

# CITY OF ARNOLD EFFECTIVELY BEATS THE HOLIDAY FLOOD DISASTER

by Jeff Dunlap

The flood that swamped Arnold, Missouri, (22,000 pop.), during the 2015 holiday season was unlike any the City had ever seen.

Unlike the flood of 1993, when the Mississippi and Missouri rivers backed up due to ice melt and heavy rain upriver, the rain that started in Arnold on Dec. 26 simply would not quit for days.

More than 10 inches fell on the City in 72 hours. That, along with a deluge of heavy rain across Missouri overflowed the Meramec River, a 229-mile-long waterway normally dotted with canoes, fishing boats and kayaks in the summer.

Arnold's quick response to the disaster that affected 295 local homes; flooded city parks and streets; closed businesses; and temporarily shut down Interstate 44 and Interstate 55 is a textbook case of how a municipality effectively managed a major crisis that impacted thousands of people.

At Arnold, the Meramec averages about five feet deep as it flows to the Mississippi a few miles south. The day after Christmas, it looked 10 feet higher.

Arnold Mayor Ron Counts was celebrating the holiday at home with his family.

"Reports came in about the river getting higher, and we became more concerned," Counts said.

Over the rainy weekend, the Meramec rose another 15 feet. Counts learned the river was expected to reach at least 40 feet within days and crest at 47 feet by New Year's Day.

On Dec. 28, with the river at 35 feet, Mayor Counts assembled city department directors and Police Detective Omar Ruiz, who manages the City's Emergency Operations Center (EOC); Police Captain Robert Ruckman;



Photo courtesy of Humane Society of Missouri.

Fire Chief Jeff Broombaugh; and two officers from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

The City prepared to handle flood emergencies with military precision.

That morning, the mayor signed an Executive Order declaring the City in a "State of Emergency" that would allow Arnold to access assistance from outside agencies, such as the Missouri National Guard.

"We wanted residents to know what was happening to the City and what might happen to them," the mayor said. "We dispatched police officers to flood-prone neighborhoods where officers knocked on doors and used megaphones to inform residents."

Those officers hand-delivered letters detailing disaster information to 400 residents.

That same day, the EOC team prepared a point-by-point situation report and distributed it to all major media within a 25-mile radius, including St. Louis. Such reports would be distributed daily for 10 days. The City would also post flood advisories on its website, [www.arnoldmo.org](http://www.arnoldmo.org), and on social media.

By noon, Director of Public Works Ed Blattner ordered his 20-person team

to begin delivering the first of 145,000 sand bags, 1,450 tons of sand and 242 rolls of plastic to deposit in piles on the corner of every street in flood-prone areas over the next four days.

Police Chief Robert Shockey had activated 48 of his 49 officers, stationing one officer on every flood-prone street.

"It was a massive call to duty," said Shockey. "We had very little information about how bad the flooding would get and what it would do to our City. We wanted to be ready for any potential situation."

Director of Parks & Recreation Susie Boone had recalled her staff from vacation on Christmas Eve.

"We had to secure everything at our parks and golf course - picnic tables, trash cans and all equipment," said Boone.

Boone assigned four staff members to help Blattner's team; her 10 other staff members began working to secure the recreational properties.

Detective Ruiz opened the EOC in the basement of City Hall. This 20' x 80' room was equipped with a chalkboard, city maps, long tables, five computers, six hard phone lines, "and everybody on the EOC team had their cell phones," Ruiz said.

Serious flooding in some areas had already begun. Staffed by city and fire department employees, the EOC buzzed with activity and phone calls. No one from outside was allowed inside without authorization. It would be open daily from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. for 10 days. It also became the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and Small Business Administration (SBA) info-center when flooding began.

"The EOC was the hub for everything," said Ruiz, who had previously worked for three years

in the American Red Cross Jefferson County office. He and Chief Shockey commanded the EOC; Ruiz became the City's "go to guy" for flood-related directives. Police Captain Robert Ruckman was named public information officer for the duration.

Christie Hall-Bettale, city flood plain manager, began to predict what other parts of town might be affected in addition to neighborhoods near the river. The City would also engage a consultant to predict flood flow and depth to learn how flood waters would impact homes, businesses and mobile homes.

"At that time, we had no definitive idea of how bad things would become or what would happen except the river would keep rising," said Blattner. "So we stuck to our disaster plan."

### WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?

Raw sewerage began flowing downriver to Arnold. The Metropolitan Sewer District (MSD) treatment plant upriver in the city of Fenton quit operating. Rain and rising waters caused a power outage and overflowed treatment tanks.

Promptly, the Missouri Department of Natural Resources (DNR) got involved. Mayor Counts, committed to maintaining transparency and keeping citizens informed, organized a public meeting with city



(Top) Staffed by City and fire department employees, the Emergency Operations Center buzzed with activity and phone calls. It would be open daily from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. for 10 days. (Above) Some members of the Humane Society's Disaster Response Team are trained in swift water rescue. Photo courtesy of Humane Society of Missouri.

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officials, DNR, MSD and public health officials. More than 100 local residents attended.

“We knew the water quality issues in Flint, Michigan, were on peoples’ minds,” said Counts. “We wanted to demonstrate to our citizens that we were doing everything possible to deal with the situation before us.”

“The City doesn’t have any regulatory power,” Arnold City Administrator Bryan Richison said. “But we made absolutely sure that the sewerage situation was being handled. DNR was on top of it, and we were, too. We had a lot of conference calls to make sure everything was being handled very well.”

In addition, the City coordinated with the Jefferson County Health Department to ensure health officials had adequate supplies of tetanus shots available for residents when the river crested. Community Treatment, Inc., a mental health counseling agency, planned for mental health workers to enter flooded areas to check on the well-being of residents after the river crested.

On Dec. 29, Boone contacted Home Depot and Lowe’s stores, and many smaller stores, to solicit contributions of buckets, disinfectants, mops, rubber gloves and other supplies.

“The response of every business was great, and I will never forget their generosity,” Boone said.

The City also contacted the State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA) for additional supplies.

“The outpouring of volunteerism was incredible,” says City Councilman Gary Plunk. “Volunteers had begun working in Arnold the day after Christmas.”

That day, members of the Missouri Southern Baptist Relief organization and the American Red Cross worked with Arnold’s First Baptist Church to open

a shelter, food and supply distribution center in the church buildings. The Humane Society of Missouri from St. Louis made the church its base for rescuing pets during the disaster.

Within a few days, volunteers from many agencies, some from out of state, set up operations in Arnold. They included AmeriCorps, Catholic Charities, Convoy of Hope, City of Hope, Disabled American Veterans and other veterans’ groups, the Fraternal Order of Police, the Humane Society, Salvation Army, and a group of Mennonites, among scores of additional volunteers.

*“The flood directly impacted about three percent of our population, but it affected everybody and during the 10-day crisis we deployed 100 percent of our resources. We discovered that this terrible disaster brought out the best in everyone.”*

*~ Mayor Ron Counts, City of Arnold*

On Dec. 29, Laclede Gas Company and AmerenUE began shutting off gas and electric services in flood-prone areas for safety. Interstates 44 and 55, flooded over at Meramec River bridges, were temporarily closed. The City also closed many streets.

On New Year’s Eve, the Meramec rose to 45.5 feet. It was expected to crest at 47 feet on New Year’s Day, but major flooding had already begun. That day, as flooding continued, calls increased dramatically and Missouri National Guardsmen arrived to assist the Arnold police, who typically respond to 150-175 incident calls per day.

“Flooding became a nightmare for many people,” Chief Shockey said. “Many were losing their homes and possessions.”

Dozens had six feet of water in their basements filled with chemicals, garbage, sewerage and snakes. Outside homes, Christmas trees, presents and ornaments floated amidst garbage and debris.

“It was a terrible disaster and we were compassionate, yet we also had to be professional,” Chief Shockey says. “Our officers did what they are trained to do – they gave their very best and more – and for that we are proud.”

The Meramec crested at 47 feet at 6 p.m. on New Year’s Eve. Within 24 hours, water slowly began receding. Arnold’s biggest challenges lay ahead: Finding temporary shelter for flood victims, inspecting residences, restoring utilities, sanitizing infected areas, helping homeowners apply for FEMA assistance, and massive cleanups that would take weeks.

Arnold Community Development Director Mary Holden’s work was just beginning.

“We had to conduct damage assessments, determine if power could be restored in homes and conduct other inspections,” Holden said. “We followed FEMA guidelines.”

Many displaced residents were staying with family, friends or in a shelter. Holden’s team created entry forms that allowed them to re-enter their flooded neighborhoods. Missouri National Guardsmen helped with the vetting process.

“It was sad to see so many people working to clean up their homes,” Holden said. “It was terrible. Yet people were always glad to see the City responding quickly.”

To speed the process, Holden recruited inspectors from other cities for assistance.

"It was vital to help people prepare to apply for buyout grants from FEMA," said Holden.

At Fox High School, hundreds of citizens dropped off food, clothing, bottled water and pediatric supplies in the gym for flood-weary residents. Boone's team staffed a city distribution center to give residents food and cleaning supplies.

The daunting task for Boone's team was to disinfect city recreational properties. Staff members donned hazmat suits and respirators and followed FEMA guidelines to disinfect everything river water had touched -- from asphalt and concrete, to fences, electrical equipment, playground equipment, restrooms and signage.

Blattner rented 289 dumpsters from Republic Services so his public works staff could deliver them to flooded areas for residents to fill with ruined items. By the end of the ordeal, 988 tons were collected in more than 950 dumpster loads. Environmental Protection Agency officials and public works crews picked up household hazardous waste, electronic waste and items not allowed in dumpsters. Arnold's public works team also began gathering thousands of wet sandbags.

A multi-agency resource center soon was established at Fox High School to centralize agency assistance - 20 agencies offered information about their services to residents whose homes were damaged.

"The place was packed with people asking all kinds of questions," said Richison.

Volunteers were crucial in the flood aftermath. Toby Tucker of the First Baptist Church and his team mudded out, cleaned and removed debris from 85 houses.

"It was a very extensive process," says Tucker, whose team ripped out wet drywall, power-washed interiors with mold retardant and piled ruined furniture outside. The Humane Society rescued more than 100 pets. Homeowners opened their houses to displaced people. Volunteers worked dawn to dusk. A police dispatcher, Traci Doutré, would not leave her post even though her house was filled with six feet of water.

"You can't describe what it's like to see people who lost their homes - they look downtrodden and beaten to a pulp, and you want to help them," said Councilman Plunk.



Cleanup activity took place on many neighborhood streets after flood waters subsided. Photo courtesy of City of Arnold.

"People who have not been in a disaster like this don't know what it's like to resolve it," adds Richison. "We hope it never happens again, but if it does, we will be ready."

It would take three months to clean up the City.

"The flood directly impacted about three percent of our population, but it affected everybody and during

the 10-day crisis we deployed 100 percent of our resources," said Mayor Counts. "We discovered that this terrible disaster brought out the best in everyone." □

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