

Piatt County Emergency Management Agency

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PIATT COUNTY ADDS EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT RESPONSE VEHICLE

Piatt County Emergency Management Agency director Mike Holmes has been steadily upgrading the county's emergency response capability since he took over the job last year. Part of that response plan is the county's ability to rapidly deploy equipment to any part of the county on short notice. This capability is not only good public policy, it is required by the state and federal agencies that fund the county agency through grants and licensing.

The county took a major step toward fulfilling its obligations to funding agencies last month when it purchased a new response vehicle for Holmes. Prior to that, Holmes was using an old county vehicle that had been handed down to the EMA from the county highway department. That truck, a 2004 Ford Explorer, had developed multiple mechanical issues over time, and on any given day it would not start. "There were days when I had to jump it to get it started in the morning, then it would be dead again a couple of times later in the day," Holmes said. On several occasions, Holmes had to ask Monticello police officers to give him a jump start when he had parked on the square to go to the courthouse, but recently even that didn't help. "It wouldn't even take a charge the last time it happened, the electrical failures had fried the battery," Holmes said. Then, a new battery was installed which only alleviated the problem temporarily.

Holmes and his vehicle problems became the subject of jokes at regional EMA meetings. "My counterparts would always say, 'don't let Mike be the last person to leave, he will probably need a jump.'" It became a running joke among his peers, Holmes said. Piatt County had become known around the area for its inability to perform in the emergency management world, and the truck was a symbol of that ineptitude.

Assistant State's Attorney Elizabeth Dobson said that not having a reliable EMA vehicle put the county at risk. "It is not a matter of if the county will be hit with a disaster of some sort, it's only a matter of when," she said, "and if we can't effectively respond, we could be sued." Holmes is charged with preparing for and responding to a variety of hazards. He and a task force of local emergency responders recently identified the most likely disasters which could impact the county. The list included, tornado, train derailment, pipeline break, snow storm, widespread power outage, chemical spill, major interstate highway accident, terrorist attack, cyber-attack, and earthquake. "These are just the ones we think may be the most likely to occur," Holmes said. "We must plan for multiple things because we can't predict the future."

Piatt County EMA would automatically be called on to respond to a hazardous materials situation, any structure fire at a commercial business regardless of size, a multiple alarm structure fire, missing persons reports, mass casualty incidents, any vehicle accident involving 3 or more vehicles or 3 or more injured parties, incidents involving major road closures, active shooter, bomb threats, or terrorism calls, any incident involving the railroad, any incident involving a pipeline, plane crashes anywhere in the

county, weather warnings, including tornado, blizzard, flood, or ice, train derailment, Mutual Aid Box Alarm System (MABAS) incidents, evacuations that require the public to leave their residence, place of work, social or recreational event, or congregate care facility, i.e., hospital or nursing home, and any incidents that may escalate past the ability of local resources to respond. According to Holmes, Piatt County has also entered into agreements with other Illinois counties whereby access can be gained to necessary resources, but our EMA has to be able to travel to pick up resources and travel to return resources when the emergency concludes.

Currently, the county's EMA equipment includes 2 large trailers—a Class IV and a Class V—one of which is used as a mobile decontamination unit and the other as a mobile command center. In addition, the county has memorandums of understanding with neighboring counties and the IEMA (Illinois Emergency Management Agency) to share equipment and resources. For instance, there is a Class IV communications trailer at Carlinville available for use in Piatt County, if needed, as well as a command center trailer located in Princeton that can be borrowed. Use of either trailer would require that Piatt County EMA transport the trailer from its home county.

State's Attorney Dana Rhoades said her office looked into methods for the purchase of the used vehicle for EMA. "From our perspective," she said, "each day that goes by without an emergency puts us one day closer to having an emergency. We were aware that the EMA vehicle had to be jump started every day, which created a real concern for timely addressing an emergency. One morning, our EMA director got electrically shocked while jump starting the vehicle in order to get to work for the day. It is important for people to know just how desperate the vehicle situation was. The old vehicle was not safe at all," Rhoades said.

County Board chairman Ray Spencer made the recommendation to purchase the new EMA truck. He said there is a stop-gap line item under the miscellaneous budget within the general fund. This line item was created when Randy Keith was the county board chairman for emergency expenses. Although the current budget did not commit any funds to this line item for the 2018-2019 budget year, the budget line still exists, which means that the county board chairman is still authorized to submit an expense under this line item. Spencer, in his role as chairman, has the authority and discretion to approve this expense for the benefit and security of the county.

A decision was made by county officials last month to purchase a 2014 ¾-ton Chevrolet Silverado pickup truck for use by EMA director Holmes. The truck, which was purchased from Douglas Dodge in Clinton, will adequately tow the 10,000 and 12,000 pound trailers used by the department, which is something the old EMA vehicle was not designed to do. Holmes said local dealerships were consulted, but a similar vehicle at the same price point was not found in the county. "We gave local dealers an opportunity to assist us," Holmes said. "We felt the truck in Clinton was exactly what we were looking for at a price that was around \$7,000 less than we would have spent on a vehicle from within the county. In the final analysis, it seemed best to save the taxpayers that amount."

Holmes is now in the process of having the radios and lighting package installed in the new truck. "It is crucial that we do the updated lighting," he said. "With so many fatalities resulting from accidents along the side of the interstates, we need the visibility. The old EMA truck's emergency lighting was outdated and not up to code, but it made little sense to spend money upgrading the lighting if the truck was going to be replaced. "The process of removing the equipment and installing it in a different vehicle is an expense that we only wanted to incur once," Holmes said.

Holmes is pleased that the county is taking its emergency management responsibility seriously. "The state and the federal EMA officials have already been here to observe what progress we've been making," he said. "This is serious business, and the funding agencies won't keep giving us grant money if we don't comply with their guidelines on how we operate." He said the new truck is just the beginning, but already his EMA colleagues have taken notice of the change. "It is an important start and I've received many positive comments about it. I certainly can't lead our emergency response efforts effectively if my vehicle won't start," Holmes said.

Spencer thinks the Piatt EMA is making good progress under Holmes' leadership. "Mike is doing a fantastic job on multiple fronts," Spencer said. "He's reinvigorated the agency, and now there is a sense of direction. Definite progress is being made toward our EMA becoming a state-of-the-art entity. The citizens of Piatt County can take pride in that."

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