



Picking up the pieces: When disaster calls, Extension answers

Photo by Melissa Carlo, Winona Daily News

August 18, 2007. As drought scorched northeastern Minnesota, record rains of up to 20 inches flooded the southeastern part of the state. During the three-day deluge, streams and rivers swelled to dangerous levels. Mudslides and foamy, debris-laden water washed out roads and destroyed homes and businesses. Crops on the cusp of harvest were demolished. In the end, seven people were dead and thousands left with only pieces of their former lives.

Despite tragedy, all hope was not lost. Relief came in many forms during the torrential rains, including the University of Minnesota Extension. Armed with research-based information, strong communication skills and a commitment to help long after the flood faded from prime-time news, Extension quickly helped local residents begin to regroup and recoup.



“Extension compiled an extensive list of resources that were distributed to victims of the August flood.”

—state Rep. Andy Welti, DFL-Plainview.

From pet care to mortgage payments, the August 2007 flood permeated every level of life for southeastern Minnesotans. Thirty-six hours and 14 inches of rain later, some 1,500 homes were damaged or destroyed. Farmers lost livestock and crops. Businesses that had taken decades to establish were demolished.

Extension responded quickly to the call for help. “We weren’t the guns and hoses part of the rescue—somebody else was doing that,” said Extension educator Jerry Tesmer, who is based in Fillmore and Houston counties. “But we did have key roles.”

One major role was providing credible, unbiased, research-based information to those in need. The Minnesota arm of the national Extension Disaster Education Network (EDEN) activated a “website in

waiting” filled with answers to flood-related concerns. Extension’s Tesmer and other local educators were on hand to answer questions covering everything from drowned turkeys to hot hay. Tesmer and his Extension colleagues also pulled together a handbook with information on livestock, wells, septic systems, food safety, handling stress—anything that might be inaccessible without Internet and/or phone service.

“The book of resources provided timely answers to many of the questions that homeowners and business owners needed during the crisis,” says state Rep. Andy Welti, DFL-Plainview.

Beyond providing credible information, Extension extended helping hands. Wabasha County 4-Hers spent nearly 500 hours

helping clean mud from homes and out-buildings and assembling relief packages for displaced residents in the Stockton area. In Winona and Fillmore counties 4-H organized an eight-week, after-school program for children of families affected by the flood.

In addition to helping residents address immediate issues, Extension also identified and worked to meet longer-term needs. Winona County Extension staff organized a community call-in with local bankers, which allowed residents to discuss sensitive topics—such as foreclosure and bankruptcy—while remaining anonymous. Extension educators with experience in family finances and counseling also participated in several flood recovery resource fairs. Family resource management educators, who have Accredited Financial Counselor (AFC) status, continue to provide both one-on-one and telephone consultations to help sort out the financial

snarls. Educators working with families are referred by community caseworkers to ensure a coordinated effort among agencies.

“We’re a team with community players,” says Patricia Olson, Extension program leader for family resource management. “We’re an equal partner with folks. That’s really important.”

Rochester-based Extension educator Neil Broadwater assembled a “to-do” list for flood victims, complete with information on everything from emergency aid to tips for mold-cleanup. Extension even went the extra mile to coordinate donations so families could replace holiday decorations lost to the floodwaters.

“They help with morale a lot,” says Rushford resident Crystal Schroeder, whose family of five lost a basement full of toys and memories—not to mention the everyday conveniences we take for granted: plumbing,

electricity and ductwork. “It’s nice to have an organization out there that puts people first like they do.”

The flood of 2007 was uncharacteristic and unanticipated. But Extension’s response was not. Strong community relationships, advance preparation for responding to disaster, and an enduring commitment to identifying and meeting people’s needs with timely information made Extension a welcome companion on the road to recovery for southeastern Minnesotans.

“We’re there in the community,” Tesmer said. “We work with the local people. We fit there.”

For more information on Extension’s resources to help Minnesotans recover from disaster, visit <http://www.extension.umn.edu/projects/disaster>

Safe after school

There are no words to describe what it was like to have a basement filled with sewage. But Rushford resident Crystal Schroeder does not hesitate to describe Extension’s response to a three-day flood that left southeastern Minnesota in ruins last August: “Terrific.”

As daunting as the cleanup was, Schroeder and her husband, Colin, were eager to be done with it. Before they could tackle it, however, they had another obstacle to overcome: Debris from the storm littered their yard, rendering it dangerous and leaving the Schroeder children without a safe place to play inside or outside their home.

So they were grateful when they heard about a program 4-H Extension educator Nicole Pokorney and her colleagues set up to give kids in St. Charles and Rushford a safe environment. For seven weeks Tovah, 8, and Merrill, 7, joined dozens of other children for two hours of after-school activities with 4-H staff and volunteers from Winona State University and the community.

“That was a big deal, to have them interact with friends and be someplace that was at least somewhat normal,”



Extension educator Nicole Pokorney helps provide 4-H programming for young flood victims of Rushford.

Schroeder says. “It also allowed my husband and I time to come home to get some other cleanup done without worrying what they were going to be doing.”

For more information on 4-H programs in Minnesota, visit <http://www.extension.umn.edu/4-H>

For more information on Extension’s out-of-school time resources, visit <http://www.extension.umn.edu/YouthWorkInstitute>