

A regional emergency office is central to handling the COVID response

By El Paso County Health Office of Communication

In the summer of 2012, the Waldo Canyon Fire tore through the forest along the western edge of Colorado Springs, ultimately killing two people, destroying close to 350 homes, and leading to evacuation of the Mountain Shadows neighborhood.

The City of Colorado Springs and El Paso County took many valuable lessons from Waldo, key among them the need for more regional collaboration before, during and after an emergency. “Disasters have a way of pointing out the areas where you could be stronger,” Lisa Powell, El Paso County Public Health’s Emergency Preparedness Program Manager, says. “It’s so important that we take those lessons to heart and really learn from them, so that when the next disaster comes — and with COVID-19, it certainly has — we are stronger and more prepared than ever before.”

In 2019, the city and county created the Pikes Peak Regional Office of Emergency Management (PPROEM) through intergovernmental agreement, consolidating city and county governments’ and local municipalities’ separate emergency management offices. Headed by Director Jim Reid, who had previously led the El Paso County Office of Emergency Management for 14 years, the new office allows for a regional response to major emergencies and hazards, from snowstorms and fires to terrorist attacks and pandemics.

“Disasters don’t respect jurisdictional boundaries,” Reid notes. “Since major disasters generally involve city and county governments and local municipalities, a single office of emergency management allowed us to have a seamless response. The consolidation breaks the norms we see across the country, and I think that’s a sign that we’re committed to being pragmatic and efficient in the Pikes Peak Region. In fact, we went the extra mile, incorporating El Paso County Public Health in our emergency response organizational structure.”

The PPROEM created efficiencies of time, staff and taxpayer dollars. It also meant reduced confusion from the public and the media, increased cohesion of team members — including government employees from many sectors who are reassigned to work in an emergency response — and improved communication capabilities both during an emergency and throughout a recovery.

As it turns out, the move was prescient. The scale of the COVID-19 pandemic has demanded the coordination of multiple agencies and response systems at the federal, state and local levels. “A global pandemic was not on the horizon when we set up this office,” Reid says. “It’s a testament to the cooperative spirit and proactive planning of county and city leaders that the PPROEM was up and running when this virus began spreading in our community. I am thankful that we had the right plan and structure in place so that we could immediately mount an aggressive response.”

One of the most important functions of the PPROEM is to serve as a liaison between city, county, state, military and federal agencies and departments, bringing partners together and guiding strategy and policy decisions aimed at stopping COVID from spreading, helping the sick, protecting the helpers, communicating with the public, providing economic relief and seeking help from federal and state governments. The agency also takes the lead in securing federal, state, local and private funding for the response effort.

A hand in everything

Even before the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in El Paso County, PPROEM was active in preparing to respond to the outbreak.

Since then, the agency has been a key stakeholder and organizer behind many high-profile projects. One of the top priorities has been bringing in more supplies, particularly personal protective equipment like masks, gloves, and gowns for our health care workers.

“We have left no stone unturned as we work to bring these needed supplies to our community,” Colorado Springs Deputy Chief of Staff Bret Waters says. “Our team has tapped everything from community donations to purchases from major manufacturers to state and federal supplies. We continue to fight to get these supplies where they’re needed.”

The agency has also been a key player establishing additional shelters and medical facilities to house an increasing number of sick people. For instance, PPROEM was a key player in funding and coordinating the homeless isolation shelter at the City Auditorium and has been working diligently with partners for months to set up facilities that can treat an influx of patients needing medical attention, should our hospitals become overcrowded.

The agency has also managed a call center for questions from the public.

“When the community is experiencing a crisis, it’s our job to effectively communicate with them so that they understand how to access the resources they need. We also help them differentiate between real information and scams that may end up harming them,” Robin Adair, PPROEM Community Outreach and Emergency Preparedness Coordinator, explains.

Support from leadership

A big part of PPROEM’s success is the continued support of local leaders. Colorado Springs Mayor John Suthers, for instance, says the agency has been key in mounting a response.

“We knew that consolidating our emergency management efforts with El Paso County would be beneficial to residents across this community in providing efficient, consistent and collaborative emergency response in the case of any number of emergencies,” he says. “For this global pandemic specifically, the creation of the Pikes Peak Regional Office of Emergency Management has proven not only beneficial but absolutely vital to an effective response. I’m incredibly grateful to our City staff, El Paso County, County Commissioners and our City Council for working tirelessly to accomplish this last year. While we didn’t know we’d be dealing with a pandemic at the time, it was this effort that put us in a very strong position, enabling us to react swiftly and effectively to this current crisis.”

El Paso County Board of County Commissioners Chair Mark Waller agreed and said the success of PPROEM’s missions is due to cooperation.

“Our region faces an unprecedented challenge from COVID-19, and a unified response from local government is critical to our response, recovery, and resiliency,” he said. “Our current unified OEM comes from years of experience and lessons learned dealing with fires, floods, severe snowstorms, and other disasters. A regional approach to the Office of Emergency Management ensures a coordinated response during crisis that better serves our citizens. This regional approach, along with the amazing and dedicated staff, is a great asset to our community.”

Beginning to end

The words “emergency response” draw up familiar images for most people: emergency shelters, truckloads of food and drinking water, medical tents.

Really, that’s the tip of iceberg. PPROEM is responsible for mitigation, preparedness, response, recovery, and coordination for large-scale emergencies, whether natural or manmade. That means a lot of their work is done before an emergency: building relationships, making detailed plans and testing those plans through life-like stagings of emergency scenarios, which are called “preparedness exercises.”

Only through proper preparation can the PPROEM be certain that it will have the resources, properly trained staff, structure and partnerships to respond to a crisis. Preparedness exercises can be quite involved — with shelters being established and supplies trucked in, unloaded and distributed.

“Over the years, we’ve tested our responses to everything from outbreaks to terrorist attacks,” Powell says. “It may seem silly to play out a fake emergency in such a detailed way, but this is what helps us to ensure that when a real emergency happens, we’re ready for it.”

PPROEM also helps people after the immediate emergency has passed. Recovery is usually broken down into two parts: short-term (restoring basic services and functions) and long-term (rebuilding the economy and the community’s way of life).

When a wildland fire threatens lives and structures in El Paso County, emergency response doesn’t stop when the fire is put out,” Reid explains. “We have to make sure that people have shelter, food and water. We have to help our community return to normal life again. Rest assured that when this crisis ends, your Office of Emergency Management will still be here, working every day to help this community recover. We really do care about each and every one of you.”