

Presentation by Linn County Risk Manager Steve Estenson at the 2017 State of the County Luncheon

April 19, 2017
Linn County, IA



Steve was one of four Linn County leaders to speak during the event hosted by the Linn County League of Women Voters.

Good afternoon, Supervisor Oleson had asked me to present today to reflect back to September 2016 and the efforts of Linn County employees working towards the common goal of providing services to our customers during the flood. The video you're watching on the screens is the preparation of our most vulnerable properties with relation to flooding. This first one is of the Linn County Sheriff's Office; the second will be of the Courthouse and Correctional Center. Footage provided by CalCam AP.

Some of you know who I am but most of you probably don't. I'm the Risk Manager at Linn County and have been since August of 2005, I'm tasked with administering the county's self-insurance program. So what does that mean? We are self-insured in three areas, workers' compensation, auto liability and general liability. Rather than securing insurance policies in those three areas, we choose to self-insure and pay those claims from funds we set aside each year. We've found that we are a large enough entity, that this is the most cost effective way to manage these programs. As an example, when a county vehicle is involved in an accident, employees don't call Flo at Progressive, they call me. So unless you've been in an accident with one of our vehicles, had your camper or RV accidently struck by a mower in one of our parks, or passed our paint truck painting lines on County Home Road when the sign on the back clearly reads, WET PAINT, DO NOT PASS, we've probably not met.

Working for Linn County is quite the experience, particularly in my line of work. Like most employers in the area, we have great employees. Their hard work often goes unnoticed outside of our organization. Many people probably don't even realize what the County does or what services are provided. I once had a conversation with someone who saw me during the week wearing my normal attire of slacks and a button up shirt and he said, "Why are you dressed up, I thought you worked at the County?" I think the

“County” worker is sometimes lumped into a category of a laborer or someone who works on a road crew. We have those, but we also have secretaries, social workers, we have a Public Health director, finance director, we have attorneys, nurses, cooks, teachers, we have an IT department, an HR department, an accounts payable department, we have it all.

Along with the variety of employees and job titles within Linn County, we offer numerous services to our customers. Customers could be the public, or other organizations, agencies and businesses that we serve. Most all of those customers were affected by the events that began on or about Thursday, September 22nd. Although we began preparing for a crisis, for some of us it wasn’t more than an inconvenience.

I was made fun of a while back because I still carry a Franklin Planner. But I can tell you from the scribbles only legible to me on September 22nd, it came in pretty handy. My note read: 18ft – best case, 24ft – likely case, 28ft – worst case. These of course are the preliminary estimates on the potential crest of the Cedar River in Cedar Rapids. These notes were taken five days before the eventual crest. Five days that saw incredible preparation and determination from the employees of Linn County. That night, I ordered 24 pallets of HESCO barriers, and 32,000 sandbags that needed to be picked up if we wanted them by Friday – delivery wasn’t available until Monday.

Friday morning, September 23rd our purchasing director Britt Hutchins and I left for Peosta at 6:00am to pick up those 32,000 sandbags in a straight truck that I wasn’t sure would go more than 50 miles per hour on the highway. During the trip, my phone was blowing up with texts and phone calls. Being a responsible Risk Manager, I had Britt responding to the texts and answering my calls, most of them from Supervisor Houser. We managed to get there and back in time to deliver the sandbags to the Sheriff’s Office about the same time the HESCO barriers arrived.

At noon that day, in an emergency Board meeting, the BOS designated me the incident commander for this event. I gave my first update to the Board indicating to them that most attention with regards to emergency protective measures would be put on the Sheriff’s Office as that is our building with the lowest elevation in regards to flood zones. Sheriff Gardner gave an update on the building as well indicating that they were already in the process of moving furniture and contents up from the lower level and removing plumbing fixtures, plugging drains and moving staff to the Marion Police Department. It

was also disclosed that the Correctional Center would eventually be evacuated at some point over the weekend.

Because of the projected river levels and coinciding evacuation zones, we evacuated the Sheriff's Office, the Correctional Center and Courthouse, the Juvenile Justice Center, the Elections Depot, and the Public Service Center.

The Public Service Center closed until further notice and services from that building relocated to the Community Services Building beginning on the 23rd. This would involve numerous departments and employees on both ends to continue a seamless transition over the weekend to be open and ready for business on Monday. We essentially moved the Public Service Center into the lobby of the Community Services Building in about 2 days.

The temporary location was open for business at the CSB on Monday the 26th. The river crested on the 27th and we immediately started our discussions on moving back to the evacuated buildings. Not only did we work internally on a schedule to reoccupy the buildings, we also had to coordinate gaining access to Mays Island with the City of Cedar Rapids.

Perhaps two of the most notable challenges faced by our employees during the move would be the dates September 29th and September 30th.

September 29th was the date that early voting opened for the 2016 election and voters were already coming into the Public Service Center to request absentee ballots. Auditor Miller acted quickly to see that his staff would be able to set up at the temporary location to continue meeting their customer's needs. The first early ballot was submitted in the lobby of the CSB on the 29th by Secretary of State Paul Pate. This was due to the employees actions to prepare and be ready to provide to their customers.

September 30th was the date that property taxes were due and if anyone has come to the Treasurer's Office at the end of a month, that's when we're our busiest renewing tags for license plates. Because of this, the BOS made a formal request to Governor Branstad on Monday, September 26th to extend the property tax due date by 30 days for Linn County residents. Treasurer Gonzalez also requested the use of a mobile RV from the IOWA DOT to assist with the processing of license plate renewals at our temporary location.

Possibly one of the more remarkable feats accomplished during the event was the evacuation of the Correctional Center. At the time of evacuation, there were 251 prisoners who needed to be strategically transported to three separate locations. The amount of staff involved to do this and the hours logged is very impressive and I commend Sheriff Gardner and all of his staff for their efforts at both the Correctional Center and the Sheriff's Office. Although we were absent from the Correctional Center for about a year as a result of the 2008 flood, this time around the evacuation and eventual move back was done in a matter of days.

We had many other employees involved in flood related activities not related to building evacuations. The Secondary Road Department first had to close flooded roads to keep the public safe and then continued efforts by hauling sand, filling HESCO barriers and sandbags to construct a watertight barrier around the facilities you've been watching on the screens. They also returned after the crest to tear everything down. Their work still didn't stop as then they had to repair washouts, replace culverts and get the county's road system back to a functional state.

Linn County Conservation also assisted in the construction of the HESCO barriers and had to get their parks evacuated initially, and then repaired after the flood waters left. Floodwater can remove the things you want like rock on RV camping pads, but leave tons of unwanted sand that needed to be removed.

One of the departments that I utilized personally to help predict when and where the water was headed was our GIS department. They were constantly updating prediction models and assisting in providing the most recent data to help the rest of us make the decisions we needed to make.

The Courthouse staff had the challenge of cancelling trials, resetting court hearings and relocating all of first floor contents to the rotunda to assure nothing was lost if the river found its way inside. Cancelling trials and rescheduling may sound like an easy task, but keep in mind that those awaiting trial have lawful rights and our staff had a duty to follow codes and standards to keep from violating those individuals' rights.

Linn County Public Health was ready to start inspecting flood-affected restaurants and business as soon as floodwaters receded.

Our Planning and Development Department was able to inspect numerous flood-affected properties to allow homeowners back into their homes to start with clean-up and rebuilding. The BOS also passed a resolution waiving applicable permit fees for those affected by the flooding.

The Recorder's Office was even open in the temporary location at the CSB to provide marriage certificates and other vital records for their customers.

Linn County Community Services aided residents with special needs and monitored those in affected areas. Linn County LIFTS also aided in getting affected residents out of the evacuation zones.

Linn County Facilities had employees that were working over 24 hours straight monitoring sump pumps and buildings to ensure we could keep up with water and minimize the damage.

And I'd mentioned our IT Department earlier – they were incredible. In 2008, my e-mail was down and I didn't check it for about three days during the height of the flood. This time around we were connected the entire time, our temporary locations were set up and working. We never left the grid and had continual communication with our employees and the customers that were in need of our services.

Thank you to all Linn County employees who put the customer first and help demonstrate our resiliency. If I've missed anyone, I apologize.

I'll leave with a quote that I have taped on my phone at my desk. It's been there since August of 2008 and I always thought it was inspiring and sharing it today seems more than appropriate. It's a small piece of paper torn from the corner of a page from my Franklin Planner; you know they have quotes in there every day. It's from famed Notre Dame football coach Lou Holtz. I'll spare you of my impersonation of Coach Holtz, but the quote is:

“Adversity is another way to measure the greatness of individuals; I never had a crisis that didn't make me stronger.”

The employees of Linn County learned from the crisis and chaos of 2008. Although this latest event was not comparable in magnitude, it was in the terms of interrupting our daily operations. During that event, we had over \$60M in damage and lost

infrastructure, this time we've tallied about \$800K. We were inconvenienced for about a week doing tasks that were outside our normal scope of work.

My final thought is, know the difference between an inconvenience and a crisis. Our employees worked through this calmly, professionally and without hesitation because to us, it was an inconvenience. But what we tried to do, was minimize the effect on our customers to make sure they weren't inconvenienced and absolutely weren't faced with a crisis.

Thank you.