

As We See It

Are we prepared?

The exhausted fire fighters were forced back by the flames, reaching as high as 50 to 75 feet as they consumed sage and rabbit brush along the base of Ward Mountain.

More than a dozen homes already had been destroyed by the lightning-caused wildfire which was being whipped toward town by strong August winds. The fire raced forward at a half mile per hour.

The incident commander had no choice. Mineral Heights and the Shoshone Indian Colony would have to be evacuated. Maybe Ely itself.

But no one here had ever considered an evacuation of that size.

At first local doctors thought it was a seasonal outbreak of the flu, as more people came into the clinic with the same symptoms.

Then people started to die... at first the very old and very young. But then otherwise healthy adults started to succumb to the mysterious sickness..

Outbreaks began to be reported in other communities in Idaho, Montana and Wyoming, as well as Nevada and Utah..

Bird flu had arrived in the United States..

Bed space at William Bee Ririe Hospital quickly filled. And more beds were desperately needed. The hospital began to search for public buildings around the community to use as emergency clinics. Schools closed to slow the spread of the virus, but not in time to prevent many families from contracting the disease. The CDC identified the virus as a new strain of the oriental bird flu, brought into America by migrating raptors, which had eaten contaminated water fowl in Siberia.

And it could spread from human to human. The CDC had warned communities to prepare for a inevitable pandemic, but Ely had not..

The storms lined up in the North Pacific as the jet stream dipped deep into Nevada. December had already been the snowiest month on record since the late 1940s. And there was still more to come.

Each storm added up to a foot of snow in Ely and road crews were hard-pressed to keep even the main arteries open, much less the neighborhood streets.

Another blizzard arrived as the previous system left. The snow continued to accumulate.

People began to compare the situation to Operation Haylift -- those few people who could get out.

Snow-mobiles, snow shoes and skis were the only ways people could get around -- the people who were lucky enough get out of their homes.

But some people, the very elderly and other shut-ins, were trapped. They couldn't get outside as the drifts reached up to their roofs.

Their food began to dwindle; their prescriptions were running low. Fortunately for most of them, other people knew where they were, and many were being helped by concerned volunteers.

But some others without friends or families were totally alone, waiting for help to arrive.

For a few, the help finally arrived too late, because the community wasn't prepared to help its most at-risk residents.

The first responders showed up at the crash scene within minutes. A tractor-trailer had smashed into the steam locomotive as it crossed U.S. 93, rupturing its boiler.

Before the EMTs could help the scalded train crew, several felt their own skin start to burn. Headaches followed and vomiting.

A green cloud began to spread from the truck's ruptured trailer overturned on the highway.

As the EMTs rushed to put on their air packs and other protective gear, they saw the growing toxic cloud begin to drift toward Ely's only hospital. Nobody was prepared for anything like this.

The list of potential emergencies could go on, but you get the point.

The scenarios above are all too possible. There's nothing we can do to prevent disasters, but we can make ourselves as prepared for them as possible.

The White Pine Ministerial Association knows that.

It has started an effort to compile a list of community resources and schedule emergency seminars.

But we would like to see more... much more.

Our emergency workers, police and fire fighters do an excellent job of protecting us. But what happens when a disaster is so great it overwhelms their best efforts?

This isn't something the sheriff's office alone can prepare for, nor the fire department nor the EMTs.

The schools, communications providers, the medical community, grocery stores, construction contractors, electricity and fuel providers and the local media need to become involved, as well.

The ministers deserve praise for taking the lead in this. But their leadership will only matter if the community recognizes the need is real and acts in time.

And we don't know how much time we have.