

Notes from Town of Heath AAR held 3/26/25.

Tim Lively, Heath EMD opened the meeting at the Heath Emergency Operations Center (EOC) at 6:00 pm, with a brief recap before inviting participants to share their roles and experiences during the event.

Event: February 16-19, 2025, Snowstorm with severe winds, very cold temperatures and a 54-hour power outage impacting towns of Heath, Charlemont, Rowe, Colrain, Monroe Bridge. State of Emergency (SOE) declared in Heath on 2/16/25; Heath EOC activated at 9:30 am on 2/17/25. Mutual Aid was called upon to assist with house-to-house wellness checks. American Red Cross (ARC) support was provided for warming centers, and an overnight shelter was established in Charlemont for all area towns; Heath EOC deactivated about 9 pm 2/18; SOE in Heath was ended on 2/22/25.

AAR participants: Tim Lively, EMD; Sheila Litchfield RN, Asst. EMD; Nick Anzuoni, Fire Chief; Tyson Howard, Highway Superintendent; Select Board members Elissa Viarengo and Will Emmet; Town Coordinator, Hilma Sumner; Heath Fire Department members Charles Hamel and Greg Rode; MEMA representative Nathan Moreau.

Participants described their roles during the 4-day event in a process that enabled a broader understanding of the extent to which volunteers and town employees were stretched thin and yet responded heroically to the needs of residents in spite of frustrations related to limited personnel, poor communications from the power company, whiteout road conditions and cold temperatures.

Specific Actions taken:

- Warming Center was activated at the Heath Senior Center Tuesday 2/18/25 at 9 am. Postings were done to inform residents about warming center activation but without phones the communication was severely limited.
- Door to door searches for wellness checks were done to the extent possible but hampered by limited personnel (2 members of HFD) and extreme weather with cold and white-out conditions, unplowed driveways and no power/no phones. Residents reached were informed about warming shelter and rides were provided if necessary.
- Calls were made to Heath's Emergency call list (Board of Health list that includes primarily elders and those in need of assistance to get out of their homes) were made but hampered by lack of power to residences being called, rendering most calls unanswered.
- Town Coordinator established direct communications with NationalGrid.
- Residents assisted friends and neighbors by shoveling snow, using chainsaws to remove trees blocking driveways, starting generators, providing transportation.

- Highway Dept did their best to keep roads open, but whiteout conditions made the task nearly impossible, and the crew almost had to abandon the task. Delivered water to residents and reminded about warming center.
- Mutual Aid from unaffected Towns and the CERT Team out of Ashfield responded to assist in house-to-house wellness checks.
- Equipment from Berkshire East and Utility Terrain Vehicles (UTV's) from responding towns aided in accessing residents and keeping roads open.
- Warming center in Charlemont at the Federated Church (CFC) pivoted to serve as an overnight shelter with the assistance of the ARC. CFC also serves as the Good Neighbors Food Pantry and has generator backup to social rooms and walk-in food storage units.

Lessons Learned: What Worked Well

- Due to weather forecasts, Heath Firefighters took it upon themselves to ensure equipment was in a state of readiness.
- Neighbors helping neighbors; huge efforts by volunteers.
- Once 'things got rolling' there was good coordination of resources when they became available.
- MEMA coordination, support, and assets
- No loss of life; minimal property damage
- Shuttle system to bring residents to roadside for transport to warming center.
- Bringing generator to warm the room of a bed-ridden resident unable to be transported.
- Excellent radio communication between Heath Highway, EOC and HFD
- UTV's with tracks made it possible to check year-round residents in Mohawk Estates.
- Additional MEMA support to other Towns enabled Nathan to focus on Heath (by day three of the event). Nathan's call to CERT at 2 pm resulted in CERT arrival at 3 pm!
- Positive feedback received from residents who were amazed that someone had come to check on them.
- The Heath Municipal center at Jacobs Road with plenty of parking available proved to be a significant asset as the EOC, warming center and Town offices were located all in one building served by generator power.
- Internet never went out, so as long as modems had backup power internet access was possible.
- Cell service in Heath remained available where satellite service is accessible.
- ARC called Nathan on Monday night 2/17 to offer assistance before he called them.

- Backup UPS units (where they exist in residences) functioned until their batteries died.

Lessons Learned: Where Improvements are Needed.

- There was ample warning of the impending storm, but the Emergency Response Team did not meet as a team to preplan, prepare or review action plans; A corrective action recommended is a commitment to meet remotely or in person two days prior to a storm to review responsibilities, emergency response plans, prepare resources, and alert residents that the building is open anytime employees are scheduled to work and is a resource to get warm, water, cell phones recharged and to access the internet, and that the EOC will be open in the event of a SOE with loss of power.
- National Grid communications that power would be restored within 3 to 6 hours gave everyone a false sense of security and hope that resulted in residents not seeking warmth and shelter, delayed emergency response calls for assistance, and delayed mobilization of resources.
- Long duration storm for a 3-member Highway crew; took naps in warm truck.
- Need to build redundancy into response plans, including provision for backup personnel and alternative routes into and out of town and routes to access EOC.
- Need to ensure key people in Heath's Emergency Response network are informed about SOE, EOC and are able to get to the EOC.
- Heath Police Department did not respond to a request to assist with house-to-house checks.
- There were comments regarding overuse of radio ops channels among all those responding to the towns impacted by the storm, and whether radio communications may be improved with strategically placed repeaters.
- Charlemont's mutual aid call for assistance doing house-to-house checks in Charlemont would have drawn critical resources from Heath, had Heath personnel responded. There was a question about better utilization of shared resources.
- There was a question about whether the EOC should have remained open after the last resident left. A corrective action recommended is that a policy be established that the EOC would remain open 24/7 until the emergency ends, and that additional support resources would be requested as needed to keep the EOC open.
- MEMA indicated there was a delay in getting MEMA resource activated due in part to the fact that Heath did not request support right away but mostly due to a MEMA policy that activated a response once 25,000 customers had no power. As a result of this incident MEMA has revised their policy and notification of resources will commence when three or more towns are without power. Nathan advised that

regardless, we should contact him if Heath has no power for 24 hours (or if an outage is predicted to last 24 or more hours).

- Redundancy in the power delivery system to the area towns is needed.
- Implement Tim's plan to survey residents to ascertain where full-house generators are located, who has a portable generator, wood stoves, cell services, who may need assistance getting to a warming center or shelter, who has neighbors who would check on them, etc.
- Obtain and install a temporary mobile signboard in Heath center (and at the corner of Jacobs Road/8A) to indicate "EOC is open."
- Consider installation of a siren to notify personnel to respond to EOC in the event phone communications are down. In lieu of this a call-list with cell and text numbers to ensure all who need notification about SIOE and EOC are reached.
- Review written response plans for any needed updates; create digital version of plan; post it on website; hold practice drills.
- Update the BOH brochure on emergency preparations; make the brochure available to all; include in "welcome baskets."
- Could have activated the HFD auxiliary personnel.
- Recruitment for both HFD and CERT is necessary; consider including a recruitment notice in mailing tax bills.
- Consider sending a reminder about signing up for Code Red in mailing of tax bills.
- Hold MEMA Shelter training class in Heath.

NOTE: It was observed that the April/May Heath Herald issue includes articles about the emergency response with huge thanks to responders; The issue also includes an article for residents about preparing for weather-related emergencies. In addition, the 3/25/25 edition of the Greenfield Recorder includes an article calling for investigation into National Grid's communications during the power outage. In general, the sense is that residents would have been more likely to use a warming center or shelter if they knew it could be days before power was restored.

Summary Goals to Achieve:

- 1) Improve Communications/Notifications (for staff and residents).
- 2) Preplanning (before an event) and following response Plan (during event).
- 3) Improve EOC use and operations.
- 4) Establish local shelter operations plan.
- 5) Redundancy (of emergency personnel and electric power).