



2016 – Speaking Out

Contact: Ted Fisher
Town of East Hartford
Phone: 860-291-7202
Cell: 860-817-8590
tfisher@easthartfordct.gov

Helping East Hartford Prevent and Recover from Disasters

By Mayor Marcia A. Leclerc

Winter snowmelt, unseasonable thunderstorms, rising flood waters, and a full Emergency Shelter....

It has been an unseasonably warm and dry September, so for most of us these things don't seem particularly urgent or important. But for the participants in a recent high-level training program provided by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), they were urgent problems in need of a solution.

Last week, while East Hartford was basking in some of the last hot (and very dry) weather of the summer, our town leadership was worried about too much rain and a snowier than expected winter. Beginning on September 12th and lasting through the 15th, the Town hosted a FEMA Integrated Emergency Management Community Specific training course. This special course, offered to very few communities nationwide, will significantly help our Town prepare for, respond to and recover from disasters.

The class was developed specifically for our community and our expected hazards, and was attended by over forty people. Leadership staff from every town department were in attendance, as well as key partners like Eversource the State of Connecticut Department of Emergency Management and Homeland Security, the Capital Region Council of Governments and the American Red Cross.

The course was broken into three segments; the first two days of the program were filled with classroom instruction and designed to better our understanding of our emergency procedures and disaster preparedness. This portion of the course also included a specific section on how to communicate with residents and visitors during times of emergency.

On Wednesday we conducted a full functional exercise; roleplaying an early spring after a particularly tough winter. In the exercise the Town was at risk of the Connecticut River rising due to snow melt. Severe thunderstorms also contributed to the mayhem, causing the river to rise further, and requiring various town departments to respond to fictional

flooding. My staff and our partners tackled flooding, evacuation, relocation, sheltering, and communications challenges. During the event, we gamed out installation of the Main Street Stop Log barricade south of Pitkin St., evacuated Goodwin College and the surrounding neighborhood, successfully rescued a missing kayaker, opened three emergency shelters and dealt with a major crash on I-84 and a fire at Pratt and Whitney.

The final day of the program was solely focused on the recovery effort. Post emergency response, recovery occurs as the Town supports and guides the rebuilding process. This portion of the class was driven by inter-disciplinary discussions on the best way to move the community forward after a significant emergency or disaster. This effort addressed everything from behavioral health to responder fatigue, to larger issues such as debris removal and neighborhood recreation.

This course was a once in a lifetime opportunity to measure our capability and capacity against the recommended best practices of FEMA and their cadre of experts. I am very proud of the performance of my staff, as well as their demonstrated commitment to making the exercise a success. Each department performed admirably, and more importantly, identified areas of improvement and new methods to make our ability to prepare, respond, and recover that much better.

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