

How can we ever forget the sight of 100-foot flames dancing along the Helena skyline in late July 2019. Over a dozen aircraft, numerous agencies and over 150 fire personnel fought the fire line that raged from Marysville and Lincoln all the way across to York. A dozen different neighborhoods were evacuated. Choking on smoke and encouraged to stay inside due to poor air quality, our community was on high alert.



Amber Johnson

Photo provided



Helena's North Hills glow as the North Hills fire burns in this July 2019 file photo.

THOM BRIDGE, Independent Record

“The hardest thing about emergency management is convincing people that they are vulnerable. It only happens to someone else, until it happens to you,” says Brett Lloyd, former public health emergency preparedness (PHEP) coordinator for Lewis and Clark Public Health.

County Commissioner Andy Hunthausen learned that lesson the hard way. Elected to the County Commission in the fall of 2006, Commissioner Hunthausen has been involved in Lewis and Clark County’s fire response for 15 years now. But in 2019, things got personal when he and his family were evacuated from their home during the North Hills fire.

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“It was pretty scary and dramatic,” Hunthausen said. “During an evacuation, you are filled with fear for your loved ones; the future of your life together hangs in the balance. Thankfully, we have family in the area and were able to pack up and go to my sister’s house. Not everyone is so lucky. What about our neighbors? I gained a whole new perspective about what people go through during natural disasters.”

“In a major disaster, we must rely on each other and our community, not just to survive but to rebuild,” says Lloyd. “The sooner we forge relationships, and the stronger those relationships are, the more resilient our neighborhoods and communities will be. It starts in your neighborhood and extends throughout the community.”

Lloyd emphasizes the need to prepare. Apart from hurricanes, Lewis and Clark County is susceptible to every other hazard – hazmat, flood, fire and earthquakes. These are the big ones, and any one of them could not only damage infrastructure but kill and injure lots of people.

“Some disasters are serious enough that you only have one chance. And if you haven’t prepared, you’ve reduced your chance of survival. Preparedness is not something you do all at once. Look at it as an ongoing process. Take steps; do a little at a time. It is a lot more manageable that way,” says Lloyd.

For Lewis and Clark residents interested in learning more about emergency preparedness and how to keep their families and property safe from the unimaginable, Lloyd and Hunthausen suggest a visit to the **ready.gov** or **redcross.org** websites for a list of ideas, supplies, tips, and tricks.

“You go down the list. What documents do we need, ownership of things, vehicle, home, insurance. In 2019, we had none of that information gathered in one place,” said Hunthausen. “After the North Hills fire, we now have a fire safe box, so that if our house was to burn down, our documents would be safe.”

“You also start looking around at all your stuff. We took a video of everything in our home, which you should do on the regular basis, so replacement costs can be equivalent to what is in your house. Because you can’t take everything with you during an evacuation. Maybe some family pictures and family heirlooms. The rest is just stuff. It makes you think about how much stuff you have, and most of it doesn’t really matter. Most things are replaceable. It’s the people who matter.”

In addition, the local Tri-County FireSafe Working Group works with residents and property owners to help reduce their fire risks and live more safely in a wildfire environment. Started in 1984, their programs include outreach and education, private property wildfire risk assessments, and risk reduction activities targeting hazardous fuels removal and defensible space improvements on private lands and structures that are at risk to the impacts of wildfire.

“Emergency preparedness is a big, often overlooked, piece of public health,” Lloyd reminds us. “Not just for individuals and families, but workplaces and schools as well. You can’t control Mother Nature, but you can mitigate harm. We can all make an effort to be fire wise, flood wise, earthquake wise and more. Be aware of your surroundings and possible hazards. Know your avenues of escape. Know where to shelter in place or lockdown during a hazmat spill or active shooting. Know your workplace or school plans and policies. Get yourself ready.”

For more information and resources about emergency preparedness, please visit the Lewis and Clark Public Health website at <https://www.lccountymt.gov/health/disease-control/emergency-preparedness.html>.

Amber Johnson is the communications specialist for Lewis and Clark Public Health.

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