

center to relocate to. The only plan if the weather got too bad and we did not feel safe to stay in the ECC was to go to the basement, which housed the Sheriff's Office Records Division.

As the night went on we received nonstop weather warnings. We advised our patrol supervisors and units of the plan to evacuate the communication center if the weather worsened. As the heavy rain and hail pelted our front windows we received a weather warning of a tornado headed toward the city. We made the decision to evacuate to the basement. We transferred our phone lines and radioed out to our responders that we were leaving. But it was too late. We had waited too long. As we ran to the rear stairwell, our only access to the basement, we could not get the stairwell door open. Tree limbs and debris had filled the stairwell, and the tornado had taken out part of the back wall to the building. As we tried to evacuate we could feel the building shaking, we lost power and made our way to a different area and waited for help

to arrive. In the darkness we were not able to see the destruction. Across the street the historic courthouse had been destroyed. Most of the old buildings and homes around us had extensive damage.

When we finally made it to the basement, it did not take long to realize the work space available to us was inadequate for five telecommunicators. Over the next couple of days the dispatchers were split up to work in a borrowed mobile command center and different police precincts until a new workspace could be set up for us in our building. Those days were stressful due to a disruption in our work flow, and not having our office, normal equipment and supplies.

After an event such as a major tornado damaging the city and your building, there are many things you learn. One lesson learned: We never tested out our evacuation plan and did not realize it was inadequate until we needed it and it did not work. Lesson learned No.2: We needed a secondary location away from our normal office location that is easily accessible to us no matter the hour of the day.

Budgets are tight and everyone knows it is not always financially possible to build



Downtown Clarksville, Tennessee, in the wake of a devastating 1999 tornado.

PHOTOS BY ROBERT SMITH

Operations Center Assessment Checklist. Check with other agencies to see what kind of plans they have in place.

Our committee was able to identify a location to set up a backup center with portable equipment at our new EMS administrative building. We use their training room, which is set up with robust Wi-Fi, has plenty of electrical outlets throughout the room with generator backup and is a 10 minute drive from our ECC. We installed administrative phone lines dedicated for our use. We can work off laptops that remote into our CAD system, and we have portable ECC computers to receive 9-1-1 calls. We bought a large storage cabinet to store equipment. It is easily accessible and can be set up quickly when needed. Exterior antennas placed on the roof provide optimal radio reception and transmission. While this is not an ideal setup for long-term use, it is adequate to continue operations for a shorter time. We are grateful to our local EMS agency for allowing

us to use the space and working with us to make sure our community does not have to go without 9-1-1 service in the event of another displacement or disaster.

Once there is a plan in place, write a thorough policy, procedure and check lists that your staff can use when they evacuate and demobilize to return to normal business in the ECC. Most importantly, practice the evacuation and demobilization processes with all shifts not just during normal business hours.

Some agencies have never had an evacuation and hopefully never will, but there is always a possibility and every agency needs to be prepared. Remember to seek out assistance from local officials and other department heads. It is vital to keep our telecommunicators safe so they can continue to provide lifesaving services to the community. ●

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