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FEMA "Disaster Camp" Experience Highlights Importance of Whole Community Approach to Disaster Response

SPRINGFIELD, Missouri- Local leaders returned from an intense week-long FEMA disaster training with a renewed focus on the importance of whole community disaster response. The group of 68 city and county officials along with representatives from Springfield Public Schools, City Utilities, American Red Cross and United Way traveled to the National Emergency Training Center (NETC), located in Emmitsburg, Maryland on Feb. 12-17. While there, attendees participated in a disaster training course designed by FEMA exercise specialists to reflect Springfield's unique community. The course was hosted by an experienced team of instructors from NETC's Emergency Management Institute (EMI). Travel expenses, lodging and all course materials for the trip were funded through FEMA.

"Our local leaders recognize that when a disaster strikes our community, it affects not just public safety officials, but all of us. It will take all of us working together to recover and return to normal." said Bob Cirtin, presiding commissioner of Greene County. "We can train and exercise together in Springfield, and we do often, but when we dedicate a week of our time to travel to a training center where the entire focus is on disaster planning and preparedness, it really allows us to come together, collaborate on the best way to respond and learn more about one another, so that when the next disaster impacts Greene County, we've got a solid plan in place and we're ready to get to work."

The course included instructor led modules with topics that covered a wide range of issues related to disaster response. Among those were the impact of public policy on disaster response, how to effectively communicate with the public during a disaster, planning for recovery efforts such as debris management following a disaster and understanding how the stress of a disaster affects both victims and first responders. Instructors also encouraged participants to share preparedness information with community members back home. "People who are prepared are people who survive," said Tim Smith, deputy city manager for the City of Springfield. "There's no amount of preparedness that should be looked at as too trivial, because when it (disaster) happens, and it will happen, you want to be ready."

In addition to the training modules, the team participated in a disaster exercise that prompted an activation of the emergency operations center (EOC). The disaster scenario, crafted by FEMA's training specialists in coordination with Office of Emergency Management (OEM) staff, focused on hazards that could potentially impact Greene County. These included the threat of severe weather, a hazardous materials spill, civil unrest and a targeted cyber-attack.

"When working with FEMA representatives to create the disaster exercise, we wanted to ensure that the scenario was plausible for Greene County and that it incorporated a response effort of some type from every agency represented at the training, and I think we accomplished that," said Samantha Peterson, OEM training and exercise specialist. "It was incredible to see our group come together and launch into a coordinated response mode. There was a flurry of activity as each section began responding to the increasingly complex scenarios we threw at them, and they handled the exercise injects like pros."

"I am managing six exercises at this time, and I can actually rank Springfield-Greene County at the top of the list. They have raised the bar with the cyber piece of this exercise, which is a challenge to any community, and this was something that they specifically asked for." said Steve Cardinal, FEMA training specialist and lead exercise developer. "I commend them on the challenge and the results of the exercise."

As a takeaway from the trip, OEM staff will focus on developing a local full-scale exercise that will build upon the EMI experience and provide the opportunity for additional partner participation. OEM will also host its annual EOC workshop this fall, which provides an opportunity for EOC sections to meet together to discuss response efforts.

Brad Huffines, a 21 year EMI instructor, said "In this group, I've seen no egos. I've seen no one try to take their title and talk over somebody else in the classroom or in the exercise. It's pretty amazing how this community works together. I've always been impressed by working with them, both on-site since I've been there several times as well as the exercises we do here."

This marks the second time that local leaders traveled to the NETC to participate in this course. A group of nearly 70 officials attended EMI in 2012.

Click [here](#) to view a highlight video of the 2017 EMI experience.

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