



City of Ferndale

POVERTY TASK FORCE REPORT

MEETING DATE: Sept. 4th, 2019

SUBJECT: Emergency Response for Vulnerable Populations

DATE: 8/30/19

FROM: Riley Sweeney, Communications Officer

PRESENTATION BY: Riley Sweeney

SYNOPSIS: Here is an overview of the issues and resources relating to Emergency Situations and how that interplays with vulnerable populations in north Whatcom County.

STAFF NOTES: When the flood waters rise, the big earthquake hits or a catastrophic train derailment releases dangerous material into our community – it affects everyone. However, for our most vulnerable populations, a crisis can quickly turn deadly.

Most of the discussion in Bellingham and Whatcom has been centered around a cold weather shelter however I believe this is one small piece of a larger question: when disaster strikes, how do we ensure everyone stays safe?

Thankfully, we have talented and capable people who spend a great deal of their time preparing for the worst. We will be joined at our meeting by John Gargett and Frances Burkhart with the Whatcom County Sheriff's Office Division of Emergency Management. They bring their years of experience to bear on preparing our community for exactly these sorts of disasters.

We will also be joined by Ferndale Police Chief Kevin Turner, who has spearheaded the latest update to our emergency response plan and will direct our first responders in a crisis.

As usual, below is a brief outline of some of the issues however it is by no means exhaustive. Personally, I've completed over 100 hours of training on emergency preparedness, mostly in my role as Public Information Officer (PIO) for the City and Police Department, however I've barely scratched the surface.

BACKGROUND:



Snow and Ice Control

Before the snow falls, the City is already hard at work preparing for the worst. We closely monitor the conditions while applying sand and/or salt to trouble spots throughout the city. As icy conditions arrive, we plow our priority routes which ensure that first responders have access throughout the city. You can find the complete map of priority routes here:

https://www.cityofferndale.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Street_Snow_Removal_Plan_2018.jpg

Residents are urged not to drive and maintain supplies of water, food, batteries and other essentials in case of extended power outages or icy conditions however not everyone has access to these resources.

When the snow falls, bus service can be impacted and warm spaces are hard to find. The Ferndale Library has a good track record of remaining open during inclement weather but it is not a cold-weather shelter.

In years past, the United Church of Ferndale has been identified by the Red Cross as a cold weather shelter but that is not accurate, this is no official cold weather shelter in the City limits.

Definitions that will be helpful for this discussion. A **Cold Weather Shelter** can be a place for people to warm up either during the day or evening. A **Warming Station** is usually a place for people to warm up but they cannot stay for extended periods of time (i.e. they cannot sleep there). An **overnight cold weather shelter** allows for people to sleep there.

Cold Weather Shelter Options

The obvious solution in Ferndale would be to convert the Pioneer Pavilion Community Center into a cold weather shelter during inclement weather. Speaking with the city's insurance provider (WCIA), they would require police presence at all times for an overnight facility but would be more lenient about using SCOPE (volunteer) officers for a daytime warming station. Obviously inclement weather would also impact the ability of volunteers to arrive and staff the station.

Implementing this would require additional training and materials for our volunteers.

Other options include supporting local churches assisting vulnerable populations on a person-by-person basis or utilizing a private facility like the Senior Center.



Flood Response

The most likely and common threat our community faces is flooding from the Nooksack River. Usually, we have anywhere from 1-3 days warning about rising river levels although flash flood conditions are possible. When the river rises, our Public Works staff mobilizes to strengthen the levy and protect critical infrastructure such as the police station.

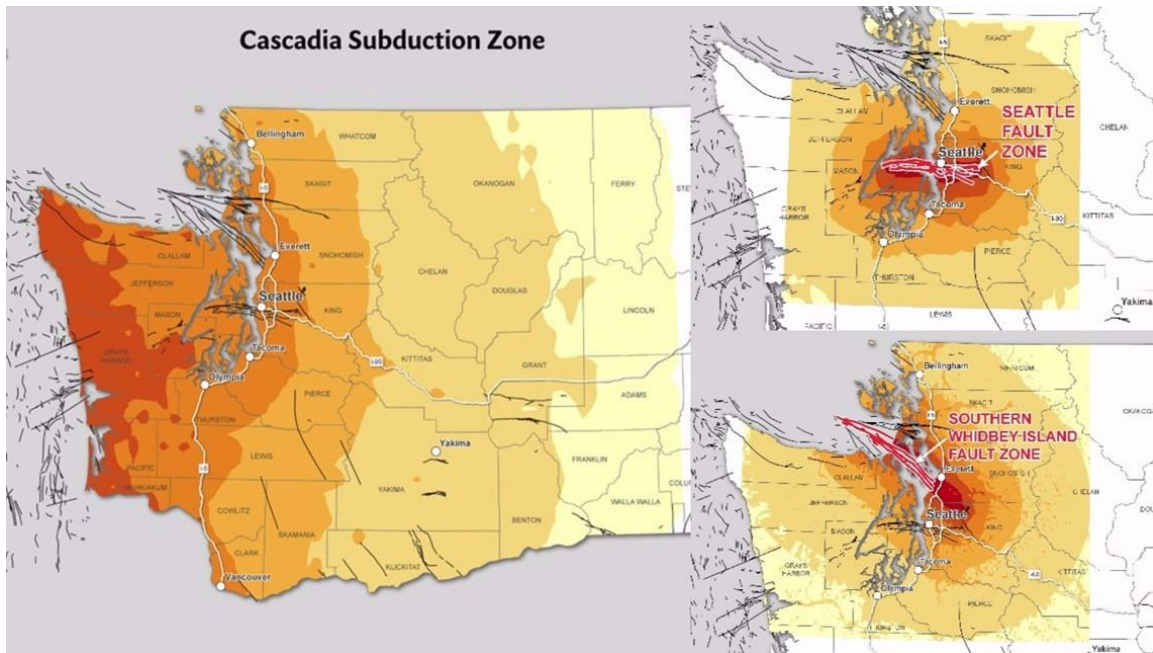
Challenges for vulnerable populations during a flood would include transportation, since both the Pioneer and I-5 bridges may be impacted, and the need to get to high ground.



Train Derailment/Toxic Spill

In the case of a train derailment and/or toxic spill as a result of a train derailment, the city would face many of the same challenges as a flood but with our first responders tied up dealing with the mess rather than helping treat the public.

The City has interlocal agreements with our neighboring municipalities however for a large scale event like this, it would strain everyone's ability to treat and relocate the public, especially for vulnerable populations.



Large Scale Earthquake – The Big One

We are overdue for an earthquake the size and scale this community has not seen since white settlers arrived on our shores. A significant earthquake would disable both bridges across the Nooksack, knock out power, cell and water service for weeks, if not months, and could trigger other emergencies – especially if it happened during cold weather months.

Efforts to mitigate this with the population at large revolve around increasing resiliency – in this case, encouraging folks to keep food, water, medicine on hand in case of an emergency so that they can survive until aid can arrive from Canada or south of Washington.



Communications

No matter the crisis, one of the biggest challenges for assisting vulnerable populations will be communications. How do you get accurate information to someone who isn't online, or doesn't speak/read English in a crisis?

Ferdale has made some efforts to expand our reach during non-crisis situations (our city newsletter which is distributed through utility bills quarterly) but that will not work in an emergency. Obviously, we'd utilize our media partners, reverse 911 and go door-to-door as necessary but no matter the method, this will remain a major challenge in a crisis.