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## **Planning paid off in bridge rescues: From detour plans to new radios, 'seamless team' was prepared**

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Aug. 20--No one expected August to start with a bridge collapsing in Minnesota.

But when the Interstate 35W bridge in Minneapolis fell, officials were ready.

Before the bridge fell:

- The state practiced snap assembly of an emergency operations center, where agencies could quickly coordinate their immediate response to a tragedy.
- Minneapolis studied where to place massive amounts of debris in a disaster.
- Most local law enforcement officials had updated radio systems, allowing them to talk to each other in emergencies.
- The Minnesota Department of Transportation developed traffic plans in case a bridge failed.

The bridge disaster was the first major test of state emergency response systems developed after years of practice and special urgency following Sept. 11, 2001, and Hurricane Katrina.

The result, officials inside and outside of government said: Minnesota passed the test.

When the bridge collapsed shortly after 6 p.m. Aug. 1, hundreds of officials -- from Hennepin County Medical Center security guards to Gov. Tim Pawlenty -- had to respond immediately. Almost all of them knew exactly what to do and where to go when they heard the news.

"It is pretty much automatic," said John Kerr, deputy director of the Minnesota Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Management. By 6:30 p.m., his agency had opened and begun staffing the state's Emergency Operations Center in St. Paul, where all involved agencies run operations in an emergency.

Reactions were automatic, even when they ran counter to common sense.

"Common sense, when you're a cop, is to run down to the water, jump in and try to save people," Minneapolis Police Inspector Mike Martin said. "I knew, because of the nature of this incident, I was needed at the command post, and I had a role there."

Once he arrived at the temporary police command post in a printing company parking lot on the river's west bank, he was put in charge of the bridge investigation, a role he still holds.

The fact that there was a command post ready is attributable to planning. By the time Minneapolis Deputy Chief Rob Allen arrived 20 minutes after the collapse, the city fire department already had a command station set up. Allen quickly created a police post.

And because of their emergency training, everyone already knew everyone else.

"When there is an emergency, it is not the right time to be exchanging business cards," said Doug Neville, spokesman for the state emergency management department. "We all knew each other when we got here."

Rocco Forte, Minneapolis emergency preparedness director, said even though multiple agencies had to work together, they were "a seamless team" in the cramped Minneapolis City Hall basement room that serves as the city's emergency operations center.

"We had a state bridge, in a county river, between two banks of a city. ... But we didn't have one problem with any of these issues, because we knew who was in charge of the assets," he said.

Rescuers also could talk to each other on emergency radios.

The lack of interoperable communications -- the ability of responders from different agencies to talk with each other -- was a major problem during 9/11 and Katrina.

Not so in the Minneapolis bridge collapse.

"They would have never been able to coordinate that response without the ability to communicate," said Scott Wiggins, program director of ARMER/911, the state organization working on the emergency radio system.

Carver, Anoka and Hennepin counties' emergency responders all use new-generation 800 MHz radios. The radio system allows departments to talk to each other on the same channel and share channels, just like e-mail users are able to communicate individually and in segmented e-mail groups.

The planning and preparations also paid off in almost eerily specific ways.

Years ago, Minneapolis identified four sites around the city to store debris from a collapsed building, Forte said. One of the sites is Bohemian Flats Park -- one-eighth of a mile downstream from the bridge -- where contractors are storing concrete and steel from the span.

The state Transportation Department also had traffic management plans in place to use if a major route became inaccessible.

"We do have a plan for if a bridge goes down. Our folks didn't have to sit there and say: 'OK, what are we going to do?' We had a plan in place. That's why it could happen as quickly as it did," Transportation Commissioner Carol Molnau said.

And Minneapolis officials were trained and equipped to deal with a structural collapse.

In 2002, city, county and state officials realized they had no one ready to deal with a massive building collapse.

"It was a huge gap to have identified," said Tim Turnbull, director of emergency preparedness for Hennepin County. "Otherwise, you've got nobody who could do that work, nobody who could do it safely. You'd have to wait for a federal asset to get here."

The city of Minneapolis secured about \$3.5 million for training and equipping a collapsed-structure team. While the focus was on rescuing people from a collapsed building, the ability to saw through concrete and peer into crevices with cameras paid off in the bridge collapse.

After every disaster, officials ask what can be done better. Many of those who responded were still involved in recovery activities late last week, so those reviews were not complete.

But there are several changes officials hope will make a difference in future disasters.

The state's alternate-route planning will receive a technological boost in a few years, said Sonia Morphew Pitt, director of homeland security and emergency management for MnDOT. The state is working with the University of Minnesota to develop a computer program that will allow it to create complex alternate route plans with a few clicks of a mouse.

While three metro counties already have the 800 MHz communication system in place, Ramsey and Dakota counties are still transitioning to the new radio system. That work is expected to be complete by the end of the year. Washington and Scott counties should have the system by the end of next year, Wiggins said.

Forte's only complaint thus far is one of real estate and technology.

The city's emergency operations center has just 14 seats, so "we didn't always have the right person in the room," he said. He said he wants space for 40 to 50 people in the center.

He said he needs \$13 million to open a larger operations center. The city has set aside \$5.5 million. Another \$1.5 million has come from grants.

"It's really the one spot where we're looking to fill a gap now," he said. "It all comes back to planning."

Bill Salisbury, Dave Orrick and Emily Gurnon contributed to this report.

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