



Exploring the Food and Water Response to the Spring 2019 Nebraska Floods

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Background

In the spring of 2019, communities across the state of Nebraska experienced an unprecedented weather event when rising river waters led to flooding and were followed by a bomb cyclone bringing snow and falling temperatures. The weather events led the state to declare an emergency in 65 counties as cities and towns grappled with the aftereffects of flooding. Among the needs of those affected, as well as volunteers and emergency relief workers assisting in clean up, was access to clean water and food. The purpose of this case study was to conduct a case study of the March 2019 Nebraska floods to understand how natural disasters impact the people living in affected areas, especially vulnerable populations, and to examine lessons learned related to emergency food and sheltering during natural disasters and recovery.

Approach

GSCN first conducted informal interviews with two disaster preparedness and management experts in order to better understand the timeline of the weather events, areas affected, and key stakeholders involved. Additionally, GSCN learned more about the flooding through articles and documentaries published online. Following background research, an interview guide was developed that focused on questions regarding the food and water response in the phases of preparation and planning, immediate response, and recovery.

A total of 27 interviews were conducted with community and state stakeholders. Interviewees included members of long-term recovery groups, disaster preparation and relief organizations, county emergency managers, and community leaders. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Thematic findings were extracted and findings are presented.

Findings

Interviews revealed a myriad of important steps taken and avenues considered to ensure affected Nebraskans received clean water and food in the days following the flooding and into the state's long-term recovery. The following section briefly highlights some of those findings.

Community Members are the Real Heroes

From larger cities to small towns, the importance of community members and helping your neighbors resounded throughout the interviews. Many cities affected by the floods were left stranded due to high flood waters or damage to infrastructure such as collapsed bridges and washed out roads leaving citizens to take on immediate response activities without the assistance of outside organizations. Congregation areas, food and supply pantries, and shelters were erected in school gyms, fire halls, and other larger buildings. Getting the word out about the availability of bottled water, cleaning supplies, and donated food was made using social media, by going door to door, and relying on neighbors to spread the word. Community members, restaurants, and religious parishes were also vital in the response to ensuring the food needs of those whose homes sustained damage were met immediately following the event and the weeks following.

“From the residents, the people that weren’t affected by the flooding, they were the ones making the food and bringing it up there. Even before breakfast, they would make a meal plan and say, ‘This is what we’re having for breakfast. Who’s willing to help?’ And they would get enough to feed a hundred people.”

“You could just see the best of Nebraska during the flood. And we are here because of the way Nebraskans are.”

Water, Water Everywhere

Although an excess of water led to the emergency, a lack of consumable water exacerbated the issue. Many communities experienced damage to their water treatment facilities as well as their water service lines and independent water wells serving rural families. This led to city-wide boil ordinances and a reliance on bottled water. As a state, those involved in emergency preparedness had plans in place to respond to the need, but also realized the scope was larger than initially expected. Pallets of bottled water donated by industry and the Food Bank for the Heartland arrived into towns by the “semi load” to ensure people would have access to clean water. Citizens were able come to a central hub to get what they needed and deliveries were made to those who were homebound.

“I was told by, asked by the state to just find all the water resources I could find. I had members and partners that I had already built relationships with. That I reached out to then and got them... I had one major organization that trucked in multiple semi-loads of water.”

“Down in front of the donation center, we always kept a couple pallets of water and people could come and just take it. People could just come and take whatever they needed.”

Flood Waters Receding, but the Need is Still There

A resounding theme from the interviews was that although flood waters often recede fairly quickly following a weather event, the need for assistance often doesn’t surface until weeks later. In the days immediately following the flooding, those affected turned their attention to the immediate needs of assessing damage to their homes, finding a safe place to sleep, and forming a plan to return home if they had been displaced. Once those needs were met, then came the question of how they would feed their family. Nebraska was granted permission to allocate the Disaster Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or D-SNAP, which provided additional food dollars based on a family’s income via an electronic benefits card containing disbursed funds good for up to a year. In addition, local food pantries and the Food Bank for the Heartland noted an uptick in those using their services, many for the first time.

“They’re still looking for food sources. I know that there’s been an increase in, from what I’ve heard anyway, an increase in the number of people who are taking advantage of food pantry kind of things that you know are around the city every now and then. It sounds like their numbers are increasing because of this.”

Across the state long-term recovery groups, or LTRGs, were formed in order to assist communities in getting back to their “new normal” following the flooding. The disaster caused many to lose their homes, savings, and jobs which required them to begin navigating a new way of life. LTRGs have assisted Nebraska disaster survivors by making case managers available to help make connections with mental health, food security, housing, and other resources. LTRGs were able to provide referrals to food pantries and donated gift cards to grocery stores. For those whose homes were red lined and deemed too dangerous, a challenge of where to go came first. This was followed by those affected pondering how best to feed their families without a kitchen while staying in a hotel or camper in addition to having a smaller food budget due to recovery expenses and having to pay for a lease or mortgage in an inhabitable home.

“[Flood survivors are] doing all these things that [they] had zero budget to do with. And again, I don’t think it’s that initial impact. It’s that long-term impact when those bills start coming in, that really starts setting these families back. And they go month after month until it’s at the point where something’s got to give and it’s usually their food budget.”

Lessons Learned for Future Weather Events

Although state, county, and local organizations had plans in place for how to respond to a weather crisis such as the spring floods of 2019, going through the actual event helped build knowledge, make changes to existing plans, and solidify new ones for future events. Many recommendations and lessons learned brought up by interviewees focused on how to better reach those affected in a more efficient manner. This included improvements to collaborations among disaster relief organizations at the local level as well as improving communication channels with citizens to ensure everyone is aware of available resources and where to find them. Lastly, despite having gone through the experience of the flooding, many interviewees emphasized the need to be resilient and understand that “mother nature” works on her own terms and disaster response won’t always follow a predetermined plan.

“You need to go with the flow. A lot of your plans that you have plan goes out the way by the wayside anyway, and you’re totally redoing your plans on the go. You have to take things as they come and deal with them.”

Conclusion

Following the unprecedented weather events of the spring of 2019, national and local organizations, community leaders, and Nebraskans went into action to ensure those affected by flood waters received the clean water and food they needed. Temporary shelters and pantries, as well as pop up community dinners, provided immediate relief in the days following the floods. Food pantries and other food distributions, D-SNAP, and LTRGs provided access to financial aid and food for those in need in the months after most of the flood waters receded. While the 2019 floods were a weather event Nebraskans hope the state doesn’t have to face in the future, those involved in disaster preparedness will undoubtedly be able to draw on the experiences and lessons learned to better serve those affected if the floods come again.

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