

FEMA's New Web-Based Public Assistance Delivery Program Praised by Derry Officials in Aftermath of Mid-March Nor'easter and Snow Storm

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MANCHESTER, NH — Mark Fleischer has been accounting manager for the Town of Derry, New Hampshire since 2005. Last March he tallied the 10th major storm of his tenure when Derry was hit with New England's third nor'easter in less than two weeks. The east coast's most powerful nor'easter in years, the winds brought blizzard conditions and dumped record snowfalls throughout the region.

Fleischer remembers the severe storms and flooding that hit in May, 2006, known locally as the "Mother's Day Storm." One year later came the "Patriot's Day Flood," and in December 2008, a severe early winter snow storm that left Derry without electric power for two weeks.

When the snow started falling on March 13, Fleischer didn't have to wait for official notice of an "anticipated weather event" from New Hampshire's Homeland Security and Emergency Management. He knew what he had to do. Towns in Rockingham County, where Derry is located, would certainly be eligible to apply for Public Assistance (PA) grants from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), in the likelihood of a presidential disaster declaration.

FEMA's PA program is the agency's largest grant provider, it accounts for 51 percent of grant dollars administered by the agency, averaging \$4.7 billion in assistance each year to state and local governments and certain private nonprofit organizations. Through the PA program, following a federal declaration, FEMA offers grants to eligible communities for debris removal, life-saving emergency protective measures, and the repair, replacement, or restoration of disaster-damaged publicly-owned facilities and infrastructure.



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Even before the first snow plow hit the road, Derry was readying the necessary paperwork to assure accurate accounting for the cost of manpower, equipment, contractors and supplies.

Mike Gagnon, Derry's fire chief and emergency management officer, activated the town's Emergency Operations Center and began handing assignments to town personnel. Meanwhile, Fleischer opened specific computer project codes in the town's general ledger and ordered all expenses related to this storm coded accordingly.

Alan Cote, who runs the town's Public Works Department, was at the ready with a full crew of truck and tractor drivers to man the snowplows, and building and grounds personnel were standing-by. In addition, Cote was in touch with 15 to 20 private contractors who would be called upon as the snow piled up.

While police and fire personnel would not be needed for duty in this coming storm, they were at the table in the Emergency Operations Center, Gagnon said. A 30-year veteran of the Derry Fire Department himself, Gagnon says some Derry police captains match or better his time on duty. "So we all understand what needs to be done and what to expect. We don't have to reinvent the wheel every time we get a storm," he said. "We have a template established. You just have to go back to see what was done the last time."

By the time it was over, 26.8 inches of snow covered Derry. The clean-up would cost the town nearly \$144,000.

Fleischer knew that FEMA would require accurate documentation and accounting in Derry's application for federal aid. FEMA typically covers no less than 75 percent of the eligible costs for emergency measures. For Derry, about \$108,000 was at stake. Fleischer knew well the labor-intensive, time-consuming task ahead: All those forms FEMA demanded... all the do-overs when the numbers didn't come out just right.

As the singer-songwriter Brenda Lee sang-out so long ago, "But that was yesterday and yesterday's gone."



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In 2014 and 2015, FEMA conducted an in-depth analysis of its PA program. The result of that study is a new business model for PA delivery.

Chief among the program changes is use of on-line technology to promote consistency, transparency and accountability — providing better grants management and fiscal responsibility from beginning to end. The foundation of the new web-based delivery model is a partnership between FEMA, state, tribal and territorial emergency managers, and other applicants requiring disaster recovery assistance.

The success of the new delivery model, according to FEMA, depends on the strength of these internal and external partnerships. A key aspect of the new program is continuous improvement; FEMA will monitor progress, receive feedback, and make on-going adjustments and improvements to the process.

With the new Grants Portal system in place, FEMA no longer requires the use of hard-copy documentation and forms for damage claims. All required data is electronically uploaded directly from the applicants' locations through a password-protected electronic portal.

This is great news for towns like Derry. Instead of shuffling paperwork and doing the math often required for FEMA paperwork, Fleischer was able to quickly prepare spreadsheets documenting all of Derry's labor, equipment, material and contractor costs, and gather copies of invoices,

policies and insurance information for electronic uploading to the FEMA Grants Portal. On the receiving end of the portal, the data was immediately available to the FEMA grants manager and the PA Program Delivery Manager assigned to the Town of Derry.

The documentation and data Derry compiled throughout the storm and it's clean-up, was electronically uploaded directly from Fleischer's offices at 14 Manning Street into the new FEMA Grants Portal.

The Town's claim was quickly processed and electronically sent to the Consolidated Resource Center in Denton, Texas. In approximately six weeks, Derry's claim for storm damage had been prepared, forwarded to Denton, passed through the FEMA review queues and was funded.



Derry officials were surprised at the quick processing of their claim. In the past this process took about 6-8 months.

Not only has the new delivery program drastically reduced the time from submission of documents to payment of claims, but it also has eliminated use of the complicated, outdated FEMA forms. This saves both time and money when applying for a FEMA grant.

The new Grants Portal also allows applicants to identify, view and track all of their claimed damages. “The new system is user-friendly and we had no trouble uploading our documents,” Fleischer said. “We no longer use FEMA forms, and just upload our Microsoft Excel spreadsheets created from our general ledger codes. We electronically uploaded our supporting documents and no longer have to copy large quantities of information.”

“The new system will be important to future town officials,” Gagnon said. “It will allow them to look at previous FEMA events and see how they were documented. This allows us to track our projects and all storm information is in one spot.”

The new PA delivery model and the Grants Portal system means that FEMA no longer requires filling-out complicated forms or hard-copy documentation for damage claims. Fleischer’s foresight in planning Derry’s application for assistance, beginning, as he said, “with the first snowflake,” will not go to waste.

“That’s the reason Derry did so well with the new program. The town was prepared and engaged,” a FEMA official said. “They demonstrated an effective level of applicant participation and self-responsibility for the recovery. With more applicants like this, who take the lead within their own communities, we could get a lot more funds to the states sooner,” he said.

“FEMA has streamlined and simplified the process,” Gagnon said. “We can’t say enough good things about it.”

