

The Health and Well-being of Folks after a Disaster

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In Greensburg Kansas on the evening of May 4, 2007, little did I know that my 30+ years of Public Health was about to take on a whole new focus. As we came out of our basements and saw most everything around us destroyed by a tornado, we couldn't believe what had happened. I spent the night helping to see that those who were injured got the medical care they needed while others mostly needed the reassurance that they were going to be ok. As the night progressed people were coming and going but the realization that ALL

of our community had been destroyed still was more than our minds could believe.

When I was able to get back in the town, I checked in with the Incident Command center and recruited my family to help get the Health Department set up. The courthouse, one of the last standing city buildings, naturally became the hub of all services that folks would be looking for as they were allowed back in town. My home was right across the street from the courthouse so I decided to set up my office in the front yard. I knew in my heart that Public Health needed to be located here in the area so that folks would see a familiar face and a place to ask questions.

At first most everyone just needed a hug and had lots of questions, but the looks in their eyes said that there was so much more going on. I knew that my job in Public Health would have a different focus for the next several months. People were going to need basic things and these types of supplies were flooding in from everywhere. I decided that with the help of volunteers we would try to get these supplies to the people. They were still in a state of shock and were just trying to recover a few possessions that may be left in the rubble. As such I wanted to get to them things like water, sunscreen, baby formula, tetanus shots, first-aid supplies, mask and gloves. I wanted to go to where the people were and give them the supplies they needed. Many coped with the disaster by focusing on the tasks still within their control and needed to be reminded to take care of themselves so I asked my volunteers to go mobile. We used Dillon's' grocery carts, packed them with supplies, and sent volunteers to walk the streets each day. I worked to see that we would have a pastor or mental health person walking with these groups so that we could address whatever folks needed, be they physical or mental.

Many of our local workforces were also victims and so outside help was invaluable. Many local leaders were able to work despite great devastation and pressure but some were not able to focus on anything but themselves. Seeing what stress does to people was taking its toll and it required all of us to deal with each other being sensitive to everyone's needs. Stress does things to our bodies that none of us can predict and therefore each person had to deal with what was going on in and around them. Each of us had to make decisions that no one should have to make and there was no way anyone could judge or decide for anyone else how to move through each day. Every chance I got, I would remind folks that their bodies were under a great amount of stress and that they needed to be very aware of TAKING CARE of themselves. I encouraged them to get enough sleep, eat well, and be getting medical help if they were having any problems as this was necessary if they were going to get through this stressful time.

The help and support of thousands of people, seemed to give us the will to keep going each day and do what was needed. As days moved into weeks and months, we had to face what all this really meant to us. The land marks of our past were gone, friends and family were no longer going to be coming back, trees, flowers and the signs of the seasons were gone and this also began to take its toll. People were having blood pressure problems, digestive issues, extreme weight gain or loss, and generally a sense of fear and uncertainty. Data may give a small picture of the toll that stress can take. On May 4th we lost 11 people and grieved as a community. Before 2007 the county death rates were 20-22. In 2007 data showed that we had 32 deaths and in 2008 we had 34. These figures represent only Kiowa county citizens and we know that we had at least 4-8 other folks that had moved out of county that had died dur-

ing 2007-08. By 2010 our number of deaths had come back to 22. We knew that the loss and stress had affected us and it could be a contributing factor to our number of deaths during this time. No data will ever be able to say for sure, but when faced with overwhelming stress it will change you physically. Even as much as we were aware of health issues, stress would take a toll that was really beyond our control. For the elderly this stress could have brought them to the end of their lives more quickly.

Experts told us to be prepared to experience all the same stages of Grief and that holiday, special days, and events would most likely set us back, but hopefully we would continue to move on. They said that emotionally we would find ourselves back to where we were before 2007 in maybe 6-8 years. YEARS! I couldn't believe that it was ever going to take us that long. We offered events with meals and speakers so that folks could come together to hug, cry and celebrate even the smallest accomplishments.

These times together seemed to be very valuable to the recovery of our community. Civic and spiritual leaders worked tirelessly to keep our folks informed, encouraged and offering a sense of hope for our future and the future of our community. I feel that this kept our folks from dealing with the disaster in more negative ways. An encouraging piece of data shows us that our leaders had the right idea and this data is our birth rates. Kiowa County had averaged around 20 births before 2007. In 2007 we had 22 and increased to 23 births in 2008. The numbers continued to increase and by 2010 we had 28. Young families were drawn to be a part of our rebuilding and wanted to raise a family here which has been pretty exciting for us.

Five years later I don't see folks quite as emotionally affected by the thought of 2007. We are now able to talk about those days without tears in our eyes. This last year, I did see many speak about Joplin with great emotion as the pictures on the news brought us back to 2007. We know that we have moved on but May 4, 2007 will always be with us.

Though we had no choice to be a part of that EF5 tornado, we did have a choice as to how we would deal with our future. No one wants to lose so much so quickly, but for myself I wouldn't change all the things that I have experienced since that day. Our skills and ability to live life has taken on a new and different meaning. We can let an event in our life destroy us or learn from it and make us better. The vision statement that our community adopted was: **"Blessed with a unique opportunity, to create a strong community, devoted to family, fostering business, and working together for future generations."** With this philosophy before us, we dealt with the great losses of this tornado. The strong support of our civic and spiritual leaders helped us to minimize the repercussions that could have affected the health and wellbeing of our Greensburg community. Today we can see that our tragedy is beginning to be a triumph in our lives.