



TOWN OF BURLINGTON

TASK FORCE on COMMUNITY EMERGENCIES

INTRODUCTION

The Task Force on Community Emergencies was convened in the aftermath of the October 2013 fire at the Lord Baron Apartments' complex. The Town of Burlington and the Board of Selectmen wanted to consider and formulate viable community responses in the event of a similar incident in the future in the Town. The Task Force was proposed by Town Administrator John Petrin at the Selectmen's meeting of January 13, 2014. The Board of Selectman unanimously voted approval at their meeting of February 10, 2014.

The members of the Task Force include:

- o Ray Santilli, Community Member – Chair
- o Rabbi Susan Abramson, Temple Shalom Emeth
- o Eric Conti, School Superintendent
- o Reverend John de Beer, St. Mark's Episcopal Church
- o Joyce Deliyiannis, HELPIS
- o Joanne Frustacci, Town Meeting Human Services Committee
- o Valerie Healey, People Helping People
- o Robert Hogan, Board of Selectmen
- o Michael Kent, Police Chief
- o Thomas Killilea, Ways and Means Committee
- o Susan Lumenello, Director, Board of Health
- o Marge McDonald, Director, Council on Aging
- o Jim Murphy, Chamber of Commerce
- o John Petrin, Town Administrator
- o Cindy Phillips, Town Meeting Human Services Committee
- o Wayne Saltsman, Board of Health
- o Christine Shruhan, Director, Burlington Youth & Family Services
- o Steven Yetman, Fire Chief

The group was tasked to take a look at how the Town and its various community groups can plan to address a crisis of this nature in the future. The group was to understand what did take place and to develop a strategy on how the community could come together in the future to provide necessary support. The objective of the Task Force was not to conduct an inquiry on this one incident but to assess capacity to take action in the future. The goal will be to develop suggestions and a task list that the various community organizations can utilize to improve a future response to a similar incident.

BACKGROUND

On the evening of October 23, 2013, a fire struck Building #8 at the Lord Baron Apartments' complex. The building had 36 units of which 34 were occupied. A total of 85 people were displaced according to the Fire Chief. The Daily Times Chronicle reported that an occupant was badly injured and two others were rescued in a three-alarm fire which started in a unit on the

second floor and extended to the third floor and roof. The Burlington Union reported that due to damage to the electrical system and from smoke and water, the building was condemned until extensive renovations were completed. More work was required than originally anticipated. Residents were allowed to return to their homes 10 weeks after the fire occurred.

During this displacement, the tenants of these units were put into a difficult situation and had needs that needed to be addressed. Many community organizations, congregations, businesses, schools, and individuals stepped forward and offered temporary housing, services, clothing, food, furniture, entertainment, toys, gift certificates, etc.

DISCUSSION

The various municipal departments and the community groups related what actions took place and what contributions/arrangements were made the evening of the fire and the days and weeks following. The purpose was not to critique or praise but simply to understand what occurred. A Red Cross representative also spoke of the organization's efforts assisting the displaced residents they were made aware of and had contact with.

Critical issues the evening of the incident and shortly thereafter included:

- Knowledge of affected number of individuals and families
- Coordination at the scene with location of Red Cross
- Loss of contact with affected individuals and families
- Transmitting needs of affected individuals and families
- Coordination and storage of donations of articles and clothing

The vast majority of assistance and services to the displaced fire victims were initiated through informal channels. Individuals, friends, neighbors, classmates, etc. all stepped forward in one manner or another to assist those displaced from the fire. However, in specific instances, such extraordinary generosity led to confusion, inequities, and an overabundance of items (i.e., clothes).

The most interesting discussion of the group centered on the actions of HELPIS (HelpMeHelpSomeone, Inc.). Many on the Task Force were unaware of the organization and its involvement within the Burlington community. Their involvement with a limited number of affected families was initiated simply through a chance encounter.

The Town Administrator made note of the guidelines and restrictions placed on municipalities in such expenditures and the procurement of goods and services. For the unfamiliar, a brief explanation of the Commonwealth's 'Uniform Procurement Act' is presented.

Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 30B (Uniform Procurement Act) governs and regulates municipal procurement. In general, Chapter 30B applies to the procurement of supplies and

services, dispositions of surplus supplies, and the acquisition and disposition of real property. For supplies and services, with certain exceptions, Chapter 30B provides for:

- Use of sound business practices for purchases under \$10,000.
- Solicitation of three quotes for contracts in the amount of \$10,000 up to \$34,999.
- Competitive sealed bids or proposals for contracts in the amount of \$35,000 or more.

For the latter two categories, the execution of a formal contract document is required.

Chapter 30B does contain a provision for emergency procurement but it would not pertain in the types of community emergencies considered here. Section 8 of Chapter 30B governs procuring supplies and services during an emergency and states in part:

Whenever the time required to comply with a requirement of [M.G.L. c. 30B] would endanger the health or safety of the people or their property, a procurement officer may make an emergency procurement without following that requirement. An emergency procurement shall be limited to only supplies or services necessary to meet the emergency and shall conform to the requirements of this chapter [M.G.L. c. 30B] to the extent practicable under the circumstances.

The departments and groups were asked to list the type of assistance, services, etc. that they could offer in the event of a similar incident in the future.

Board of Selectmen/Town Administrator

- Emergency Management Plan – The Board of Selectmen, through its departments, implements the Emergency Management Plan of the Town. This could bring various resources to the table in the case of an emergency including:
 - * Shelter/Housing
 - * Food
 - * Various Services – Fire, Police, DPW
 - * Counseling Assistance
- Requests for Services – As the executive body of the Town, the Board and Town Administrator could assist in coordinating requests for various services from outside agencies that could provide assistance.
- Coordination – The office could provide assistance in general coordination for certain situations.
- Communications – The office could assist with the communications aspect of situations. Have at our disposal the use of phone systems, community notification system, and a website. Have relations with various news outlets that could be in contact with.

Board of Health (BOH)

- BOH staff is available to assist the Emergency Management Director and/or Town Administrator, as requested.
- The Director of Public Health, acting as the Unit Leader of the Burlington Volunteer Reserve Corps MRC (BVRC), can activate the BVRC in the following scenarios:
 - * Immediately following an emergency situation to assist in the town response;
 - * To provide volunteers to assist in town wide community service activities, if requested by the organizers (i.e. a road race fundraiser).

Council on Aging (COA)

- The COA can refer seniors (60+ and occasionally 50+ adults) to services they might need that aren't provided by the usual American Red Cross services. Can also "hold their hand" if there is no family around to help them through what is obviously a very scary event. So not have the resources to help with hotels, etc. as do not have a friends group.
- The senior center can also be a shelter for displaced residents as long as necessary. Director has been shelter trained by MEMA. Could also, if there was another large scale fire in Burlington, open the senior center immediately for folks to get out of the weather.
- Representative from COA and BYFS can probably do what no one else could in a large emergency like that and be able to run around looking for people that could get missed as well as walking them over to the Red Cross or wherever they need to be directed to which might have kept some of the folks from slipping through the cracks.

Ways & Means

- Would be responsible to approve any emergency funding being requested by the Town for any particular event.

Interfaith Clergy Group

- The Interfaith Clergy are a network, not an organization. The network itself is a resource and is able to mobilize congregational resources of volunteers, space and money. St. Mark's itself has a parish hall which is available as an emergency shelter.

Burlington Youth and Family Services (BYFS)

- As requested, in an emergency situation, the BYFS would be in a position to provide the following services:
 - * Agency Director (or designated representative) will arrive at the scene of the emergency and be available to assist in determining potential needs of displaced residents. The Director is also available to notify potential collateral's of needed resources.
 - * As an agency that provides social services are in a position to connect residents to potential resources such as food, shelter, clothing, mental health services (if needed). During this most recent event, screened residents to access funds from the People Helping People Basic Needs (which provided the majority of funding for their stay at the hotel) as well as helping them connect with the food pantry. They also connected with other areas of support, such as HELPIS, Salvation Army, utilities, etc. They acted as the clearinghouse for residents to access furniture and mattresses from Mission of Deeds and HGRM.
- Frequently deal with families that become or are on the verge of homelessness and use connections that we have with DTA and MBHP to help residents' access services and funds that are available at the state level.
- Provide counseling to families in crisis situations.

People Helping People

- The purpose of People Helping People is to establish a town-wide effort to provide assistance to residents who have an emergency need for food, medicine, heat and utilities and to provide for holiday food baskets and gifts for children.
- Operate the food pantry in Town at St. Mark's.
- Provide direct assistance that can be accessed through Burlington Youth and Family Services
- Relies on a coalition of people and groups in Town to provide the resources that they then distribute. Have developed relationships with various businesses to assist with fundraising.
- Programs tend to be more systematic and operate in a pre-determined fashion. Do not typically operate outside of the pre-programmed events.

HELPIS

- The missions of HELPIS are:
 - * To encourage and promote good and charitable deeds by groups and individuals for the purpose of helping someone needing help, and
 - * To create the first observation of HelpMeHelpSomeone celebration, a spirit of sharing during May giving help and saluting those who promote generosity and kindness
- With HELPIS members and our network of individual supporters we serve individuals and families in need.
- Communicate the need to our group and those who can help step forward to supply what is needed. This process allows us to respond quickly to individuals and families with immediate needs of food, shelter, clothing, medicine and other items as we did for the Lord Baron residents until they were back into their homes.
- Are continuing to help these residents as needed going forward. For example, organizing computer classes with Microsoft for children and adults from the Lord Baron community and continuing to supply food to some of the families.
- Collaborate with other organizations.
- Listing of some of the resources that have been provided:
 - * Haircuts for unemployed people in the military and their families
 - * Food
 - * Clothing
 - * Medicine
 - * Pay a heating bill, car payment or other bill if needed
 - * Help with expenses for children's music lessons, gymnastics, sports, school supplies, train transportation for college students
 - * Help build self-esteem by supporting families to have activities together, such as theater, games, museums or dinner at a restaurant

RECOMMENDATION(s)

As is typical in this type of community incident, the Town of Burlington responded overwhelmingly to provide comfort, assistance, and material goods to the individuals and families affected and displaced by the Lord Baron Apartments complex fire. A wide array of organizations and individuals all contributed in various ways.

It would be difficult for a community to plan for the aftermath of such incidents as they are not only unpredictable but each incident would be unique and could affect specific and/or different segments of the community's population. Examples of varied community emergencies include the chemical explosion in Danvers in 2006, flooding in the Merrimack Valley area in 2010, and the tornados in the Springfield area in 2011. As such, it is neither prudent nor feasible to draft an all-encompassing plan to address any possible scenario.

The best approach for the Town of Burlington is to form a working group that would meet with the Town Administrator on a regular basis (either annually or semi-annually). The working group would be tasked with compiling, maintaining and updating a list of contacts, services, amenities, etc. to be made available to those affected by a community emergency in the future. The compiled list could include, but not be limited to:

- Local hotels willing to offer discounted or free accommodations for a limited or extended basis,
- Restaurants offering to cook and/or serve free meals on a rotating basis,
- Local businesses willing to donate goods and/or services, and
- Contacts for community organizations (churches, PTOs, etc.) that would have their own method of communications with their members.

The working group would consist of a limited number of individuals in order for it to be efficient. Members could include:

- Town Administrator
- Director of Burlington Youth and Family Services
- Representative from School PTOs
- Representative from Chamber of Commerce
- Representative from Interfaith Clergy Group and/or community
- Community representatives such as HELPIS or People Helping People
- Fire Chief/Emergency Management Director

Note: It is imperative to include non-municipal/school employees in the working group as solicitation of any goods/services by municipal/school employees from businesses and individuals could be viewed as a violation by the State Ethics Commission.

When a community emergency occurs in the future, as a result of the continuing efforts and coordination of the working group, various community components could be mobilized and resources made available to affected individuals and families.

A secondary recommendation is for the Town and Board of Selectmen to develop a plan for providing additional support from the community that could be mobilized in time of need. As

outlined above, the Town has an Emergency Management Department and the Burlington Volunteer Reserve Corps are under the auspices of the Board of Health. The plan would discuss the mobilization of these critical resources and how they can play a role in providing assets and time in assisting with a response to an emergency in Town.

When emergencies happen, these volunteer members can be deployed at the direction of the Town designee (typically the Emergency Management Director) to provide critical support to first responders, provide immediate assistance to victims, and organize spontaneous volunteers at a disaster site. Members can also help with non-emergency projects that help improve the safety of the community.

In conclusion, regardless of what formal actions are taken by the Town administration, in the event of another community emergency, the citizens, organizations and businesses of Burlington will once again step forward and provide any necessary assistance.