

## Disaster Response is a Team Effort

Every summer we experience wildland fires in Alaska. This year, many of those wildland fires posed significant threats to our communities and have made headlines and hashtags over the past few weeks. While the Division of Forestry is the lead state agency on these fires, disaster response coordination is a team effort.

The Division of Forestry activated Incident Management Teams to address the fires and their aftermath. They continue to work closely with communities to ensure adequate resources are available to battle the blazes, notify residents, and control ingress and egress to the areas.

In some disasters, this is enough; response falls completely within the capabilities of a department, and using their normal process and funding, the department can address the situation. But disasters are not always as cooperative as we would like.

Most times, a disaster event requires multiple agencies to respond simultaneously. The entity responsible for coordinating that response is the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs' Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management.

When a disaster is imminent or taking place, DHSEM will activate the State Emergency Operations Center in order to orchestrate the state's response to disasters. The SEOC is the command and control center where agencies and organizations come together to plan and manage a complete and comprehensive response.

During the response to the wildland fires, the SEOC was ably staffed with representatives from the Alaska National Guard, Alaska State Defense Force, Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation, Alaska State Troopers, National Weather Service, FEMA, Department of Defense, the Salvation Army, American Red Cross of Alaska and Volunteer Organizations Active in Disasters.

While each has its specialty, no single organization has the authority or ability to respond to all critical needs present during a disaster. For instance, through a previously existing agreement, the Division of Forestry activated the Alaska National Guard to provide Blackhawk helicopters and crew for firefighting missions. As of July 1, the Guard had dropped 1,103 "Bambi buckets" for a total of more than 870,000 gallons of water to extinguish flames and protect structures.

While the fires in the Matanuska-Susitna and Kenai boroughs were covered extensively by the media, a lesser known story is that of Aniak, whose residents were forced to flee the fire and smoke from the North Aniak fire.

The Village of Aniak reached out to the SEOC for help once the fire and smoke became too much for some of their residents. People with pre-existing medical conditions were evacuated to Bethel by the Alaska Village Council Presidents and the Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation. The evacuees took shelter at the Bethel Alaska National Guard armory, with the Bethel Alaska National Guard Family Readiness Group and Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 10041 providing food and support.

As soon as residents were evacuated, those staffing the SEOC began discussing when they could be returned home. The National Weather Service, ADEC's Division of Air Quality, and DHSS evaluated the fire conditions, weather conditions and health of those evacuated. DHSEM went to work to find a funding stream to ensure non-profit entities supporting evacuees could be reimbursed for their

activities and began coordination with the Alaska Village Council Presidents and the Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation to ensure transportation home was ready, when the time was right.

The sheltering effort in Bethel was a textbook example of how evacuation and care should take place. It did not happen by luck. All of the training, coordination, communication and partnership building that is necessary for a successful disaster response has to be in place long before an event occurs.

DHSEM's SEOC Liaison Program and Mass Care Task Force were established for this specific purpose. The Liaison Program conducts monthly training and day-to-day coordination with partner organizations for events that don't rise to the level of a disaster, but do require a coordinated response.

This coordination and training has resulted in all of the liaison organizations functioning as one team, with each participant understanding their roles, ready to act when the time comes. The Mass Care Task Force subcommittees focus on specific aspects of mass care such as feeding, sheltering, pets and animals, and donation and volunteer management. The Mass Care Task Force has increased our flexibility and allowed us to fill critical mass care needs quickly and efficiently.

While the wildland fires have caused much destruction and devastation for many Alaskans, we know as a team, our state agencies and other partners executed a well-coordinated response and continue to provide the recovery efforts needed to restore the lives of those impacted by this disaster. The SEOC will continue to hone our disaster response capabilities in order to provide the highest possible level of service to Alaska when it is needed most.

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