

Healing and Rebuilding Take Time After Tornadoes' Rampage

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MAYFIELD, Ky. – Evidence of clean-up and recovery is beginning to show in the heart of this tornado-stricken city. Downtown streets are mostly passable, the bricks and rubble from shattered buildings removed from some blocks. The site of the demolished candle factory that drew the sympathy of the nation is now a vacant lot.

Since the disaster six months ago, mountains of debris have been removed in Western Kentucky and many millions in federal and commonwealth dollars have been spent helping Kentucky's survivors rebound. Shaken communities across the Bluegrass State are just beginning to regain their footing.

But the historic courthouse in Mayfield, its majestic clock tower snapped off the façade and its interior damaged beyond repair, is a visible reminder of the tornadoes' deadly destruction and the challenges as survivors heal and towns rebuild.

The tornadoes hit with unexpected force the night of Dec. 10 and continued the next day, carving a path through nine states including Kentucky's mostly rural towns like Mayfield and Dawson Springs and the city of Bowling Green. Eighty-one lives were lost in Western Kentucky, 24 of them in Graves County, where Mayfield is the county seat.

Mayfield city officials reported 257 structures destroyed, more than 1,000 others damaged.

Immediately after the tornadoes, local, commonwealth and federal disaster officials, nonprofits and volunteers began mobilizing. By daylight, Gov. Andy Beshear was touring Mayfield, Dawson Springs and other damaged areas.

"It was beyond anything I had ever seen, with whole communities nearly wiped off the map," he said. "But I also witnessed acts of heroism, compassion and



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Page 1 of 4

kindness that should make us all proud. The entire world saw how Kentuckians come together, how we open our hearts and our homes to our fellow citizens in their time of greatest need.”

By Dec. 11, advance teams from the Federal Emergency Management Agency began arriving in response to the state’s request for federal help. The next day, President Biden issued a major disaster declaration unlocking federal assistance under multiple programs for residents and communities in the tornado- damaged counties.

To make sure survivors knew how to apply, FEMA launched a multi-pronged outreach. Disaster Survivor Assistance teams visited 11,000 homes between Dec. 14 and March 9, helping with applications and answering questions. Teams reached out to houses of worship and community groups, asking them to pass along disaster information. FEMA messaging was shared with elected officials and amplified by media outlets.

FEMA also set up disaster recovery centers across the affected counties where survivors could get updates about their applications and submit their documents. The federal agency was prepared for survivors with disabilities or language barriers, which was particularly important in Bowling Green, home to refugees and other immigrants speaking more than 100 languages. To communicate with them, FEMA offered language line interpretation, allowing non-English speaking survivors to get information in their native languages.

A FEMA-funded disaster case management grant was approved in April, allowing individuals and families to work with case managers to access a broad range of resources. Case managers will also work with non- English speakers who still need translation help to continue through the assistance process and receive eligible aid.

Housing was an early priority and remains a major challenge in Western Kentucky, a rural area already experiencing housing shortages. Nevertheless, disaster officials were able to find temporary shelter for displaced survivors before Christmas. Commonwealth officials led the effort, providing cabins in state parks and finding available hotel rooms. They purchased 200 travel trailers as a temporary solution. Even six months later, FEMA and the state continue to look for additional longer-term temporary housing.



In an effort to make more homes available to disaster survivors, FEMA's housing officials agreed to increase the rental assistance rate to 125% of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development fair market rent for eligible residents in Caldwell, Graves, Hopkins, Marshall, Muhlenberg and Warren counties. FEMA also began bringing in manufactured housing units for survivors who had no other options.

As of June 1, FEMA and the U.S. Small Business Administration have provided nearly \$82 million in federal disaster assistance to Kentucky. That figure includes \$15.5 million in housing assistance and other essential disaster-related needs, \$58.4 million in SBA low-interest disaster loans for homeowners, renters and businesses, and \$1.5 million to fund Disaster Unemployment Assistance.

Under FEMA's Public Assistance program, communities get help with the cost of repair, rebuilding and emergency work including reimbursements for debris removal, damaged roads and infrastructure. For example, Marshall County was reimbursed \$2.4 million for debris removal and Bowling Green was reimbursed \$1.5 million for power restoration and repairs. As of June 1, the program has provided a total of \$6.3 million in reimbursements, with more than 700 projects still under review.

FEMA also distributed information to help disaster-prone areas look ahead and strive for resilience. Hazard mitigation teams visited home improvement stores, where they offered tornado survivors advice and tips on how to reduce future disaster risks as they repair and rebuild their homes. Other mitigation teams visited schools, parks and resource fairs with a stormwater model designed to educate the public on the dangers of floodwater and ways to reduce flooding risks.

But help for Kentucky is not limited to restoring damaged buildings, clearing debris and learning about flood risk. Free crisis counseling has been available from the start to help survivors overcome feelings of depression, sadness or anxiety so common after a disaster. The counseling service will continue until January 2023.

Federal Coordinating Officer Brett Howard, who is leading the federal recovery operation, noted that FEMA is just one source of assistance. Disaster funding has also come from the state, local and other federal partners, non-profits, corporations and private donors. Insurance funds are flowing to individuals and communities for rebuilding.



The funding from all sources means that federal and state agencies must coordinate to ensure they are not paying double for the same work. Howard said these priorities are made easier by a strong partnership with state counterparts.

“The commonwealth has really stepped up and taken care of their citizens,” Howard said. “I’ve never seen anything like it: from funeral expenses, rebuilding ... they are working hard every day.”

And FEMA staff are working right alongside them.

As Western Kentucky communities begin planning their rebuilding strategy, their residents are forming long-term recovery committees to help survivors still in need. Other committees, among them Mayfield Rebuilds, meet regularly to discuss their ideas for redevelopment. FEMA’s Interagency Recovery Coordination team, in collaboration with federal partners including HUD, SBA, the Economic Development Administration and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, is helping to identify resources to support recovery.

The mountain of work ahead begins with a single pebble, with every Kentuckian playing a small part and everyone recognizing it will take time to realize the new vision.

“We will continue to work until we rebuild every structure and every life,” Beshear promised.

Kentucky Emergency Management Director Jeremy Slinker added, “Together, we are committed to meeting the needs of all people impacted by the storms as long as is necessary.”

Mayfield Mayor Kathy Stewart O’Nan can see her beloved city taking shape again, albeit in a new form. She points to a park restored with private donations, where 23 cherry trees were planted as a memorial to the city’s sons and daughters lost in the storm. It is a small step, but no less inspiring to residents who must plan for their future.

“It’s a healing process,” O’Nan said. “It’s devastating at first. Then you’re just trying to hold on. And then you think, ‘Let’s get back to normal.’ But when you accept it, that’s when you start moving forward.”

