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Edmonton Tornado: the federal government's response

by Joan Borsu

Tornadoes are infrequent in the Edmonton area, but on Friday, July 31, 1987, one of the worst ever seen in Canada, killed 27 people, demolished homes, farms, and businesses, and left a trail of destruction Albertans will never forget.



Tornado wreaks havoc in Edmonton July 31, 1987.

The response to the effects of the tornado was swift and effective — in a word, superb. Alberta Public Safety Services responded in a remarkable fashion — their indomitable team again demonstrated the kind of confidence and efficiency gained after years of intelligent planning and experience in the field. The City of Edmonton had an excellent disaster plan (the Emergency Planning Officer said it was because he had attended courses at the Canadian Emergency Preparedness College) and as one newspaper put it, "the response rewrote the script for disaster response." That story will be retold later in the form of numerous studies as well as in the *Digest*. In this article, however, while in no way wishing to detract from the magnificent performance of all those who responded to the disaster, we are concentrating on the federal response to explain the role of the Government of Canada in a crisis. As Emergency Preparedness Canada's Executive Director Bill Snarr said in a note to the Hon. Perrin Beatty, Minister Responsible for Emergency Preparedness, "the system worked like a charm."

Disaster Strikes Edmonton

Between 3:45 p.m. and 4:30 p.m. on the afternoon of Friday, July 31, the eastern part of Edmonton and parts of the counties of Strathcona, Leduc and Wetaskiwin, experienced severe winds, rain and tornadoes (there were unconfirmed reports of as many as nine tornadoes in the area around Edmonton). Twenty-seven people were killed, and approximately 200 hospitalized because of injuries. Property damage in excess of $330 million was incurred, mostly in the areas of Sherwood Industrial Park, Clareview and Evergreen Trailer Park. Approximately 60 houses and 250 trailer-homes were destroyed, 300 more houses were damaged, and many businesses were destroyed or damaged. Roughly 1,500 jobs were lost for an indefinite period.

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During the week preceding the Edmonton tornado, the same weather system caused flooding in the northwest portion of the province and damage to farms in an area extending from Vulcan to Westlock. More than 2,000 farms reported damage caused by wind, hail, or flooding.

Immediately following the tornado, emergency planning teams from the municipal, provincial and federal governments swung into action. As Deputy Prime Minister Don Mazankowski noted in the House of Commons, "Resources were mobilized in an unprecedented, co-ordinated and co-operative manner."

Usually, the federal government waits for a request from a province before offering assistance in disasters that cause property damage, as these normally fall within provincial jurisdiction. But in this case, the damage caused by the tornado was so great that the federal government wasted no time and responded immediately. Jim Hoffman, Regional Director of Emergency Preparedness Canada for Alberta and Northwest Territories contacted the Alberta Public Safety Services to indicate the federal government was standing right beside Albertans.

The approach to emergency management and recovery following the severe storm system between July 25 and August 3 was unique in that all three orders of government were involved almost from the beginning.

As the City of Edmonton and the counties affected began rescue operations, the Atmospheric Environment Services of Environment Canada continued to provide weather information, the Department of National Defence placed helicopters and ambulances on standby and at the disposal of the provincial and municipal officials, and Transport Canada's CANUTEC assisted in dangerous goods response.

On-site federal actions were co-ordinated by Jim Hoffman. Numerous federal departments and Crown corporations played a part in post-disaster recovery. They included Canada Post, the Department of National Defence, Consumer and Corporate Affairs, Health and Wel-



Peter Martin



Larry Wong



Canapress Photo Service

fare, Employment and Immigration, Regional Industrial Expansion, and Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation.

Mark Egener, Managing Director of the Alberta Public Safety Services, in Edmonton, intimately involved in the disaster response, was impressed with the quick federal action.

"The approach to emergency management and recovery following the severe storm system between July 25 and August 3 was unique in that all three orders of government were involved almost from the beginning.

"Jim Hoffman, Regional Director of Emergency Preparedness Canada, played a fundamental co-ordinating role in the provision of federal assistance. This is entirely in keeping with the 'one window' approach to federal assistance and is a key aspect of EPC's function.

"I believe that Mr. Hoffman's very competent undertaking in this regard really focussed the federal effort in a way that could not have been done by federal departments and agencies each operating independently. I also wish to mention that the recovery program is a complex piece of administrative machinery and the ability to access federal advice and assistance through one point of contact really facilitates the whole process.

By noon August 1, the objectives and strategy for federal support to Alberta and to the victims had been approved and included a proposal for a one-stop victims' assistance centre.

"I might also add that the federal government announced very early its willingness to co-operate and assist in every way possible and has proven quite prepared to adapt its programs to meet the specific needs of this disaster.

"Our regular programs (whether federal or provincial) rarely 'fit' the precise needs of disasters and those of us who manage programs must be prepared to modify them as required. During the Edmonton emergency, the Regional Director of EPC was able to take this approach and modify programs from a position of intimate knowledge, and I think the excellent results speak for themselves."

The day after the tornado, Deputy Prime Minister Don Mazankowski and Secretary of State for External Affairs Joe Clark toured the damaged area with Bill Lesick, MP for Edmonton East; the Regional Director of Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation; and Jim Hoffman, EPC's Regional Director. Immediately afterwards, Mr. Mazankowski offered assistance under the federal Disaster Financial Assistance arrangements, another departure from normal procedures as the federal government usually waits for a province to ask for such assistance.

Some people were grief stricken and needed to pour out their feelings. We tried to help make things as easy as possible for them.

Mr. Mazankowski and his group then met with senior regional officials of federal departments and agencies to discuss federal assistance. He also named Jim Hoffman as the federal co-ordinator and spokesperson.

Thanks to Hoffman's meticulous daily reports on the Edmonton disaster and recovery phase through EPC's Situation Centre in Ottawa, grassroots needs and potential issues were made known speedily to the federal government. (As soon as the disaster occurred, the Centre was staffed around the clock.)

By noon August 1, the objectives and strategy for federal support to Alberta and to the victims had been approved and included a proposal for a one-stop victims' assistance centre.

On Monday evening, August 3, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney toured the disaster site accompanied by the Deputy Prime Minister and Jim Hoffman. During the tour, the Prime Minister expressed the wish that full support from federal resources be provided.

That same day a Victim Assistance Centre involving all three orders of government, the Insurance Bureau of Canada, and volunteer agencies, opened at M.E. LaZerte High School to provide all disaster relief services under one roof. The Centre registered losses and property damage, assisted with housing needs, provided immediate clothing, food and emergency financial assistance, and arranged distribution of various federal payments such as family allowance, unemployment insurance and old age pensions, as well as unemployment insurance registration. Insurance company representatives at the Centre arranged for advances on claims. In addition to playing a key role in the immediate disaster response, the Centre also laid the groundwork for the personal counselling and services that disaster survivors would need for some time to come.

A second Victim Assistance Centre was opened in the Municipality of Leduc on August 4 for residents of Leduc County, and a special centre to assist employees and employers whose businesses were damaged also opened the same day at Strathcona County Office in Sherwood Park. The purpose of this Centre was to:

- register all losses and damage to business and commercial property (anyone who came in to register personal and property loss was also looked after)
- provide Unemployment Insurance and Workers' Compensation registration and advice
- provide advice on accessibility and safety of damaged structures
- provide information through representatives of the federal department of Regional Industrial Expansion and the Alberta Economic Development and Trade Department on assistance available for industrial recovery.

All three centres provided counselling for anyone suffering stress and trauma.

During the week that these centres were open:

- Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation registered 104 housing requests and housed 62 families in existing units
- Employment and Immigration Canada registered 725 claims and provided service for 60 further enquiries

- Health and Welfare Canada served 204 clients
- Consumer and Corporate Affairs provided advice on precautions to be taken in arranging contracts for reconstruction
- more than 700 families received some sort of assistance from one of the government or volunteer agencies.

The Sherwood Park Victim Assistance Centre closed on Friday, August 7 and the LaZerte High School centre closed on Monday, August 10.

Health and Welfare Canada was one of the many federal government departments positioned in a high school within a short distance of the major disaster area. Jacque Lemare, Edmonton Chief of Old Age Security and Canada Pension Plan, occupied one classroom along with Unemployment Insurance officials from Employment and Immigration, and Alberta Social Services personnel.

"We put Health and Welfare staff right at the door as people seemed lost and confused as they came in. We explained what services were available and helped guide people to the services they needed. We did about 215 interviews — some people were grief stricken and needed to pour out their feelings. We tried to help make things as easy as possible for them.

Knowing the faces around the table is an incredible advantage in an emergency — you knew you could really count on these people!"

"We took a number of survivors' applications and death benefit applications. We also took a great many changes of address as in many cases people lost absolutely everything and we wanted to make sure that they received their next cheque (Family Allowance, Canada Pension, or Old Age Pension).

"One elderly woman was overwhelmed by what had happened. She told me that she had been right in the centre of the tornado, sitting in her wheelchair, utterly helpless. She looked out the window just in time to see her son's trailer fly right up into the air, twist to one side, and blow away.

"The teamwork that existed was incredible — the goal was to be as efficient and expedient as possible to minimize people's suffering. We had daily meetings in the relief centre to make sure everyone knew what everyone else was doing," Lamare said.

Many residents lost their mail boxes in the tornado, but Canada Post quickly stepped in and offered to hold their mail or redirect it free of charge. Canada Post's General Manager for Edmonton Victor Taylor explained that "the major damage was the group box delivery at the trailer park. We had no access to the boxes for a few days after the tornado."

In addition to providing helicopter services, the Department of National Defence provided numerous services to the relief centres, including transportation between relief warehouses, experts to organize emergency supplies, and shelving for supplies.

Employment and Immigration Canada's (EIC) Regional Manager of Administration Deryk Graham and his group were on the job on the Monday following the disaster replacing lost Social Insurance Numbers and obtaining new documents for landed immigrants who had lost everything in the tornado. (EIC waived the $10 fee it normally charges for such services.) In the first two days, EIC served more than 450 clients.

"We had units next door to provincial booths so that we could offer as broad a range of services as possible to those whose jobs were lost due to the tornado damage, he said.

"Employers are only now filtering through the various options." [August 21, 1987 — Ed.]

What made the emergency response in Edmonton work so well?

"It was because of the interpersonal relationships we developed after sitting through so many emergency planning meetings that when we finally got into the room together we all felt a sense of collegiality. Knowing the faces around the table is an incredible advantage in an emergency — you knew you could really count on these people!"

As for EPC's Regional Director, Deryk Graham knows him well. "We were extremely impressed by Jim Hoffman, who contacted us right away. Much of the success was due to Jim and our Tom Kehoe doing 'yeoman' service. Thanks to them we were able to move decisively."

"It was quite awesome — the good feelings when you came into that room."

"The Government of Alberta is extremely pleased with the co-operation and commitment shown by the federal government through Emergency Preparedness Canada in assisting the victims of the tornado."

The Honourable Ken Kowalski, Minister of Alberta Public Safety Services, summed up his feelings about the federal response this way: "The Government of Alberta is extremely pleased with the co-operation and commitment shown by the federal government through Emergency Preparedness Canada in assisting the victims of the tornado."

In developing the necessary recovery assistance program, there was no quibbling about which order of government would pay for what. Everyone agreed that such details could be worked out later and that the main objective was to return the survivors to pre-disaster conditions and reinstate the economic viability of the farms and industries that suffered catastrophic loss.

The Department of Regional Industrial Expansion and Agriculture Canada worked closely with Jim Hoffman and the economic and agricultural agencies of the Alberta government to identify potential elements that could be used in the recovery assistance program.

Disaster Assistance Program for Industrial Sector

To help the industrial sector re-establish itself and resume business as quickly as possible, a joint federal-provincial program was announced August 21 to assist businesses that suffered catastrophic loss and damage. Although the initial intent was to



Paul Wodehouse

An aerial view of the northeast Edmonton suburb of Clareview shows some of the devastation.

provide assistance to small businesses only, this was changed to include large businesses. (As of August 29, fifty applications for assistance had been processed.)

The program provides clean-up and re-establishment assistance and will facilitate interest-free loans for up to two years. Also included in the program is the Industrial Recovery Assistance Office which opened on August 24 to assist businesses prepare a recovery plan and access the re-establishment assistance grant, as well as to provide clean-up assistance, loans and other federal and provincial programs including modernization and upgrading programs that could be of use during the re-establishment process.

In announcing this federal-provincial plan, Alberta's Acting Minister of Economic Development and Trade Les Young said: "We are very pleased with the co-operation and commitment shown by the federal government through Emergency Preparedness Canada. . . ."

Agricultural Sector

In the agricultural sector, estimates show that 100 farms suffered catastrophic losses to capital buildings, equipment and crops. An assistance program funded jointly by the federal and provincial governments was announced on August 20.

The two-part program comprises: home and personal assistance for families experiencing loss and damage as a result of the July 25–August 3 storms, and a farm business assistance program for producers experiencing loss and damage.

While the immediate needs of those who suffered have been met, the post-disaster period will be a long-term effort emotionally, as well as physically in reconstructing homes, businesses and farms affected. The Government of Canada will continue working with the Government of Alberta to help make this rebuilding process as smooth as possible.

Jim Hoffman attributes the effective response to the tornado to planning that started back in the 1970s. "It's the result of years of effort and it never stops. As soon as you think you've finished, then you're beat! Planning is a dynamic and living thing you can't put on a shelf and say, 'I'm finished.' Why? Because it's people — they change, their thoughts change, our knowledge changes and people with organizations change.

"Although some organizations have been singled out in recognition for providing special response or assistance, kudos belong to every individual of all sectors of government, industry, and the volunteer sector who acted in an altruistic fashion to meet the needs of the victims."

Joan Borsu is Editor of the Emergency Preparedness Digest.