

Bethel's Citizens Plus: The Future of Disaster Preparedness?

Bethel, a Windsor County town of slightly more than 2,000, was one of those municipalities hit hard by Tropical Storm Irene in 2011. Roadways and homes were swept away by the powerful waters of the converging branches of the White River, and the pounding rains swelled normally placid tributary creeks to roaring torrents, stranding residents for days without power. The storm caused more than \$7 million in damage to the town and its residents' property.

As the days following the storm crept by, many residents, still without power and unable to communicate with the outside world, grew frustrated with local officials, who were doing their best to respond to a disaster of unprecedented scope that destroyed or damaged much of their town's infrastructure. David Aldrighetti, Bethel Fire Chief, remembers it well. "I watched how hard the town government and the town manager were working to try and fix everything," he said, "but the people seemed to be really upset that no one was taking care of them."

Eventually, much of Bethel's local infrastructure was repaired, in part thanks to the work of the municipal government and the state. Many agreed, however, that Bethel's response to the disaster, both from its government and its citizens, could have been better.

In stepped Todd Sears, who happened to move to Bethel just ten days before Irene savaged the town. Sears worked with town officials and private residents to create Citizens Plus (C+), a community-wide volunteer group dedicated to citizen-led disaster planning and recovery efforts. The initiative has already met with welcome acclaim from Bethel's citizens and many emergency responders. "I think that a key element to what we are doing is that it is homegrown, neighborhood-centric, and utterly personal," he said, citing reasons for the organization's acceptance.

Citizens Plus divides its efforts into three categories: Public Education, Local Self Help (i.e., Neighbor-on-Neighbor Assistance and Situational Awareness), and Institutional Augmentation. In the Public Education component, volunteers visit every household in Bethel and help families to prepare for a future natural disaster or large-scale emergency. Local Self Help divides Bethel into a number (8-10) of neighborhood zones or clusters of households, each with a designated geo-lead who lives and operates in that zone. This model establishes a reporting/command chain through which information can quickly flow into Bethel's First Responder's command structure and thence into the town's Emergency Operations Center. Institutional Augmentation enables Bethel's Emergency Management Director to fill in any gaps of the town's Incident Command System and other emergency service systems with well-trained volunteers.

Since the inception of Citizens Plus, the Bethel Selectboard has been briefed twice on its development. According to Sears, "The municipal government has been on board from Day 1." That sentiment was echoed by Selectperson William Hall. "The Selectboard is very supportive of the Citizens Plus initiative," he said. "It is important that citizens be prepared for emergencies and it is important that people have a plan for dealing with the aftermath of an emergency. C+ does that in such a way that involves people directly in the process. The formation and development of C+ has gone a long way toward making people feel comfortable that the town will be better prepared in the event of a future event."

Chief Aldrighetti continues to serve as a liaison with and an active participant in the group.

Currently, Citizens Plus organizers are training volunteers, often using online FEMA courses. Over the next couple of months, Citizens Plus volunteers will continue to visit every home in town to discuss possible emergency preparations and responses. The effectiveness of Citizens Plus remains to be seen, but municipal oversight and community buy-in coupled with efforts at transparency look to keep the group on the path to local, effective disaster mitigation. Concluded Sears, “We believe that if we can help to enable simple and small improvements in attaining positive outcomes in the wake of disaster, then we are doing good work. If our impact is greater than simple and small, then all the better.”

For further information on Citizen Plus, contact Chief David Aldrighetti at 802-353-6433 or bethelvtfire@comcast.net.

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