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Jeff Harvey: Everyone should be ready for emergencies
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In West Virginia, we think we understand emergency preparedness. We've sure had plenty of chances to see it first-hand. During the past decade alone, West Virginians have dealt with natural disasters in hot weather and cold, including wide-scale flooding, crippling snow, fires and overwhelming winds. We have seen massive power outages accompanied by temperatures higher than 100 degrees and lower than freezing. We can be grateful that our state has sophisticated and well-trained response teams on the federal, state and local levels. Thousands of individuals perform selfless work time and time again during emergencies. In short, our state's emergency workers seem to do the absolute best anyone could have during the difficult situations they face. But a few weeks ago, when the Elk River was contaminated, we encountered an emergency of an entirely different stripe. We were, in some respects, confounded by what happened. This was not Mother Nature dealing us a blow. And as a result, today, we in the Mountain State are asking a lot of questions.

The Elk River contamination offers plenty of insight. For starters, no incident in West Virginia in recent memory so vividly gives us a look at an emergency preparedness concept called "whole of community."

The "whole of community" approach isn't complicated. It means that everybody — not just the government, but also individuals and families, businesses, faith-based and community organizations, non-profits, schools and academia and media outlets — need to participate in preparedness efforts. Stated even more simply, preparing for an emergency is everyone's business and everyone's responsibility.

Regarding the Elk River contamination, the what-ifs, the blame, the economic impact estimates, even the lawsuits, will be front and center for months, maybe years, to come. But something else should also be equally important to us: Just what, exactly, did we learn? What is the immediate take-away?

Sure, the government response — though excellent in many respects (most notably in the rapid mobilization of water distribution and donations) — can be improved. Local officials are working on that, making sure that resource inventories are updated, planning contingencies are evaluated and relationships with various partners are strengthened.

But, again, does the onus for preparedness fall solely on our community agencies? The absolute answer is no.

On the smallest scale, we, the individual citizens, need to make sure that we have supplies on-hand to get ourselves and our families through emergencies. This preparation does not need to be a cellar stocked with three years' worth of food; rather, it can be a small allotment of non-

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perishable food, water for drinking and sanitation, and medications suitable for three to five days of household self-sufficiency. (Ensuring that lighting, heat, first aid, pet supplies, and a little extra cash are available doesn't hurt, either.) On a larger scale, the Elk River contamination demonstrated the preparedness that is needed at the intersection of the public and private sectors, as well as the coordination that is necessary between members of the private sector. We must remember that businesses bear the responsibility for ensuring contingency measures are in place for their most vital operations.

Businesses also must assess the risks their sites present. There are numerous legislative requirements regarding preparedness measures at businesses and industrial sites, but many of those are contained "within the fence." Requirements for engaging other private sector entities — downriver, for instance — are not as robust.

After the water was contaminated in Charleston, many businesses in nine counties were closed for up to a week. Employees were out of work. The Charleston Gazette recently reported that losses in tax revenue following the spill in Charleston alone were roughly \$120,000. Overall economic impacts figure to be much, much greater. Will the day arrive anytime soon when 100 percent of the population trusts the water that flows into the region's homes?

So the question we now need to ask, if we're being responsible and planning for another day, is: Could these losses have been minimized by more businesses — even small ones — undertaking business-continuity planning efforts to identify their most critical services and needs, as well as suitable recovery resources?

The National Incident Management System — the preferred construct for managing emergencies for the entire nation — supports the notion that incidents are managed at the lowest possible level. Though this is often taken to mean the "lowest" governmental jurisdiction (or the one "closest" to the emergency), it can and should be extended to the private sector — the "partners" in truly effective incident management.

Whether response to the Elk River contamination was outstanding, fair or poor, the most critical response question remains. What will we do next time?

Taking that a step further, when will recommendations for business continuity planning be realized as requirements? When will recommendations for broad risk-assessment activities for an entire "impact area" be realized? And by entire impact, this means not only the area within an entity's fence — but outside the fence as well.

These and similar questions can help us turn the recovery from this incident into a true "whole of community" effort to prepare for us for next time — the inevitable next time.

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