

► PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



Priscilla Oliver, PhD

When Disastrous Weather Hits Close to Home

On March 3, 2019, we left Atlanta and headed to church in Opelika, Alabama. A 91st birthday celebration was planned for my mother afterwards as the 90s Club of Greater Peace Baptist Church traditionally holds an annual dinner for its members celebrating birthdays. Suddenly, text messages started to come in about a severe weather alert and our pastor suggested that we finish the celebration and get home. There was nothing unusual about the day until this point. Unfortunately, widespread and advanced warning for disastrous weather does not always happen.

While getting gas on the way home, I heard the weather siren and received a text about the tornado. I recall as we drove back to Atlanta on I-85 that the rain was heavy and traffic was moving slowly but steadily. When we reached I-285 in Atlanta, the sun was brightly shining. It was refreshing.

I then received a call from my cousin Deborah to report the devastation caused by a tornado that had occurred just blocks away from her home. She could not get home due to debris, downed power lines and trees, and road closures. She reported that bodies of neighbors were all over the area. She was devastated, saying she had to park her car and walk to get home. Her folks at home were safe, having taken refuge in the bathtub during the tornado. The 23 people, including 4 children, that were killed that day were basically sucked up and out of their homes. A mother told me that her two boys had laid on the floor and were taken by the wind to about a mile away and then dropped to the ground. They were fortunate to survive the event; however, they were visiting relatives from the

Let us work individually and together to overcome these unpredictable disasters.

area who lost their lives. The tornado hit and it was deadly.

The National Weather Service reported that the EF4 tornado hit south Beauregard, Alabama. My hometown is located within 30 miles of Beauregard. My father was from this area. The tornado was 1 mile wide and 24 miles long. The winds reached up to 170 mph, destroying trees, animals, homes, cars, churches, buildings, and people. It was reported that 41 tornadoes hit in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina within 6 hours. Many people who survived these tornadoes were left homeless. The environmental health cleanup and restoration in these areas are ongoing.

Almost every day there are dangerous weather events occurring around the world. Some have attributed these events to climate change and the rising temperature of our planet. We must plan and live with these weather changes and the individual and collective consequences. Being environmental health professionals, we are on the frontline

to responding to the aftermath of weather events. The destruction of property and injured people carries a high financial burden that we all share in the long run.

Returning to Atlanta, I asked what I could do. We were glued to media and communication outlets, calling people and churches to learn what was happening. The following week we visited Deborah and her family to check-in on them. We had to be escorted by a resident within the stricken area. While there I was able to observe inspections being conducted by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, American Red Cross, and Salvation Army. Representatives from all over the country were present, some as far away as Seattle, Washington. Churches and nonprofit groups were giving out supplies in various locations within the affected area.

I decided to call Tim Hatch, MPA, REHS, the National Environmental Health Association's Region 7 vice-president and an environmental health professional and leader in Alabama. Hatch attended my rival college—he went to Auburn University and I went to the University of Alabama, which are traditional football rivals. While the rivalry is a bit of fun between us, it dissipates when we have to deal with the work at hand. Regardless of our differences, we work together because of our passion for the environment and the people in our communities.

Hatch, who is from Montgomery, Alabama, told me that he was at the tornado scene within hours of the event. He shared with me his experience and perspectives:

“As an environmental health specialist and emergency manager, I have seen firsthand

the devastation and need for environmental health field staff. In a career of public service, it is the environmental health specialist who becomes the face of public health, which is often an asset when responding to disasters and assisting the public. Environmental health specialists are capable of functioning in a disaster area but specialized training and experience are a must.

In the aftermath of the tornado that hit Beauregard, Alabama, on March 3, 2019, numerous environmental health concerns were apparent. Sheltering, food safety, water quality, and debris management were among the more obvious. State and county staff worked with emergency managers and federal responders to gather data and make plans to mitigate any health effects the environmental conditions might cause. Staff were in the field for days assisting in this monumental task.

In 2011 a string of tornadoes tore through Alabama and the city of Tuscaloosa was hit. Some areas near the University of Alabama

were impacted and a few students lost their lives. Putting rivalry and team loyalty aside, members of the Auburn University family banded together as Toomers for Tuscaloosa to render aid to our neighbors in west Alabama. Environmental health professionals in Alabama were traveling across the state to help in well water evaluations, restaurant inspections, and shelter operations. The same rang true with the March 2019 storms—Tide for Tigers was formed and the normal banter was set aside to offer assistance to those in need.

Being an environmental health specialist lends itself to myriad roles and responsibilities. It takes a special person to not only perform at their highest professional level on 'blue sky days' but also go above and beyond to help their communities in times of great need. God bless the environmental health practitioner!"

We all pull together in environmental health during severe weather events and other disasters. Each area of environmental health has an important role. With the

enhancements made to the Pandemic and All-Hazards Preparedness and Advancing Innovation Act of 2019 legislation that was signed into law in June 2019, environmental health professionals are now able to take on a greater role in emergency preparedness and response.

Personally, we need to digitalize our home, office, and school records; catalogue what we have; prepare emergency plans; and educate and train people to prepare for disastrous weather and other emergency events. We also need to train our pets and prepare for their safety. It is important that we take extra efforts to restore our communities and help each other in times of emergency. Disastrous weather hit close to home for me in March and there is no telling when it might occur in your community. Let us work individually and together to overcome these unpredictable disasters. 🐾

Priscilla President@neha.org

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Individuals who have contributed to the foundation are listed below by club category. These listings are based on what people have actually donated to the foundation—not what they have pledged. Names will be published under the appropriate category for 1 year; additional contributions will move individuals to a different category in the following year(s). For each of the categories, there are a number of ways NEHA recognizes and thanks contributors to the foundation. If you are interested in contributing to the Endowment Foundation, please call NEHA at (303) 756-9090. You can also donate online at www.neha.org/about-neha/donate.

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