

STATEMENT BY

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ADJUTANT GENERAL  
COMMONWEALTH OF KENTUCKY

BEFORE THE

HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE  
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ON

DISASTER RESPONSE:  
IS FEMA UP TO THE CHALLENGE?

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The winter storm that moved across the Commonwealth of Kentucky on the 26, 27 January produced the most catastrophic natural disaster to strike Kentucky since the New Madrid Earthquake that occurred in December 1811 to February 1812.

The January storm persisted for more than 24 hours - first freezing rain, followed by snow, then more freezing rain, and more snow. The unique blend of ice, snow and strong winds produced scenes that were stunningly beautiful and massively destructive.

Vehicles, homes, trees and power lines – everything exposed to the outdoors -- were thickly coated with more than an inch of ice --- in some cases as much as three inches. The effect was immediate. The entire western half of Kentucky was effectively paralyzed.

The weight of the ice on power lines collapsed steel utility towers carrying major transmission lines, and caused miles of wooden utility poles to snap like toothpicks under heavy pressure.

Virtually every tree of any significant size lost multiple branches, and hundreds of thousands of them toppled onto homes and residential utility lines, blocking most roads

More than 769,000 Kentucky households were without power. That number represents 36% of all of the electrical customers in the Commonwealth.

In much of the state we lost the means to communicate. In the hardest hit areas of Western Kentucky all land lines, microwave, cellular and emergency communications were out of service. In many cases the total extent of our emergency eyes and ears were a couple of satellite radios and a few ham radio operators operating on batteries.

Without power, municipal water plants could no longer provide water to more than 250,000 customers – that included water for fire protection as well.

Primary and secondary roads were impassable.

102 of Kentucky's 120 counties, and 87 cities declared states of emergency. That represents a land mass that stretches 387 miles from west to east and more than 100 miles from North to South.

And because of the storm, 36 Kentuckians lost their lives – most while fighting the extreme cold weather, or through hypothermia, and carbon monoxide asphyxiation from improper ventilation of makeshift home heating.

## RESPONSE

In contrast to a hurricane striking the coastal US, this was a no-notice event affecting a wide geographic area and requiring massively parallel response.

Fortunately for us, just last March we rehearsed our plans for dealing with a catastrophic earthquake along the New Madrid Fault in West Kentucky – It essentially, in military operational terms, served as a rehearsal of the “battle” on the ground we would fight on, during the Ice Storm of 2009.

In keeping with our New Madrid Response Ops Plan, Kentucky's State Emergency Operations Center was immediately brought to full strength with representatives from all state agencies, under the direction of Brig Gen John Heltzel. John had authored the original ops plan and designed the March seismic exercise in a Kentucky National Guard military capacity, prior to his subsequent employment as the Kentucky Director of Emergency Management as a state employee.

Simultaneously, 1,600 members of the Kentucky National Guard - the soldiers of our Rapid Response Force - were dispatched to the hardest-hit areas to begin assisting local authorities with rescue operations. This all was within the context of very limited communication from the field. We knew it was bad – as it turns out we had no idea just how bad. In retrospect our initial reaction was typical for any emergency response force – measured and somewhat tempered.

Kentucky's Division of Emergency Management began an immediate dialogue with FEMA for the delivery of food, water and generators to Ft. Campbell for distribution to two National Guard-run logistics support areas and regional points of distribution.

Governor Steve Beshear and I, along with the Chief of Staff of the Cabinet, the Secretary of Transportation and FEMA's Federal Coordinating Officer (FCO) flew to the area for a first-hand look at the magnitude of the problem and to meet with local officials from around the region to assess immediate needs.

Recognizing that the situation required immediate action, on January 27th, Governor Beshear declared a state of emergency, followed by the unprecedented activation of all available Kentucky Army National Guard units, along with selected portions of the Kentucky Air National Guard.

Within hours of initially notifying the White House of the emergency in Kentucky and our request for federal assistance, President Obama issued an emergency declaration and contact with FEMA and Homeland Security occurred immediately in the early morning hours just after the storm left eastern Kentucky.

In a statement to the media, Governor Beshear set forth the guiding philosophy for everything that followed ----- that “the primary responsibility of Government is the protection of its citizens – we are going to do whatever is necessary to fulfill that solemn obligation – regardless of the costs.”

The Governor’s order placed an additional 3,000 National Guard Soldiers and Airmen into the effort to address the needs of the people of the Commonwealth during this winter storm – in all, 4,600 National Guard men and women were mobilized.

This was the largest state call up of Kentucky National Guard forces in the history of the Commonwealth. It represented the strongest possible effort to relieve human suffering and ensure the safety and well-being of our citizens. It was absolutely the right thing to do.

Our state Cabinet partners were immediately involved in the storm response. Kentucky State Police began an active role throughout the impacted area ensuring property was secure and traffic issues were effectively dealt with.

The Transportation Cabinet began a non-stop road clearing operation that paved the way for the distribution of critical supplies and emergency services vehicles. During the course of the emergency the Central Office vehicles logged over 19,000 miles in mission support.

#### JOINT TASK FORCE KENTUCKY (JTF-KY)

After the rapid response force moved into the most affected area and could provide situation awareness, in concert with Emergency Management officials, the Kentucky Joint Force Headquarters organized itself for a massive life-saving and life-sustaining operation. The Kentucky Joint Task Force - commanded by Brig. Gen. Lonnie Culver, who had served as deputy commander of a similar task force in Mississippi during Hurricane Katrina

House Appropriations Committee  
Subcommittee on Homeland Security Testimony  
Maj Gen Ed Tonini – TAG Kentucky

recovery efforts - was arrayed geographically to coordinate the combined Army and Air National Guard effort. He established command and control in five subordinate task forces across the Commonwealth.

Our most significant enemy was the cold. The temperature was hovering between zero and 20 degrees with wind chill making the situation extremely dangerous. Without communication and without electricity a huge portion of the Kentucky population was placed in imminent danger.

National Guard troops cleared routes for emergency response vehicles as well as to help utility crews gain access to damaged power transmission lines.

They established shelters and points of distribution for supplies provided by FEMA and, when the weather permitted, used helicopters to conduct over-flights to determine which roads were impassable and identified damaged power transmission lines.

Through the Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC), National Guard personnel and equipment from Florida, Indiana, Tennessee, Ohio, Wisconsin and West Virginia flowed into Kentucky, bringing vehicles, engineer equipment and satellite communications capabilities to assist us with the emergency. We could not have done it without them.

And in an expanded mission for the Kentucky National Guard, troops teamed up with local emergency management agencies, fire departments, rescue squads, law enforcement agencies and volunteers to conduct "wellness checks" for all households in all affected counties, literally knocking on hundreds of thousands of doors.

In a parallel operation, Kentucky's Division of Emergency Management immediately:

- Set up regional EOC's with power and satellite communications.
- Established or re-established emergency communications and provided direct support to AT&T – the primary cell phone service in the area – to get power back up at cell towers.
- Created a "Wal-Mart-style" hub-and-spoke distribution chain in 72 hours to expedite the flow of emergency resources to where they were needed most. During the disaster more than 1.3 million meals and more than 2.1 million bottles of water were distributed to those in need.

The recall of possibly contaminated FEMA meals caused by the peanut butter recall amplified the need for states to maintain maximum contracting flexibility. The entire “black swan” event was handled with an abundance of caution to provide maximum protections for our affected people. Had we not been able to locally contract replacement meals, our sheltered and stranded citizens would have experienced unacceptable periods without food.

- Once communications were back up, Kentucky Emergency Management established a statewide situational awareness with all 120 county Judge Executives and County Emergency Managers reporting twice a day, every day for the duration of the emergency.

### JOINT EFFORT

An immediate priority was placed on the restoration of electric power to water plants, communications facilities, shelters and nursing homes.

To meet this priority, a first ever “Joint Power Operations Center” was established. In just four days time, representatives of FEMA and the US Army Corps of Engineers worked alongside Kentucky Emergency Management and National Guard personnel to prioritize and emplace more than 150 generators in order to energize critical infrastructures such as shelters, nursing homes, hospitals and water plants. By utilizing a dynamic combination of multiple Corps of Engineer teams, Corp’s contractor teams and Kentucky-contracted electrical engineer teams, we were able to far exceed any emergency power generation effort in recent history. We believe the “Joint Power Operations Center” concept can be used as an operational template in future disasters to greatly accelerate the vital restoration of live saving emergency power.

Through this interagency process, we were able to shift National Guard resources and manpower “on the fly” to reinforce the most affected areas.

We made EMAC requests for additional critical emergency management support from Tennessee to assist our efforts in Region #1 – one of our hardest hit areas. Also Indiana provided additional staffing for our state EOC. Several other states including North Carolina, Alabama and Mississippi sent health care professionals who worked with the Department for Public Health, forming 12 strike teams with over 150 members to conduct shelter and special needs assessments.

As systems came back on line the Department for Environmental Protection assumed the mission of checking water systems that failed during the storm and clearing debris collection sites to ensure that the storm aftermath didn’t create an environmental issue.

Our effort to provide the Kentucky Congressional delegation with twice daily Situation Reports was extremely well received. In addition to full state reports we detailed the situation to our members of congress by congressional district.

### LESSONS LEARNED

When looking at any operation such as this - a "Heartland No-Notice Response" - there are several key takeaways:

1. "Emergency Lifesaving" is absolutely the first priority. It's a situation where life sustaining is equal to life saving in terms of power, heat, cooling, water and food. Supporting that effort is a well established shelter management program – we didn't have one.
2. We believe we MUST have an emergency response plan and annual disaster exercise that is FEMA-funded! Our Kentucky National Guard-led New Madrid exercise was a Guard initiated and Guard executed concept. These types of exercises must be part of our Homeland Security federally funded program and should not have to compete with or degrade the military resources intended to fund training of our units for military combat readiness.
3. We need to have a response package that is ready to go NOW complete with satellite communications and generators! In disasters like this the marching order needs to be "Over-source the response, then right-size it later."
4. We require much more realistic emergency response timelines on the part of FEMA and USACE geared to meet the needs at the local level. The prioritization and timing of the delivery of state and federal resources must be streamlined and focused on lifesaving in these events, where hours not days are the objective to save lives.
5. We believe there needs to be sufficient mobility to support the National Guard in its rapid response mission as the nation's community-based defense force.
  - Due to the current Table of Organization and Equipment for the Kentucky National Guard, EMAC execution was necessary to alleviate shortfalls in much needed HUMVEES to provide the mobility our soldiers and airmen needed to reach their fellow Kentuckians. In all, 180 HUMVEEs were provided to Kentucky by Ohio, Tennessee and Indiana. The support was outstanding from

our surrounding states, but the additional time to reach operational capability was problematic. Consideration need to be given to the redistribution of the soft (non-combat) HUMVEES in the DOD inventory. In a massive response we predict the need for a vehicle-to-soldier ratio around 1 to 4.

6. There needs to be created a mechanism to provide a more consistent, ready and predictable source of federal funding for the National Guard to respond under State command to federally declared disasters. Funding for these emergency response missions should not come from or degrade the already limited resources the National Guard gets to conduct training for military combat readiness. Something like the Defense Emergency Response Fund, perhaps administered by the National Guard Bureau, might provide a model for future such funding.

Presidential declarations of an emergency life-saving and / or major disaster declaration need to be fully resourced by the federal government and the National Guard respond should be under State command with federal funding as provided under Section 502 (f) of Title 32. This is superior for several reasons. First, it provides our most valuable resource, our Soldiers and Airmen, with the same protection they have when mobilized for overseas missions. They deserve the same protection when deployed stateside in a homeland security mission. Second, it preserves National Guard speed of response under State control as well as the National Guard's law enforcement capability, when needed.

7. In Kentucky, the National Guard and the Division of Emergency Management fall under the Department of Military Affairs and the Adjutant General. This arrangement provided for an ideal unity of command and resulted in what I believe was a classic example of unity of effort.

#### AFTER ACTION REVIEWS

We reviewed the complete disaster operations with our FEMA and USACE Team Members and jointly produced these recommendations:

FEMA: There is a need to shift from a recovery mindset typical in most disasters to an emergency response capability that is dynamic, flexible, resourced, coordinated and focused on lifesaving measures. Administrative issues must be set aside or tertiary to the immediate process. Our FEMA partners were central to our overall success, but we can improve the system by streamlining the request and response process.



USACE: Lifesaving support must be focused on delivery and effectiveness. – NOT efficiency. A well-honed process that is not critically time-sensitive has little value in life and death situations.

FEMA & USACE: Local and state resources that can be quickly contracted, such as generators and electrical engineers to install them. The contracting effort needs to be a critical part of the lifesaving effort from the very start of emergency operations. There is no way to predict the exact location or magnitude of the next no notice event. But we must anticipate that there will be one.

### FINAL THOUGHTS

We feared the elements were in place for the “perfect storm” for another Katrina-like national disaster. We were in the first two weeks of a new administration in Washington, with all of the uncertainty of change at the top of policy makers in multiple agencies. Our persistent enemy - the cold – continued to be unpredictable and deadly.

We were, however, very fortunate to have an exceptional Federal Coordinating officer, Kim Kadisch who guided the Federal response path with great skill. In addition, Acting FEMA Administrator Nancy Ward paid an early visit to the Kentucky EOC and the stricken areas, deftly utilizing her management skills to jump start those areas of Federal support which were temporarily stalled in administrative processes. The personal intercession of Secretary Janet Napolitano, just days into her new position, with participation in several critical conference calls and a visit to the area clearly demonstrated her command and control of the situation. All of these factors on top of the decisive leadership of Governor Beshear insured the successful resolution of this disaster.

Mother Nature really sealed the deal, by bringing unusually temperate weather to the region, serving as a major force multiplier. The weather alone turned an extremely time sensitive life-saving operation into a true recovery operation.

Finally, if you will recall, I spoke of the “Wellness Checks” that were conducted by Army and Air Guard personnel.

Our Soldiers and Airmen walked mile after mile across the entire state, knocking on door after door to check on their fellow Kentuckians.

It’s never been done before, and it sounds like a major undertaking.

It was.

This is one aspect of the operation that received quite a bit of attention from the local, national and international news media – and rightfully so.

- It was during this process that Army and Air National Guard members were credited with saving at least eight lives. This included identifying and rendering aid to two elderly people in Breckenridge County who had been overcome by carbon monoxide, as well as two elderly Lincoln County residents who were relying on oxygen to survive and about to run out.
- In another act of “unbridled service,” Two Guardsmen and a local firefighter waded into the chest-deep water of an icy stream to rescue four teenagers whose car had run off a slick road and submerged in a creek. It was 10 degrees out there, with a wind chill of minus four. When found, the four teens were already coated with ice and suffering from hypothermia – they were wrapped in blankets and transported by ambulance to a hospital to get warmed up. The Guardsmen, I’m told, changed clothes, and immediately went back to work.
- That typifies the spirit of the National Guard and the people of Kentucky in this emergency. We consider it a significant victory and I’m confident the people we serve would concur.