling, cracking, or separating from the residence).  
Damage to mechanical components (e.g., furnace, boiler, water heater, HVAC, etc.).  
Damage or disaster-related contamination to a private well or septic system.
3. Major:
  - a. Failure or partial failure to structural elements of the roof over essential living spaces to include rafters, ceiling joists, ridge boards, etc.
  - b. Failure or partial failure to structural elements of the walls, to include framing, etc.
  - c. Failure or partial failure to foundation, to include crumbling, bulging, collapsing, horizontal cracks of more than 2 inches, and shifting of the residence on the foundation of more than 6 inches.
4. Destroyed:
  - a. Only foundation remains.
  - b. Complete failure of two or more major structural components (e.g., collapse of basement walls, foundation, walls, or roof).

- c. The residence has a confirmed imminent danger (e.g., impending landslides, mudslides, or sinkholes).

Third Step: Based on the damage survey, the local Emergency Management Office will contact the State Emergency Management Office to request a disaster declaration IF certain thresholds are met. The thresholds are as follows.

1. 25 homes/businesses with MAJOR damage.
  - a. Small Business Administration loans are made available to those who are qualified. This is a low interest LOAN which must be repaid.
2. "Hundreds" of homes/businesses with MAJOR damage.
  - a. Federal funds for uninsured losses under the Individual Assistance program. NOTE: FEMA considers home/businesses that SHOULD have insurance to be insured.
  - b. So what are uninsured losses? FEMA considers things which insurance will not cover such as septic tanks, retaining walls, and wells among others.
  - c. In addition, FEMA does not cover all uninsured losses, only up to a maximum of \$42,500.
3. Public Agencies meet the County per capita threshold of \$438,826 dollars.
  - a. Federal funds for government agencies (cities/townships/villages) under the Public Assistance Program.
  - b. Certain actions taken by public agencies to return the community to normal may be reimbursable once this threshold is met.
  - c. These include things such as debris removal, public protection (police/fire/public works), public utilities damage (water treatment, sewer, etc.).
  - d. This reimbursement is only for government agencies.

Fourth Step: One the State declares a disaster; FEMA will send teams to evaluate the damage by conducting a joint damage assessment with Local Emergency Management Agencies (Us) to make certain that the thresholds have been reached.

Fifth Step: If the joint damage assessment shows that thresholds have been met, then FEMA refers the case to the President who may make the disaster declaration which triggers the funding to reimburse based on the thresholds listed above.

NOTE: Geauga County has not been notified of enough homes with major damage. Therefore, the threshold for SBA or Individual Assistance is NOT met.

Governor DeWine has issued two proclamations.

1. An Emergency Preparedness proclamation: This was intended to put State Agencies on alert that their services may be needed by our local agencies.
2. A State of Emergency proclamation: "This declaration of a state of emergency will give the state the ability to give these communities expedited assistance. At the moment, we have no outstanding requests for services the State can provide to our local communities to help in the aftermath of these storms," DeWine said in a statement Saturday.

Neither of the proclamations was a Disaster Declaration which would allow the State to ask FEMA to declare a disaster. The proclamations were meant to allow State agencies to quickly assist but Governor DeWine also made it clear that no assistance was requested.

The local communities have done an outstanding job in responding to this event. An hour after the storm passed, I noted crews already clearing trees that were blocking roads. In addition, Fire/Police/EMS units were responding to reports of downed power lines and keeping First Energy informed through the dispatch center. The dispatch center fielded thousands calls and kept crews on track as they responded.

Finally, First Energy has nearly completed the monumental task of restoring power to the entire county. They responded immediately to begin the process. First Energy called in 3,000 workers from 16 states, and they were on scene within 24 hours. Currently, 7,500 workers are engaged in the restoration effort. Crews are working 24 hours a day and doing 16 hours shifts. All of First Energy's Ohio crews were immediately available following the storms as none had been sent south for Hurricane Debby. Hundreds of poles were broken and required replacement in addition to the many downed power lines.