

CERC IN ACTION: Calm Before the Storm

Connecticut Department of Public Health

Account from Connecticut Department of Public Health's Risk Communication Coordinator



of thousands of residents were without power and unable to watch television for information, DPH posted health and safety messages on social media feeds. This allowed mobile device users to retrieve valuable information regarding carbon monoxide, drinking water, and food safety. Local media outlets following the department's Twitter feed, retweeted DPH's messages to their followers and shared the messages during their news broadcasts and in their articles, helping to spread the word.

“What CERC Taught Me ...”

It was imperative that DPH get out ahead of the storm and provide residents with information on how to prepare. Once the storm hit and utility customers began to lose power, messages on how to safely use generators and outdoor grilling devices were disseminated using social media.

Crisis Situation

While snow is no stranger to New Englanders, a rare October Nor'easter in 2011 left a record 860,000 utility customers without power. The storm dumped more than a foot of snow throughout many parts of the state causing trees, still full of leaves and heavy with snow, to come crashing down, taking down power lines and blocking roads along the northern half of the state. Essential parts of the state's electric grid were affected, and with roadways blocked, repairing damaged power lines and restoring electricity to homes and businesses became a challenge. Many customers remained without power for more than a week. Customers on well water had no electricity to pump water from their wells. Small public water companies had generators that failed, causing them to issue boil water notices to their consumers. Food kept in refrigerators and freezers spoiled after reaching unsafe temperatures. In addition to the snow came cold weather, leaving many residents not only without power, but also without heat. In an effort to stay warm, many desperate residents used generators and outdoor grills to generate heat. Unfortunately, some used these devices unsafely leading to a record 134 cases of carbon monoxide poisonings attributed to the storm.

Communication Response

Still recovering from Tropical Storm Irene just two months before, the Connecticut Department of Public Health (DPH) was able to reformat the website used for the tropical storm, which had similar public health threats, including widespread power outages, drinking water and food safety, and the misuse of generators and outdoor grilling devices. Messages were now tailored for the October Nor'easter. The website also provided health and safety information and updates on boil water notices for public water companies.

Social media became an important tool throughout the storm, especially during recovery. The day before the storm hit, DPH began posting messages on its Twitter and Facebook pages urging residents to prepare. After the storm, knowing hundreds

“In responding to the storm, the first three principles of the CERC training were critical: Be First. Be Right. Be Credible.”

The *Crisis Communication Lifecycle* taught in the CERC trainings emphasizes that there is still much work to be done after the crisis. In the Resolution Phase of the *Crisis Communication Lifecycle*, it is important to evaluate your response and examine any problems that arose. Based on our response to the October Nor'easter, we knew that communicating health and safety messages during a widespread power outage was a challenge. Even with battery-operated radios and smart phones, during a prolonged power outage, batteries may become exhausted. In these cases, we felt printed materials that could be distributed or posted in public areas would be ideal for messaging.

In preparation for future storms, DPH conducted focus groups of urban residents about food safety and carbon monoxide messaging. Messages were tested to ensure that they were clear and understandable. Images were also used to demonstrate the points being made in the flyers based on feedback from the focus group participants.

Almost one year to the day later, as we were finalizing the translation of the documents into nine different languages, Hurricane Sandy made landfall in Connecticut. While the printed materials were not yet available, electronic versions of the food safety and carbon monoxide flyers were available online for users to download and print. Thankfully, we did not see the large number of carbon monoxide poisonings we saw the year before. We like to think it was in large part due to our efforts around messaging and educating residents about the dangers of carbon monoxide.

