

# CERC IN ACTION: A River & Community Rising

## Fargo Cass Public Health, North Dakota

Account from Fargo Cass Public Health's Public Information Officer



### Crisis Situation

In March 2009, winter brought record snow accumulations to Fargo Cass, North Dakota. Temperatures began to warm more quickly than normal in March, causing the snow to melt at a rapid pace. This caused the Red River to rise to levels it had not seen since 1967. Around March 18, 2009, the National Weather Service began predicting a record flood of 42 feet in Fargo Cass, which is about 24 feet above flood stage. The prediction was that this would happen within the next 10-12 days. However, 42 feet in less than two weeks could be disastrous. Information about protecting homes and businesses had to get out quickly.

The Public Information Officer (PIO) for the City of Fargo and I, the PIO for Fargo Cass Public Health, had been in our positions for less than a year. I had just returned from an intense week of training at the Advanced PIO Course hosted by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and the PIO for the City of Fargo PIO was nearly nine months pregnant. The flood was our first large scale crisis.

### Communication Response

As the PIO for Fargo Cass Public Health and crisis communications coordinator for the southeast region of North Dakota, I served as the lead PIO at the emergency operations center (EOC). The PIO for the City of Fargo was stationed at Incident Command, which was located at city hall.

Web pages addressing sandbagging topics, how to volunteer in the flood fighting efforts, current river levels, and neighborhood meeting locations were created. PIOs from the Fargo Police Department, Fire Department, and the assistant PIOs from Fargo Cass Public Health, were assigned to the EOC to help prepare for the barrage of national and worldwide media that were about to descend upon us. Together, we established a residential information hotline at the volunteer center to answer questions, address concerns, and direct people who wanted to volunteer for sandbagging.

Each day started and ended with a live, publicly broadcasted city/county leader meeting to discuss river levels, how dikes and levees were holding, what still needed to be done, and what the public could do to help. A psychologist also took part in the meetings and spoke to the public about how to deal with the pressure and anxiety associated with the flood fight. A 15-minute media briefing followed each meeting to allow engineers, commissioners, and law enforcement to speak to reporters. To ensure consistent messaging, a fact sheet was developed from

those briefings for PIOs to use for other media calls throughout the day. Meetings at local schools and community centers were held at night by city and/or county commissioners and engineers to update residents about what was being done to protect their neighborhoods. Information on flood protection, drain plugs, and mold clean-up was shared during these meetings. It was important that we emphasized that the city was there to help.

The flood situation was constantly changing and PIOs had to make sure that the information being disseminated was current, accurate, and timely. Fire, police, and volunteer center personnel stationed at the EOC were able to contact their colleagues in the field to help with fact checking on the latest volunteer numbers, sandbags created and deployed, and street closings. They were also available for media phone interviews.

The flood became a personal issue for me as river waters had overtaken the road to my home. I was living at the EOC, sending out information about the flood, and receiving updates about my neighborhood from my husband. We lost power in our neighborhood. Luckily, we had installed a battery operated sub-pump just months before the flood; otherwise, our basement would have taken on water. Since things were being taken care of at home, I was able to concentrate on my job at the EOC.

### "What CERC Taught Me ..."

From beginning to end, the response to the flood of 2009 incorporated many of the Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication (CERC) principles. Giving the public and media access to meetings where leaders were sharing plans to protect the city established a sense of trust and credibility between residents and officials. This also underscored that the City of Fargo was the primary source for flood related information. Sharing updates directly with the public at neighborhood meetings was something we wanted to do to show that we were concerned about the well-being of the residents.

The PIOs also shared information with the media as soon as we were made aware of them. If we didn't have the information they requested, we tried our best to find the latest details. We always directed the media to our live broadcasted leader meetings to ensure a continuous flow of communication. Finally, city leaders expressing empathy was huge in bringing city and county leaders, elected officials, and the entire region together to beat the river.

The principles of CERC and FEMA's Advanced PIO course, which I took a week before PIOs were deployed to the EOC, really gave me confidence in my role. Not only were the principles a value to me and other city PIOs with whom I worked, they were also of great help to those who would serve as potential spokespersons during a crisis.

Since my CERC training, I have used the principles and supporting materials as teaching tools for other PIOs and leaders in other cities and counties. When everyone is on the same page with delivering emergency information to the public, it makes the process easier and faster. It also helps new people in leadership roles, who have never dealt with the media, learn the importance of being effective and empathetic representatives during a crisis.

