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WMFC Takes in Families at a Moment's Notice

Midland County residents will never forget Tuesday, May 19, 2020. At about 12:22 a.m. a mass alert lit up the phones of hundreds of citizens advising them to evacuate their homes due to an "imminent dam failure." Later that day, at approximately 6:00 p.m., the unthinkable happened...a section of the **Edenville Dam** in **Midland County** failed and billions of gallons of water rushed downstream threatening the lives of thousands. On little to no notice, West Midland Family Center (WMFC) sprang into action and quickly opened its doors as an emergency shelter for those who were trying to escape the flood waters.

"When we opened as a shelter in response to the flood we had no idea what to expect," commented **WMFC Executive Director, Greg Dorrien**, "we just knew that it was a dire situation. The

first night about 40 people arrived, the second night there were approximately 15. About half of our guests stayed the night in their cars in our parking lot using little more than our bathrooms usually because of the fear of the Coronavirus," explained Dorrien. "I was really proud of our staff. They volunteered at a moment's notice so we could open as a 24-hour shelter."

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WMFC Family Services Stands On Front Line

As flood waters slowly rose to a historic level, 11,000 people in the **City of Midland** were evacuated which included the entire **Village of Sanford**. Miraculously, thanks to the first responders, not one life was lost. In the weeks that followed, in partnership with the **United Way of Midland County (UW)**, **West Midland Family Center (WMFC)** transitioned from family center to flood relief distribution center. Most of the tasks that staff filled their days with in the months that followed weren't written in their job descriptions. The desire to go above and

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United Way One of Many Helpers

by Greg Dorrien

So much has changed this year. It's impossible to determine what to anticipate, making the world feel strange and difficult to understand. In such times its best to look for and find comfort in the familiar. That which remains the same, which is known and common, creates the very foundation that we can hold to as we all walk through the rest of this craziness. As I look for consistency,

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Dow Chemical Volunteers lend a hand loading cleaning supplies into the vehicles of flood victims.

The Best of Humanity on Display as Community Rises to the Challenge

Following is a firsthand account from **Helen Roth** who is the **West Midland Family Center (WMFC) Volunteer Coordinator**.

"The day after the flood when I went into work, I spoke with several of the families who had stayed overnight at the WMFC Emergency Shelter whom were waiting to return to their homes to survey the flood damage," shared **Helen Roth, WMFC Volunteer Coordinator**. "I knew right then that WMFC had to do more and staff members all agreed. We had a meeting that day to discuss how best to become involved. The devastation was so vast and the task ahead was daunting. The first question we needed an answer for was where to begin."

"We started by reaching out to people who we thought might need help," explained Roth, "I found Lawrence by going door to door. The door to Lawrence's home was wide open yet no one was home. Everything inside was covered in a thick layer of mud. The neighbor explained to me that the homeowner had recently injured himself and needed our help so I left my phone number," continued Roth. "When Lawrence called I assured him WMFC would help and we'd be over the next day."

Roth reached out to WMFC staff and others. A large group of volunteers stepped up to help including members

of the **Bullock Creek Baseball Team**. The next day the group met Lawrence at his house.

"The home was a total loss. The water had risen to within an inch of the main floor ceiling," shared Roth. "We had to remove everything he owned and haul it to the road and



Lawrence had recently finished remodeling his kitchen and bathroom and it was all destroyed. COP students helped gut what was left.

then strip his home down to the studs. Lawrence told me that there would be no insurance help and he had no idea how he would ever rebuild," shared Roth. "As hard as we worked, it was clear that Lawrence's home would not be finished by the day's end so we told him we'd be back in the morning."

The next day Roth brought a new volunteer group to help Lawrence which included **DOW College Opportunity Program (COP) Director Mike Sobolewski** and some COP kids. During the day Lawrence found his grandmother's accordion completely covered in mud and he shared with the group how much it meant to him. Sobolewski asked Lawrence if he could take the accordion and try to get it cleaned up. Lawrence was shocked by the kindness. In the weeks ahead, Sobolewski did indeed return the accordion to Lawrence as promised. It was just one small victory.

"During that week WMFC deployed several volunteer groups to help clear 11 homes and the **Sanford Historical Museum**. The people we met were kind and thankful. At the end of the week I was left with so many mixed emotions. While most volunteer jobs come with a great feeling of accomplishment once a task is completed," shared Roth, "this was an entirely different experience. There were no good feelings afterwards, just sadness knowing that these people had such a long road ahead of them."

"There is no way to sugar coat this. People will be struggling for months and years with the challenge of starting over," explained Roth. "WMFC continues to check in on families to see how they're doing and let them know that we are here to help. We'll continue to reach out and assist them in any way we can and we won't stop helping until the challenge that they face is over."

This is just one story of the hundreds of that could be told by those who found themselves in the path of the flood waters that poured into Mid-Michigan homes. The countless stories of the strength of the human spirit, the kindness and generosity of one stranger to another, the love and perseverance of family and the loyalty of friends could fill volumes of books. Although devastating, so much good came out of those horrific moments. Clearly the very best in humanity has been present not only during, but in the days, weeks and months that have followed the Flood of 2020.



"We had to remove everything he owned and drag it to the road," shared Roth.



Lawrence's grandmother's accordion was saved through the efforts of WMFC Staff.

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beyond was simply a passion for caring that was and is etched on their hearts. In response to the emergency, UW quickly set up flood relief site locations throughout the county. **Sheleigh Nicolai, WMFC Family Services Liaison** worked hand in hand with **United Way Director of Impact and Capacity Building, Beth Sorenson Prince** to set up and manage the WMFC location.



Beth Sorenson Prince

"We are fortunate to have such a strong network of partners that stepped up during this catastrophic event," stated Prince. "The team at WMFC rolled up their sleeves and jumped right in to reach out to people. We are grateful for their partnership and support."

UW sent a semi-trailer full of supplies and staffed the flood relief site for months with help from a team of **Dow Chemical Company** volunteers.

"At the end of June, the relief effort

shifted into a long-term recovery approach," explained Nicolai. "WMFC took over management of the site in early June and continued the relief efforts until early August. UW checked in with us weekly and continued to track and deliver supplies as needed. WMFC was able to help an additional 85 families," said Nicolai.

Today, four months after the flood, the work continues. **Family Services Staff** are visiting campgrounds where flood victims now reside. With no place to call home, there is concern for their welfare during the upcoming winter months.

"Although we are no longer a relief site we continue to help as much as possible. Winter is fast approaching and will bring different needs, like warmer clothes and heating assistance," commented Nicolai. "People continue to call asking for help. **Allie (Liquia, WMFC Family Services Liaison)** and I have been taking frozen food, personal care items, bread, dog/cat food and other needed items to Sanford a few times a month," shared Nicolai. "We sit in the Red Oak

parking lot and people come by and pick out what they need. The families are so grateful for the help," continued Nicolai.

"We are fortunate to live in such a great community. The collaborations and speed at which the United Way put things together was amazing. The stories we hear, and the relationships that we built will always stick with me," stated Nicolai. "Seeing the perseverance of everyone in our community inspires me and the WMFC staff to push hard every day to do the best we can do to help."



Sheleigh Nicolai and Allie Liquia sort through and organize one of the many donations.

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Although there were several emergency shelters that opened across the affected counties, many did not allow pets. This made WMFC a bit unique. "Pets are important members of a family," explained **Family Services Liaison Sheleigh Nicolai**. "Leaving a pet in a dangerous situation while a family finds shelter elsewhere, is unthinkable for most 'pet parents.'"

As staff got supplies out of storage, set up cots, put together toiletry bags and readied for the influx of families, word spread throughout the community of what was going on at WMFC.

"The phone started ringing off the

hook," shared Dorrien. "The news spread and soon people and businesses from across the state and across state lines were calling wanting to know how they could help." "The outpouring of concern, help, compassion and encouragement was so uplifting," explained Dorrien. "The best of humanity was on full display during those horrific hours."

The May flood event was the third time in the past year WMFC opened as an emergency shelter. As a result, WMFC staffers have since created a **WMFC Emergency Shelter Team**, developed a **WMFC Emergency Shelter Manual**, and stocked up on

emergency shelter supplies. The emergency shelter team stands prepared to assist in the event of future crises.

"In a large-scale event the **American Red Cross** knows that WMFC will open to help if a shelter is needed," explained Dorrien. "WMFC, with the support of the community, will take the lead to open during smaller scale events. We will be proactive in terms of being prepared when it comes to future events," continued Dorrien.

To donate to the WMFC Emergency Shelter, please contact Missy Finney at 989-832-3256.



*WMFC Staff and volunteer groups
pulled on their muck boots,
grabbed shovels and dug in to help
families impacted by the flood.*

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United Way One of Many Helpers...continued from page 1

the structural elements of our human service system provide that comfort for me. In our community, there are actually many such organizations, foundations and individuals. Countless. However, because it is autumn and because the *United Ways of Midland and Isabella Counties* partner in change with this organization annually, my



Greg Dorrien

thoughts turn to them. Their respective campaign proceeds are distributed widely in each community through their member agencies. *United Way (UW)* operates for us. Their campaign facilitates our work providing services in Midland and Isabella Counties. We couldn't do it without their efforts. As I go about my work at WMFC, I witness first-hand the effects of the *United Way Campaign Drive*. For this reason, WMFC staff members and I are highly motivated to play our part in making certain that UW meets their goal. We understand the ramification of falling short. Last year, in a time of relative prosperity we had 100% contribution participation from the staff. I can't help but wonder how the campaign will play out this year.

As I look toward the future, I cannot do so without considering, in particular, what Midland County has come through. We know that story all too well. The piece that may be lacking is general knowledge of the integral part that UW played in supporting this community through simultaneous catastrophes. Know this: if you were impacted by the floods and received assistance its likely UW had a hand in that. *In collaboration with many others*, United Way was instrumental in caring for individuals who suffered through the dam breaks. They stepped up to help fill the gaps, coordinated volunteer efforts and were involved in distributing food and cleaning supplies. They coordinated efforts to contact and assess the immediate and long term needs of flood victims. As *Mr. (Fred) Rogers* said, "... look for the helpers, you will always find people who are helping." Moving forward as a community, it's important we remember the helpers. Therefore, my challenge is to all employers and employees. Do your best to support the needs of our community by contributing to a strong UW campaign. Do what you can, because a community connected by hope and optimism is a safe community. I know that UW needs community support now, more than ever.