

Two Case Studies on Jail Evacuations During a Natural Disaster: Iowa's 2008 Flooding

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The spring of 2008 was notable in Iowa for extreme flooding in several river drainages. Images from the flooding were featured on national newscasts. Conditions became so severe that the jails in Polk County (Des Moines) and Linn County (Cedar Rapids) were evacuated. The Polk County jail was evacuated on a Friday, and inmates returned 2 days later. In Linn County, the jail was not reopened for nearly a year.

Both situations fortunately were resolved without loss of life or escapes, attesting to the effective response of staff and preparations that were in place long before the crisis.

Despite their overall success responding to the emergency situations, each jail's leadership learned through experience that additional preparations could have improved its response. The different experiences of the two jails make it clear that jails can benefit from making plans for both "short term" and "long term" evacuations. This report compares their experiences and highlights ideas that may be of value to other agencies.

Part 1. Polk County: Short-Term Jail Evacuation

Jail Basics

Agency—Polk County Sheriff's Office

Jail capacity—950 to 1,000 inmates (housed at the Old Main jail, Interim Jail, and other facilities; Polk County opened a new jail in 2008)

On-duty staff—223 correctional officers; 60 patrol deputy sheriffs

Inmates moved—260 adult male inmates from the Interim Jail

Incident Synopsis

The Polk County Interim Jail was located in downtown Des Moines, near the confluence of the Des Moines and Raccoon Rivers. In the days leading up to the evacuation, jail inmates as well as Polk County Sheriff's Office staff worked in a sandbagging operation to hold back the floodwaters. The waters continued to rise. As it became clear that flooding in the area would likely worsen, a voluntary evacuation of downtown Des Moines was invoked.

The Polk County Sheriff's Office responded to ensure the safety of staff and inmates.

- June 7—Sheriff Dennis Anderson and his staff activated the agency's emergency evacuation planning and notification process.
- June 11—The agency implemented an emergency staffing procedure to ensure that an adequate and safe number of staff would be on duty as events unfolded.
- June 13—Rising waters made it necessary to invoke an emergency evacuation order for the Polk County Interim Jail. Evacuation began at 1120 hours and was completed by 1520 hours, with all inmates secured at 1700 hours. It was not necessary to evacuate Polk County's Old Main Jail, which housed approximately 250 inmates, including the women's population, or to move inmates from other Polk County housing locations.
- Inmates were returned to the Interim Jail on Sunday, June 15.

Pre-Incident Preparations

Mutual-aid agreements and notification protocols were in place with several correctional and public safety agencies and organizations:

- U.S. Marshals Service
- U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)
- Iowa Department of Corrections—Facilities available if needed included the Iowa Medical and Classification Center at Oakdale, the women's facility at Mitchellville, and the men's Fort Dodge Correctional Facility.
- Iowa State Patrol—Provided escort and security assistance during transport.
- Iowa Sheriffs' Association—Provided a channel for notifying Iowa's 98 counties in case housing or other assistance would be needed in a long-term evacuation.
- Ankeny (Iowa) Police Department—Designated as a regional lock-up during an emergency.

Various other arrangements were already in place and were invoked to provide for emergency operations.

- Collective bargaining agreements provided for staff overtime and compensation for housing, relocation, and travel on the part of staff who accompanied the inmates to their evacuation sites and stayed with them on a rotating basis for the duration of the evacuation period.
- Agreements for housing inmates and/or use of bedding provided for inmates' physical comfort at their destinations.
- An agreement with a third-party medical contractor provided for any needed medical treatment of inmates, including medical care housing, medications, records management, and staffing.
- Transportation of inmates was accomplished through agreements with Southeast Polk Community School District. Additional transportation assistance was available through secondary sources but was not needed.
- Escorts and security staff were provided by the Polk County Sheriff's Office and the Iowa State Patrol.
- Arrangements had been made to provide hotel rooms for staff if needed. Instead, staff members were transported to and from the evacuation site each shift, so hotel beds were not necessary.

Actions During the Incident

Because of the rapidly increasing water levels, the evacuation was "rapid" and was undertaken primarily to remove people from any danger, with no opportunity for taking inmate property or other unnecessary items.

- Throughout the operation, personnel followed a communications plan that called for use of cell phones and mobile/portable radios.
- An operational plan was established, and the decision was made to evacuate the high-risk/maximum security inmates and administrative segregation inmates first, followed by the general population and minimum security inmates.
- A visual head count was performed prior to departure of each of the facilities.
- Muster and staging areas were established in close proximity to both of the Polk County facilities.
- Within 30 minutes of the evacuation order being issued, the Southeast Polk Community School District provided nine buses for transporting inmates. Additional buses were available but were not needed, since only the Interim Jail was evacuated.
- Escorts and security staff were provided by the Polk County Sheriff's Office and the Iowa State Patrol. The ratio of inmates to officers was 15:2 while in transit, with dense law enforcement coverage on the 90-minute evacuation route. Three patrol units were assigned to accompany

each set of three buses. Trip lists and bus assignments had been pre-planned so that the bus convoy could consist of up to nine buses at a time.

- During the evacuation one bus experienced a mechanical problem, which made it necessary to transfer the on-board inmates and staff to a reserve bus. This occurred without incident.
- Adult male inmates were transported to the Fort Dodge Correctional Facility, managed by the Iowa Department of Corrections.
- Polk County Sheriff's Office staff took responsibility for their inmates at the host facility and performed on 12-hour shifts. Staff members were transported to and from the evacuation site for each shift.
- Inmates were moved back to Polk County jail custody on Sunday, June 15, without incident.

Lessons Learned

Though the operation went smoothly, the Polk County Sheriff's Office identified ways to improve its response if another jail evacuation is necessary in the future.

- An "all-hazards" emergency response plan should be developed.
- A formal emergency notification system should be established and written in a format that can be easily followed and easily updated.

Part 2. Linn County Jail: Long-Term Evacuation

Jail Basics

Agency—Linn County Sheriff's Office

Jail capacity—409

On-duty staff—12

Inmates moved—386 (346 males, 40 females; including 200 federal inmates from the U.S. Marshals Service and ICE)

Incident Synopsis

The Linn County Jail is a five-story structure located on Mays Island in the Cedar River in downtown Cedar Rapids, Iowa. As the Cedar River began to swell in early June, 2008, Sheriff Donald Zeller and his staff were in close communications to monitor the situation with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, area public safety agencies, and other Linn County representatives.

Public safety agencies had difficulty getting accurate river level projections because the upstream tracking stations became inoperable as they were submerged in water. Projections for the river's height and cresting were between 21 and 24 feet; the river finally crested at 31 feet. There were two flash-flood rain events in the hours preceding the evacuation. In a defensive act to limit the damage by

floodwaters, a sandbagging operation was undertaken using Linn County jail inmates and Sheriff's Office staff.

The Linn County Sheriff's Office responded to rising water levels with a complete evacuation.

- June 8, 2008—Sheriff Zeller made necessary notifications to implement pre-arranged mutual-aid agreements.
- June 11—Higher than normal waters surrounded the Linn County Jail, but the situation still did not necessitate evacuation.
- June 12—At approximately 0430 hours, an emergency evacuation order was invoked for the jail. Evacuation of prisoners and staff began at 0730 hours, and the process was completed at 0930 hours.
- The jail was reoccupied on May 6, 2009—nearly a year after the evacuation.
- The estimated cost of clean-up was approximately \$1.9 million. The facility underwent remodeling and an addition was added that was nearing completion in mid-2012.

Figure 1 is an upstream view of Mays Island with the Linn County jail in the foreground, plus the courthouse and city hall. The U.S. Interstate 380 bridge is visible beyond the buildings. It was the only roadway to connect the east and west sides of Cedar Rapids during the flood.



Figure 1. Mays Island, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, in 2008 flood, with the Linn County Detention Center in the foreground.

Pre-Incident Preparations

Sheriff Zeller and his staff had conducted evacuation planning prior to the incident. Because of the proximity of the Duane Arnold Nuclear Power Station in Palo, Iowa, the Linn County Sheriff's Office had participated in a site assessment required by the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission. The assessment established that the Iowa Department of Corrections facilities at Anamosa and Oakdale would house male inmates and the DOC's Mitchellville facility would house the jail's female population. It was also established during this assessment that 10-person gang chains would be used to restrain inmates during an evacuation.

Mutual-aid agreements and notification protocols were in place with several correctional and public safety agencies and organizations.

- U.S. Bureau of Prisons, Federal Correctional Institute, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas—Received federal inmates.
- Iowa Department of Corrections—Institutions at Anamosa and Oakdale received male inmates, Mitchellville facility received women inmates.
- Lary A. Nelson Judicial Complex, Iowa Sixth Judicial District, Department of Corrections, Cedar Rapids—Provided space for arrestee/intake processing, inmate court appearances, and housing for detainees with jail stays under 30 days.
- Jones County Sheriff's Office, Anamosa—Provided space for some inmates in arraignment and acted as a temporary regional lock-up.
- Washington County Sheriff's Office, Washington—Took custody of 20 maximum security/administrative segregation inmates at the county's new jail facility.
- City of Marion Police Department—Used by Linn County Sheriff's Office and Cedar Rapids Police Department as an Emergency Operations Center (EOC) because both the Police Department and Sheriff's Office also were evacuated due to flood waters.
- Iowa State Patrol, Cedar Rapids Police Department, and Iowa Department of Transportation, Commercial Vehicle Enforcement Division—Assisted the Linn County Sheriff's Office with prisoner escort services.

Actions During the Incident

Sheriff Zeller and his staff notified the agency's mutual aid providers 4 days prior to invoking the emergency evacuation order. When the county invoked these mutual-aid agreements, it sought a commitment of at least 5 days.

- Inmate transportation was made possible via five to ten local area public transit buses that were used in a continuous cycle.
- Escorts and security staff were provided by the Linn County Sheriff's Office, Cedar Rapids Police Department, the Iowa State Patrol, and the Iowa Department of Transportation (IDOT) Commercial Vehicle Enforcement Division.

- The evacuation plan included a decision to evacuate the maximum security and administrative segregation inmates first, followed by the general population and minimum security inmates.
- All evacuated inmates were handcuffed to lessen the potential for escape. The jail had been provided an ample supply of gang chains when the nuclear plant evacuation plan was established.
- A muster area and inmate staging area were established in close proximity to the Linn County Jail.
- Emergency plans called for paper records to accompany inmates. All the jail needed to do was to print out the in-custody lists. Paper copies of legal documents were available in the inmate legal files and ready to bring along during the evacuation. Legal files and hard copies of inmate medical records were transported to the initial staging location and were then redistributed with the staff accompanying the inmates on the various transport buses to the other institutions.
- The communications plan relied on cell phones and mobile/portable radios.
- A small group of federal inmates were transported to FCI-Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas, 2 days prior to the evacuation. This was a prearranged transfer and had nothing to do with the flood. Other federal inmates were transferred within a few days of their arrival at Iowa DOC temporary holding facilities to facilities approved by the U.S. Marshals Service and ICE.
- Jail staff accompanied the county's inmates to their destinations—including clerical personnel, food service staff, nursing staff, correctional officers, and deputies. The destination agencies provided bedspace and operations space only. Linn County continued to provide all services. No Linn County jail personnel were laid off as a result of the evacuation.
- Staffing was possible through collective bargaining agreements addressing overtime, housing, relocation, and travel.
- Inmate housing was provided for through agreements for use of beds or bedding.
- Medical treatment of inmates was delivered by sheriff's office personnel. Nursing staff traveled to remote sites with the inmates.

After the Incident

Given the severity of the damage to the jail, new agreements were needed to provide for longer-term housing beyond the initial evacuation. Female inmates were moved from Mitchellville to the Oakdale facility. Men stayed mainly at Iowa's correctional institution in Anamosa. The intake center at the Sixth Judicial District complex was used for arrestee processing, the housing of compliant inmates who were being arraigned, and the housing of detainees with jail stays under 30 days. Non-compliant inmates

were housed and arraigned at the Jones County jail in Anamosa. Inmates who were not held at the Sixth Judicial District complex went to Jones County.

The Linn County Correctional Center reopened in May 2009, though all repairs and mitigation were not fully complete. Linn County worked with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) on risk mitigation and improvements in a “Phase II” project to reduce the severity of damages if another flood occurs of the same magnitude as 2008. An addition to the jail provides elevated second- and third-floor space for critical mechanical and electrical systems for the jail and courthouse, including the jail’s door control, computers, camera system, electrical systems, diesel generator, and HVAC. The jail’s laundry room has been moved to an upper level, and administrative segregation cells have been constructed in the main-floor space formerly occupied by laundry operations. The jail’s two main hydraulic elevators have been replaced by traction control elevators, which are operated by counter-weights. The new elevators will be protected from future flooding because the mechanics of a traction elevator are not located in the lowest level of the building as they are with hydraulic elevators. As a non-flood related part of the project, the jail’s kitchen has also been expanded to improve efficiency and capacity to feed a larger jail population than the original kitchen was designed for in 1984. Project costs were \$7.6 million, \$3.5 million of which was provided by FEMA and \$4.1 million through Linn County bonding.

Lessons Learned

The Linn County Jail remained in a state of evacuation for nearly a year. For the emergency evacuation, jail personnel identified several aspects that could have been anticipated that would have improved the response to the incident.

- Although initially the local transit buses were effective during the evacuation process, as the depth of the water rose, the buses began to have clearance issues and to float, causing a loss of control. The evacuation of inmates already was nearly complete when this occurred. School buses, which sit on a higher platform, may have been better utilized in this incident.
- Access to all information technology was lost in the evacuation. Linn County’s MIS department also was flooded, so access to the servers was lost for several days, until the system could be reestablished at a different location. The MIS department now has been relocated to higher ground in another area of the city.
- It would have been helpful to have established, in advance, release agreements with the local courts to allow for emergency releases of minimum classification inmates, inmates with short sentences, and work release inmates.
- At the time of the flood evacuation, radio systems for the Linn County Sheriff’s Office operated on VHF, the Cedar Rapids Police Department on 800 MHz, and the Marion Police Department on UHF. These systems did not allow for seamless communications between the law enforcement agencies during this incident. The entire county has since moved toward a shared countywide

communications system for all emergency responders, which is expected to be fully operational in the first quarter of 2013.

- It is important for agencies to have an up-to-date system for mass notification when an emergency occurs. Linn County utilized a “Code Red” mass notification system in connection with the flooding.
- Agencies should establish a family notification system so that family members of both staff and inmates can receive non-security-related status updates during an incident.
- Agencies will need to have a coordinated process in place for media relations and notification. In this incident, the public information officers of both the county and the sheriff’s office were heavily utilized. Daily press briefings were held at the relocated county government offices at Kirkwood Community College.
- Agencies should establish a “go” inventory of booking paperwork, inmate commissary supplies, and medication and medical supplies.
- To prevent losses due to water or other damage, agencies should limit the amount of property and valuables that inmates can possess or store at the jail.
- Agencies should develop a property reimbursement system not only for inmate property, but also for staff property that could be damaged or lost during an emergency evacuation.
- Agencies should contribute to the development of interagency standards and guidelines for emergency evacuations, so that if the need arises all participating agencies will be operationally ready to assist with a shared understanding of what is needed.

Conclusion

The men and women of the participating agencies in Iowa and beyond should be applauded for their professionalism and dedication before and during these catastrophic events. The support and understanding of their families is also to be recognized. The staff members’ dedicated service ensured that there was no loss of life or escape attempts.

Natural disasters can take many forms, and no jail is entirely free from risk. Surviving such an event allows an agency to identify its own strengths and weaknesses. By participating in this study, the Linn County and Polk County Sheriff’s Offices not only showed their dedication to improving their respective operational and emergency evacuation plans, but also have helped to promote effective emergency preparation in other agencies.

All of the many agencies involved in these two incidents worked together for the common good. The Linn County Sheriff’s Office suffered a very large setback to its operations and has risen to the challenge, performing admirably during the recovery. Staff of the Polk County Sheriff’s Office also demonstrated outstanding professionalism under conditions that were less dire but still quite threatening. Although

the widespread flooding in June 2008 was devastating and destructive to many citizens and emergency responders in and around the State of Iowa, the public safety response is to be congratulated. These events have reinforced agencies' understanding of the continuous need for "all-hazards" training and exercises to be undertaken with federal, state, county, tribal, and local agencies, as well as the benefits of including the private sector in disaster planning.

Document available at:

http://community.nicic.gov/blogs/national_jail_exchange/archive/2012/08/13/two-case-studies-on-jail-evacuations-during-a-natural-disaster-iowa-s-2008-flooding.aspx

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