

# Lessons in Disaster Recovery: MPA Students in Eastern Carolina

*Rob Shapard*

The initial cost estimate for helping restore eastern North Carolina in the wake of Hurricane Floyd was at least \$6 billion in local, state, and federal funds [see the sidebar to the cover article, page 5]. Harder to measure is the total number of hours that officials from all levels of government, staffers from private relief agencies, and citizen volunteers have devoted to dealing with Floyd's aftermath. These public and private representatives have been at the forefront in meeting needs, from the most urgent, like evacuating people from flooded homes and providing food and shelter, to the more long-term, like filing federal buyout applications and helping rebuild communities.

A month after the flood subsided, a group of students from the Institute of Government's Master of Public Administration (MPA) Program spent part of their fall break as volunteers in several eastern North Carolina towns. They helped town officials with countless administrative tasks or did physical labor. They stayed in officials' homes or in facilities like Windsor's volunteer fire station and Farmville's public works building.

The idea was partly for the students to contribute to the tremendous volunteer effort the flooding had spurred. The aim also was for the students to get a taste of what public service jobs can

*The author covers Orange County for the Chapel Hill Herald.*



Kaye Farmer, Goldsboro News-Argus

be like after a major disaster. This article reports on their experiences in Goldsboro and Wallace and to a lesser extent in other cities.

## Assessing Damage in Goldsboro

Floyd dumped about 15 inches of rain on Goldsboro, on top of the 10 inches that fell earlier in September during Hurricane Dennis, according to Lee Worsley, assistant to the city manager. After Floyd the Neuse River flooded neighborhoods and parts of Seymour Johnson Air Force Base. There was about four feet of water in the town's wastewater treatment plant, and the main pump station had to be shut down, Worsley said.

Worsley estimated that 30 to 35 percent of Goldsboro lies within the 100- or 500-year floodplain. By mid-November the city had identified about

**In Goldsboro the Neuse River crested at a record 28.8 feet, 14.8 feet above flood stage. The Barnyard Shopping Center, pictured above, was inundated with water.**

250 homes with flood damage. Worsley thought the final figure would likely reach 300 to 400 homes.

Worsley put Laura Heyman and Amy Pomeranz, first- and second-year MPA students, respectively, to work in damage assessment. They spent a couple of days searching tax records for home values, then entering the values in a computer mapping program showing the locations of the homes. This step was key in determining whether homes were "substantially damaged" and thus eligible for the program under which the federal government will buy out the homeowners.

"This was a critical piece of information," Worsley said, "and at that time



Sarah Shapard



Sarah Shapard

**Above and bottom right: MPA students Ben Canada (in cap) and Daniel Newman rip up floorboards and shoe molding in a damaged Windsor house. Top right: Newman, Rob Shapard, MPA student Sarah Shapard, and Canada survey a day's worth of work.**

we just didn't have any city personnel to devote to [getting it].

"We were very appreciative of all the MPA volunteers giving up their fall break," he added. "It showed a lot of courage and commitment on their part."

Heyman, age twenty-five, from Williamsburg, Virginia, currently plans to work for a grant-making foundation after she graduates. She said the trip to Goldsboro connected her to the town and reminded her that being able to

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serve people directly is her goal in studying public administration. "It gave me a clear vision of why I'm [in the program], which sometimes gets lost in the theory classes," she remarked.

"You can see it on TV and the news, but when you see it in person, you realize these are people's homes," she said about the flood damage. "It's heart-wrenching. The knowledge that [the

recovery] is still there and being dealt with makes pretty much everything else seem insignificant.

"They treated us like we were there to do legitimate work," Heyman continued. "The way we were treated made a place for that community in our hearts. They tried to give us the best experience we could have, and teach us as much as they could."

Worsley said that two groups of volunteers besides the MPA students have helped the Goldsboro government in its recovery tasks: electrical inspectors from Chapel Hill and Raleigh, who assisted with initial inspections; and professional engineers from throughout North Carolina, who have assessed the damage on several hundred homes so far.

"All three sets of volunteers were crucial to us being able to get through the two months after Floyd struck," he commented. "They saved us literally months of assessment time. People are in limbo—they don't know what they need to do as far as repairing their homes. The application for the buyout program was due at the end of February, so it was critical to get the assessments done.

"It makes you very thankful for people who are kind enough to donate their time and thoughtful enough to

think about their fellow man and people who are in trouble and need help," he said.

Worsley himself is a 1999 graduate of the MPA Program. He went straight from school to the job in Goldsboro. Four months later he was dealing with the disaster of a lifetime. Asked why he chose local government work, Worsley replied, "After this storm, I'm not sure!" But seriously, he said, "I believe that local government has the most direct impact on a person's life. I can see the fruits of my labor much more quickly, and I can deal more directly with the citizens I serve."

### **Recouping Costs in Wallace**

In Wallace, population 3,400, floodwaters from the Northeast Cape Fear River inundated about sixty residences and an eighty-bed nursing home, according to town manager Ken Cor-

natzer. The water overran facilities like the airport, softball fields, and the wastewater treatment plant. Emergency personnel evacuated residents from about 700 homes, and most of the town's roads were impassable for four or five days.

The absence of local Red Cross or Salvation Army chapters, and the difficulty that outside agencies had in reaching Wallace, meant that the town had to set up its own disaster distribution center for the first time, Cornatzer said. By November, about 5,000 residents had gone through the center for items from food to cleaning supplies to furniture. Also, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) located a disaster assistance center in one of the town's facilities, where residents filed claims for emergency funds.

By the time the MPA students arrived, the town's costs in helping operate those two centers had reached about \$60,000, Cornatzer continued. First-year student Kelly O'Brien and second-year student Andra Stoll helped verify those costs and prepare an application to FEMA for reimbursement.

"At the time they came down, we were still busy trying to get our sewage

## "In a small town, you have a limited number of people who can do the paperwork that FEMA wants."

plant up and operating," Cornatzer said. He gave the students their task and let them run with it. "In a small town, you have a limited number of people who can do the paperwork that FEMA wants," Cornatzer explained. "It was very helpful to be able to turn it over to folks you didn't have to worry about from that point on."

Overall, Cornatzer said, the recovery would have been "totally impossible" without volunteers. In Wallace one church raised more than \$100,000 for building supplies, and another ran a soup kitchen for five weeks. Members of a third church have done the demolition work on forty flood-damaged homes and are now working on rebuilding those homes, he related.

From the MPA students' perspective, what they did was essentially one less thing for Cornatzer and other officials to do. "What we did was really valuable

in letting them push something off their plates and give it to someone else," Stoll said.

Stoll, age twenty-eight, spent two years teaching after she was trained by Teach for America (an alternative route to certification as a teacher, for liberal arts graduates). She entered the MPA Program with a goal of working further on education and community-building issues. Initially she believed that the kind of work she wanted to do would necessarily be in the private, nonprofit sector. However, her MPA experience has shown her the growing interdependence between nonprofit and local government agencies, especially in providing human services. She now sees a greater chance that a local government job would

match her interests well. The situation in Wallace was a clear example of a local government's importance in providing human services, through means such as the town's disaster distribution center.

A native of Portland, Oregon, Stoll said that going to Wallace also was a good chance to get out of the classroom and out of Chapel Hill. She was reminded that "there is a lot more to life than sitting around and worrying about a paper, [and] there is so much more to this state than the Triangle. There are a lot of other communities out there that have a lot of things going on."

For Cornatzer one of the flood's key lessons is the need for longer-term disaster planning. Wallace had a very good emergency response plan for dealing with initial rescues, he said, but, after that first stage, "it was all seat-of-the-pants."

In addition, he mentioned the importance of getting out accurate information. In Wallace and elsewhere, he said, people do not necessarily see newspaper or television reports as "the Truth." They are more likely to believe "what the boys at the country store are saying when you stop to get your cup of coffee." And what those folks are saying is not always right. To address this problem, Wallace officials took steps like holding weekly meetings with local pastors, asking them to pass along updates to their congregations.

Finally, Cornatzer said, the disaster showed that "nature is not going to conform to your statistical profiles," which purport to map features like 100-year floodplains.

### Elsewhere, Spending Time Well

Other MPA volunteers in eastern North Carolina were as follows:

- Jim Klingler and Andy Williams, who helped the town of Grifton with a FEMA reimbursement application and an EPA-required Consumer Confidence Report on water quality (the report was not flood related)
- Wendi Ellsworth and Fran O'Reilly, who worked in Rocky Mount's budget and permitting offices



Sarah Shepard

Across the street from the house where the MPA students are working, a Windsor citizen hoses flood debris off the walls and the windows of a church.



**Left: Ruined furniture lies in piles in the front yards of flooded homes in the Mar Mac community. Below: Ruby Vernon, 72, lost everything.**



- Larry Di Re and Peter Ray, who volunteered in Kinston's inspections and code-enforcement office
- Sean Brandon, Caryn Ernst, Josh Silverman, and Sonya Smith, who helped with FEMA forms and damage assessment in Farmville
- Randy Harrington, Mary Martin, and Ginny Satterfield, who worked in Wilson on the FEMA buyout application
- Ben Canada, Daniel Newman, and Sarah Shapard, who removed flooring in a home in Windsor
- Catherine Clark and Emily Gamble, who created pamphlets for the Pitt County Public Information Office to inform residents on flood-recovery topics, like repairing homes and avoiding contractor fraud

Clark and Gamble saw the wide range of information that local governments like Pitt County must grasp and relay to citizens. They also glimpsed the flood damage in that area.

Clark described the scene that she and Gamble saw one afternoon while taking photographs of storm debris: "[There were] absolutely incredible amounts of home furnishings piled in the yards, and the neighborhoods were deserted. There were many empty cars still covered in mud, and all the doorways were marked with spray-painted orange X's to show that the

house had been visited by the inspector and deemed unsuitable for occupancy."

Canada, Newman, and Shapard helped pull up the oak floorboards of a Windsor home that had been swamped by about three feet of water. The floor looked fine, but water damage was hidden underneath.

"I wanted to help, but I also wanted to do something that was a break from my routine, and ripping up floorboards was definitely a break from my routine," Canada said.

For Newman, a highlight was seeing many of Windsor's 2,400 residents helping one another recover from the flooding, which damaged about 70 downtown businesses and 130 homes. "It was nice to see them bonding," Newman commented. "It was reassuring about the human spirit."

Di Re spent part of his time in Kinston entering data from city inspectors' reports, and he was glad to do it. But what he found even more gratifying was helping citizens who came in with all kinds of questions. "That, to me, was better than just sitting behind a keyboard," he said.

Di Re is aiming toward work on the environmental management side of local government, possibly in water or wastewater services. In Kinston he found himself thinking that in a way the flood was an opportunity for towns to

redesign and rebuild facilities like treatment plants for the better.

As Williams described his experience in Grifton, "It brought me closer to ground level." His point was that he got a better view of what city government work can be like. "Grifton Town Hall was the first place people were turning to, from what I could tell," Williams said. He saw that town manager Paul Spruill's job was obviously one with different challenges each day, major disasters or not.

With classes back in session in November, the director of the MPA Program, Stephen Allred, spoke proudly about the students' volunteer efforts. "When people apply to the program, they talk about their commitment to public service, and we believe them," Allred said. "What's gratifying about this undertaking is that it shows they really are committed to that service.

"It's pretty remarkable to get half of a class to give up their fall break to go down and help out people they don't know and may never see again," he added.

Actually the MPA volunteers might see those people again if they take a local government job in eastern North Carolina after graduation. They would definitely be dealing with some of the same issues. As Worsley said, "This disaster is just beginning. I think you're going to see the effects for years to come."