

RATON ~ NEW MEXICO NEWS

Blizzard presses Union County responders into action

By **TIM KELLER**
The Chronicle-News

The blizzard that rolled into Union County, New Mexico, at dusk Thursday evening fully tested the county's emergency service responders, many of whom got very little sleep over the next 30 hours. While many fortunate residents spent the storm indoors staying warm, they may have been blissfully unaware of their neighbors out helping others in the eye of the storm. By all reports, it was a well-run and successful response.

Union County Emergency Services Manager Midge Graham began working the phones at 2 p.m. Thursday, about three hours ahead of the storm's arrival. Receiving regular updates from both the National Weather Service and the U.S. Homeland Security Department's Santa Fe office, Graham maintained regular contact with the New Mexico State Police, the Union County Sheriff's office, Clayton Police Department, Union County General Hospital, and the region's 911 dispatchers based at Clayton PD. Her job included getting the word out through all the communities, but she said most people were already aware. "People in this county are weather watchers," she said.

Working three phones from her rural home south of Capulin, Graham coordinated the Emergency Operations Center that was set up in Clayton. Here, emergency services were coordinated by the sheriff's department, Clayton PD, the Clayton city manager, Clayton EMS, and other emer-



Photos by Tim Keller

Chuck Montoya uses a snow blower to clear his driveway on Highway 64/87 in Des Moines Saturday morning.

gency responders. One of the early orders of business was to keep all emergency routes to the hospital open.

Even before the storm's arrival, Graham suggested the closing of Highway 64/87 between Raton and Clayton. She credits Clayton PD's 911 dispatcher for urging the New Mexico State Police to close the highway just one hour into the storm as white-out conditions made driving treacherous. "We're putting Union County responders in harm's way," Graham said; she felt relieved

when the state police closed the highway at 6 p.m.

Highway 56 between Springer and Clayton was left open throughout the storm as an alternate route, but it didn't escape the storm. Friday afternoon a convoy of Union County Sheriff's 4-wheel drive vehicles followed a highway department grader down Highway 56 to the Colfax County line, filling their vehicles with stranded motorists before returning to Clayton. The grader broke through snow drifts up to six feet high. Visibility was low. A

sheriff's deputy radioed the dispatcher to use phone contact with the stranded vehicles ahead of the convoy's arrival. "Tell them if their cars are still running to turn on their lights and flashers so we won't run into them." One man reported having been stranded in his car for almost 18 hours, since 10 p.m. Thursday.

All of the Union County Sheriff's officers, aided by reserve officers, were in the blizzard until well after midnight Thursday night, then again by 7 a.m. Friday. By 9 p.m.



Baca Valley Telephone contributed crews and equipment Saturday to help Des Moines dig out.

Friday they had checked all roads and assisted dozens of stranded motorists, finally calling it a long day as the storm moved off past the Texas panhandle.

Saturday morning, David Graham, Union County Extension agent and Midge's husband, started checking with the county's ranchers who were finally able to get out to assess the state of their livestock, hoping to find no losses.

Midge Graham had the New Mexico Emergency Operations Center and the Homeland Security Department on standby from Thursday night to Friday night. Union County was officially declared to be in a "Local Winter Storm State of Emergency" at 8:55 a.m. Friday. Graham helped acquire the status in order to bring additional state resources, including tractors and graders that joined in clearing highways and other roads throughout the weekend.

"People ask why we don't have the highway crews out sooner," Graham said. "They

don't realize that if blades go out in the midst of the blizzard, they can't see. And there's nothing they can do that's not going to get covered up again immediately."

Graham, the former superintendent of Des Moines School, has held her current position since November; this was her first big emergency. From Thursday morning to Friday night, she slept only once, for 90 minutes. "But that was the case for many people in this county, not just me," she pointed out. "We have so many great people. And we have so many skilled emergency responders. I'm always amazed at how good people are."

Her comment was echoed by current Des Moines Schools superintendent, Garrett Bosarge, who helped shelter eleven stranded motorists. "I think the emergency response was so great," he said. "Somebody could've gotten killed out there. It's impressive how everyone gets together when it's needed."

Blizzard turns Des Moines School cafeteria into impromptu B&B

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Instead, they were the first of three carloads of stranded motorists to arrive at the Des Moines School.

The blizzard hit Des Moines at 5 p.m. Thursday; within minutes, visibility was measured in yards, and sometimes feet. Midge Graham, emergency services manager for Union County, was already working the phone. One call was to Garrett Bosarge, the superintendent of Des Moines Schools, a position Graham herself held for many years. She asked Bosarge to open the school and expect stranded travelers. The Havens family pulled in at 9:30 p.m., a half hour ahead of the second vehicle, a Dodge pickup carrying four Raton men.

Ruben Saenz, Lorenzo Gutierrez, Macario Hinojos, and Ruben Torres, Jr., have spent the past two months building fences between the T.O. East and Andrew Jeffers ranches northeast of Des Moines. The storm hit as they were finishing work at dusk Thursday. They started back on the caliche road toward Des Moines at 6 p.m., completing the 15-mile drive at 10 p.m.

"You couldn't see the hood of the pickup," said Saenz, who was driving. "Sometimes you had to stop. I drove real slow. I had my window down to look out." The rear-wheel drive pickup slid off the road several times but, miraculously, it never got stuck. Reaching Des Moines hungry, the foursome headed to the Sierra Grande Restaurant, but didn't make it. A highway department truck stopped to tell them everything was shut down. They were directed to Des Moines School, where they joined the Havens family for the night.

Meantime, Grover and Joy Pickering had landed at Amarillo Airport with their

two children, Will, 6, and Allison, 8, from their home in Murphy, Texas, north of Dallas. They rented a Saturn Aura and started toward a weekend ski vacation in Colorado. They ran into the blizzard at dusk. They spent part of their vacation in the cafeteria at Des Moines School.

Grover remembered, "The windshield wipers went out very early in the snowstorm. Joy would look out the right window and I would look out the left and we just hoped no one was in front of us." They averaged 10 mph. Near Grenville, they pulled off Highway 64/87 and sat for an hour. They called 911 and spoke for the first of several times with Sandy Wyant, the dispatcher at Clayton PD. She urged them to sit tight.

"I'm not a big fan of that," Grover explained. "I don't like sitting still. We followed a farmer carrying two large round bales of hay, but eventually I couldn't keep up with him." Pulled over again, he waited a long time for another set of headlights, then pulled in close behind a westbound 18-wheeler, following it to Des Moines. The truck pulled in at the closed Sierra Grande Restaurant, a truck stop, where the driver decided to remain.

After sitting there for another hour, the Pickerings decided to attempt the drive to Des Moines School, about 1200 difficult yards ahead. They didn't make it. After coming to ground in a deep snowdrift in the westbound lane, they now followed the advice of Wyant, the Clayton 911 dispatcher. ("Sandy was wonderful - just fabulous - calm and encouraging," Grover said.) They sat there for almost four hours.

Wyant contacted Midge Graham, who arranged for

Ray Churchman, the Des Moines School principal, to take the school's Chevy Suburban to bring the Pickerings to the school. The Suburban ran aground just short of the Pickering's rented Saturn. At 4 a.m., with Churchman leading the way, the five hiked through the blizzard to the school.

Because the New Mexico State Police and the Department of Transportation closed Highway 64/87 between Raton and Clayton early, at the beginning of the storm, they avoided dangerous accidents and filling the Des Moines School with stranded travelers. As it was, Union County Sheriffs spent more than 24 hours assisting dozens of stranded motorists further south on Highway 56, which was left open. Only three carloads - eleven people - were stranded at Des Moines, and they counted themselves lucky.

Interviewed while heating a lunch of enchiladas in the school cafeteria Friday, Pam Havens said, "Ray and Garrett have been absolutely wonderful - very caring, very considerate, giving us their time. You don't get that everywhere. It's small town hospitality at its finest." Expressing her appreciation for how well Des Moines took care of all the stranded travelers, Havens spoke of her Westcliffe home and said, "Everyone from this town is now welcome to come stay at our place."

With assistance from the New Mexico Department of Transportation, she and the others were able to leave the Des Moines School Friday at mid-afternoon, making their way to Raton and points beyond. The highway officially re-opened Saturday

Radosavich addresses Watch group

By **MARTY MAYFIELD**
The Chronicle-News

Retired New Mexico State Police Captain Mark Radosavich spoke to a small hardy crowd at the Holiday Inn Express Thursday night about what makes a neighborhood watch program successful.

Sue Martin introduced Radosavich talking about needing to take the town back by making the neighborhood watch program more successful. Radosavich started the talk indicating how important communication lines between the local police and the watch programs are. They need to be open and informative.

Radosavich said, "This is your community you own it." He added that one of the things he noticed when he drove through town was the lack of graffiti, abandoned cars and such. He added that the group could be proud of the town.

Radosavich then asked the crowd if they really knew their neighbor. He brought up that there are 12 to 15 sex offenders registered in the Raton zip code. There are also about 170 individuals that are currently under supervision of the probation and parole board. He also talked about the release conditions these individuals are under, such as no drinking, no association with certain other individuals and how this can be used to remove them from the area, should they violate the conditions of release.

He then went into how to communicate with neighbors about activity using a perhaps a cell phone tree or telephone tree to pass along information. He then explained that when enough pressure is placed on the criminal element in the area that they will more than likely move on. He qualified that by saying he felt that police didn't reduce crime they just displaced it. That the criminal moves away finding it easier to do business elsewhere.

He also talked about how important it is to be accurate with the details of the crime in an area. He noted that just numbers really didn't mean much to him but flags on a map indicating the actual incident made more sense. He said you can see how concentrated the crime activity is in an area or how wide spread it is.

He then went into how important it is for the homeowner to be prepared should they become a victim of crime. With digital cameras being so prevalent these days he felt that there is no excuse not to have an inventory of your possessions. Record the serial numbers and descriptions of possessions.

He added that the home owners need to make sure they have deadbolts on doors and windows so that they are not easily opened. "Harden your house," he added. Create a well-



Photo by Marty Mayfield

Mark Radosavich talked to a hardy crowd that braved the snow Thursday evening to learn how to make their neighborhood watch program more successful.

lit area around the house.

Community policing includes the sharing of information on a timely basis. Again the lines of communication between police and the watch program need to be open and a proactive approach needs to be taken, noting that people need to be accountable for themselves. He talked about a neighborhood in Albuquerque where the residents found ways to reduce traffic flow in the area with medians to make it harder for the drive by shooting or drug deal. One resident actually set up a video camera and recorded the comings and goings of possible criminal activity giving police a tool to work with.

When it was all said and done Radosavich told the crowd that these residents took their neighborhood back by being proactive and helping the police displace the criminal element. He added that 80 percent of the crime is done by 30 percent of the population. He added that the participants in the program need to visit with the police chief and find out what the department's priorities are and how they can help. It was also suggested that a class on how to be a good witness would be helpful, so that the judicial system can put the criminal away, and not get them off on a technicality.