

Regional Responses to Natural Disasters

Richard Chapman

This article examines the various roles the Two Rivers Regional Council (Illinois) played, and is playing, as a direct result of the Great Flood of 1993. In examining our various roles, we will also need to look at the new partnerships forged that enabled us to provide the assistance that was and still is being provided by our council. Before examining our roles, however, we must make the following points.

1. In each county in Illinois, the county board appointed an individual known as the Emergency Services Disaster Assistance (ESDA) Coordinator. These ESDA Coordinators are considered by the Illinois Emergency Management Agency (IEMA) and Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) as the primary points of contact for their respective counties.

2. In some counties, committees or special task forces were formed to broaden the assistance available to these ESDA Coordinators and others.

3. At the state level, a Governor's Task Force was formed of the various federal, state, and local agencies or governments that were to take part in planning for the tasks ahead. Regional councils in Illinois were asked to participate in this Governor's Task Force.

4. Our council, Two Rivers Regional Council (TRRC) of Public Officials, is not a traditional planning commission. TRRC serves its local governments not only as a Regional Planning Organization but also as the Regional Community Action Agency (RCAA) and as the Regional Jobs Training Program administrator. We also serve our region in the areas of housing and housing renovation.

Our hope in identifying the points above is that the reader will have a better understanding as to why TRRC was involved in the various roles and partnerships which we examine in this article.

Participating as a Member of the Sandbag Brigade

The initial role of the council was a more individual one. The council's board of directors, at our staff's request, provided an additional three days of paid leave to those who wanted to assist in the fight to hold back the floodwaters. While not all staff members were physically able to assist in filling, lifting, or stacking sandbags, they helped in other ways.

Some assisted by driving our agency's trucks filled with sandbags to problem areas. Others aided in preparing meals or washing clothes for the National

Guard, who were sent in to assist. Others acted as coordinators, directing volunteers to locations where they would be needed for the fight ahead. The obvious partnerships forged in this effort were the one-on-one partnerships. Whether working side-by-side with a fellow volunteer stacking sandbags on a saturated levee or taking a much-needed meal out to a tired worker, these partnerships will no doubt be the most memorable.

Providing Emergency Assistance

After countless hours of fighting to hold back the floodwaters, the inevitable finally happened. The Mississippi and Illinois Rivers breached their banks and topped the local levees.

It was at this point that perhaps the full support of our Regional Council was first tested. In this role of providing immediate emergency assistance, we faced our first challenge, and we forged our first truly new partners.

Once the state and federal governments had assessed the damage, they began declaring our counties disaster areas. Due to this declaration and the ongoing flooding, a DAC (Disaster Assistance Center) was established in our region in the City of Quincy. Being the RCAA, we asked our ESDA Coordinator whom we should contact to provide assistance at the DAC. The ESDA Coordinator told us to contact our local Red Cross director, and the Red Cross would direct us from there. Once we made contact with our Red Cross director, we were told where to be and at what time to meet with the DAC director, who was responsible for setting up these disaster cen-

ters and assigning organizations to specific spaces. Well, we were less than welcomed. The DAC director couldn't determine who we were or what service we would be providing. He first felt that we would be overlapping the Red Cross and the Salvation Army. He was then informed by both the Red Cross and the Salvation Army that our assistance would be needed and that we had worked with them in the past as a service provider. With this hurdle overcome, we went into full action.

A group of volunteers from our various departments signed up to assist at the DAC seven days a week. The TRRC Board of Directors gave our staff the authority to approach the Illinois Department of Commerce for permission to free up \$50,000 being held in the agency's Revolving Loan Fund.

The state, without hesitation, gave approval for use of the \$50,000 as disaster relief and we were on our way. Approximately five to six staff members worked in the DAC, taking applications, assessing needs, and referring victims to other agencies. They worked day-in and day-out from July 13 until the DAC closed on August 1, 1993. An additional three to four staff members assisted back at the council's office, verifying, processing, and coordinating other services for the flood victims. The council's board of directors also helped by assisting as volunteers in a variety of capacities at the DAC and at the council's office. After approximately 10 days into the relief effort, we knew that the \$50,000 would not be adequate.

The Department of Commerce was again approached for financial assistance. This request yielded another \$80,000 for

emergency disaster assistance. The funds made available by the organization provided immediate financial assistance for lodging, rent, food, medical, gas, clothing, and other emergency needs. Funds were provided in the form of vouchers to local vendors for those who were processed through the DAC, thus reducing the opportunity for misuse of funds. Occasionally, vouchers were issued on the spot for some immediate needs. From July 13 until August 1, Two Rivers served 1,450 flood-affected families with obligations of more than \$122,568.00 in emergency assistance. Financial assistance was not the only form of assistance needed.

While at the DAC, Two Rivers staff members saw another need that had to be addressed—the need for on-site childcare. The childcare service gave children a place to play, watch videos, or just talk while their parents went through the lengthy process of completing forms and seeking assistance. In order to provide adequate services to the children, the Red Cross provided refreshments to the childcare center, a local video store donated videos, and a rental store provided baby beds. Some local retail stores donated children's toys, providing each child who came through the DAC a toy to take with him or her. The childcare center was staffed by another group of volunteers—this time the children or other relatives of agency personnel and also some board members.

Another service made available at the DAC was the distribution of federal surplus commodities. As the RCAA, Two Rivers distributes surplus commodities on a regular basis. The program coordinator for our Community Service Depart-

ment received special permission to distribute commodities on site at the DAC to any flood victim. Approximately 500 families were assisted with this special allocation at the DAC. Staff members from the Department of Commerce also assisted as volunteers with the distribution of these commodities. While this provides some insight as to the assistance provided at the DAC, the council's services went well beyond those identified.

In the opening comments of this article I mentioned that it was probably in this role of assisting with emergency assistance that we found our first new partners. I also should have said we improved our relationships with some old partners as well. When we first entered the DAC, the FEMA and IEMA staff members were unaware of who we were or what assistance we could provide. Before the DAC closed, our staff and agency were touted as one of the better organizations in assisting disaster victims. We were able to issue vouchers on site in some situations. In other situations, we were able to provide a voucher within a 24-hour period. The bond formed between ourselves and the personnel from FEMA and IEMA was obvious. We were also recognized as being truly caring for setting up the childcare center and distributing surplus commodities on site.

Another new partner identified was our counterpart across the river in the state of Missouri. Due to all the bridges being closed in our area, workers were stranded on both sides of the river. Also, some workers were travelling approximately 200 miles one way to get to work. Arrangements had to be made to assist in finding suitable housing for these workers. Working with our Missouri

counterpart and some local hotels, motels, and landlords, and also those affected businesses, arrangements were made to assist these stranded workers.

Assisting in the Recovery

This role of providing assistance in the recovery of our region has been perhaps the most perplexing. Perplexing in that our roles varied from assessing the physical damage to identifying the economic impact, from identifying and coordinating financial resources to writing and administering grants. In some areas within our region we held a direct leadership responsibility in coordinating informational meetings, while in other areas we served a more supportive role. Our purpose was to be there and provide whatever assistance our local governments wanted from us.

In order to better understand the various roles that we were involved in during the recovery phase, we have attempted to break them out in the order in which they occurred.

Assessing the Economic Impact

It was obvious from the extent of the damage, and the fact that recovery would be long-term, that this region and its local governments could be facing a severe loss of revenue. TRRC contacted the Department of Commerce and Community Affairs and requested assistance to determine what economic models were available to assist in analyzing our economic plight. We were interested in studying both the initial and long-term impact on the public and private sectors. We held informational meetings with the

principal local government officials to inform them of our plan and to obtain their approval (see Figure 1).

Once we obtained their approval, our staff worked in conjunction with the state to subdivide the various private and public sector businesses into subgroups. We sent letters to CEOs of our principal businesses and to the principal chief elected officials, requesting their participation in an upcoming informational meeting. The focus of the meeting was to identify the problem and the anticipated outcome, then to delegate specific tasks. We then reviewed the types of businesses or organizations that had to be surveyed and approved a survey instrument. While overall the exercise was not as successful as we had anticipated, it did assist in determining the initial impact on our local governments and on certain types of businesses.

Coordination of Resources

In order for the various federal and state resources to reach their intended uses, a massive coordination of effort would be required. Since Illinois had not been the first state affected by the "Great Flood of 1993," we could look at the recovery efforts being considered in those states first affected, and hopefully learn by their experiences. Our state association was asked to participate in the initial discussions to determine the most effective coordination and delivery of resources. We tried to determine the level of assistance that would be made available and the various federal and state departments that would be involved. Once this was determined, we looked at what requirements would be placed on

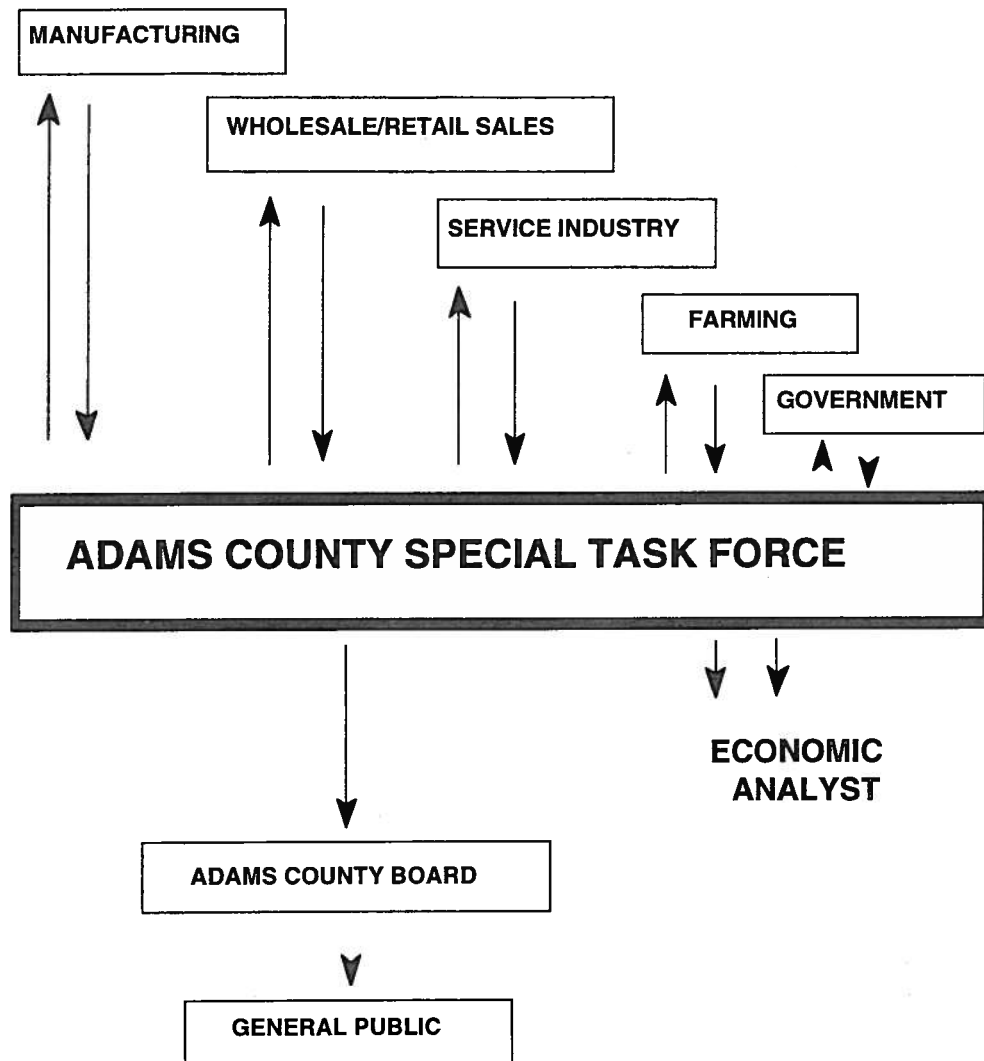


Figure 1. Assessment Process

obtaining those resources in a given area and which agencies at the local level had experience in dealing with those program requirements. Another issue for consideration was how to reduce the number of agencies that would be involved, and thus reduce the confusion. After all issues had been identified and evaluated, IEMA and FEMA determined that the regional approach would be the best (see Figure 2).

Using the regional planning councils (RPCs) would ensure the most effective coordination of services at the local level. While this was the preferred method, it was also clear that other organizations could be used in place of, or to assist, their RPC. While coordinating the efforts at the local level was of great concern, it was necessary to coordinate efforts at the state level as well, in order to assure that the resources being made available were used in the most appropriate way.

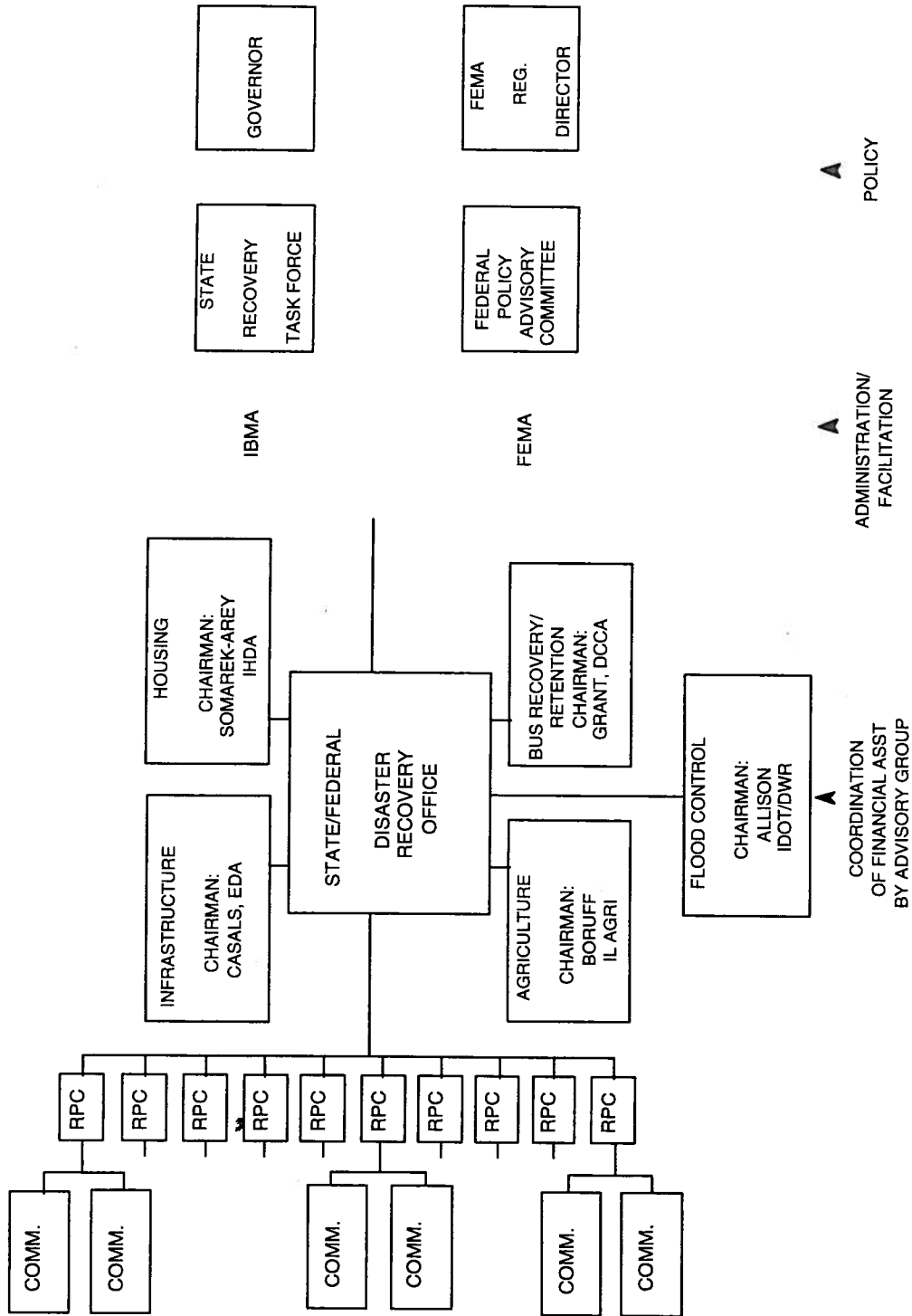


Figure 2. 1993 Illinois Flood Disaster Long-Range Recovery and Mitigation Process Organizational Chart

A representative from the governor's office established the Governor's Flood Task Force. This task force, while overseeing the Illinois effort, also helped to establish the primary body to coordinate the review of funding requests, to collect and disseminate flood-related information, and to identify and employ all available resources.

As of this writing, eight RPCs are still actively involved in assisting their local governments with buy outs and relocations as well as elevations and rehabilitations of flood-damaged properties. We

anticipate that this effort will continue well into 1995, and even beyond. ☀

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