

Executive Summary and Response Report
Snow Incident Management – February 14-15, 2007

Edited and approved by:

Cornell Emergency Management Committee
Ad hoc group of incident managers and executives

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On Wednesday, February 14th and Thursday, February 15th, 2007, the Ithaca area was subjected to a heavy snow storm accompanied by strong winds requiring the university to invoke an incident command process to govern its preparation, response and follow-up. An incident management team was assembled by EVP Stephen T. Golding as provided under emergency management policy 2.10. The preparation and execution stages were extensive and complex, involving more than a dozen functional areas and several hundred people. Decisions and processes were guided by inclement weather policy 2.5. The management team interacted regularly throughout the process.

Based upon recommendations from team members and with the best available weather advice, EVP Golding made the decision to open the University for business on Wednesday morning, requesting supervisors to fully support members of their staff who may be delayed or unable to safely get to the workplace. As weather conditions unexpectedly worsened during the morning, it became necessary to close the university at 12:45 PM and to delay opening the following morning until 9 AM in order to provide sufficient time to clear roads, parking lots and walkways.

During and after the incident, members of the team and other campus leaders have been registering ideas about the process including a preliminary debriefing forum held on February 20th with subsequent sessions during the summer. Further feedback was provided by members of the community including an electronic petition filed with President Skorton (enclosed). The Cornell Emergency Management Committee has discussed the event and provided valuable input into the processes and areas for improvement. While other useful ideas will be forthcoming, this document summarizes the campus critique to date.

Processes that worked well and should be preserved or expanded:

- ***Management team...*** An incident management team was assembled by EVP Golding in a timely way. The group organized for the effort expeditiously, and established an effective governing process.
- ***Implementation-Support team...*** Cornell operates like a small city. Hundreds of people in diverse functions across the university performed admirably to clear roads and sidewalks, maintain infrastructure, provide needed services in dining halls and residence halls, maintain public safety, and a host of other essential support functions. Cornell depends on their professionalism and they performed admirably.
- ***Conference call process...*** EVP Golding established a pattern of conference call check ins where all incident managers and other involved parties could gather information, vet ideas, ensure a common understanding of changing circumstances, and inform decision making.

- ***Internal Communications...*** The network of communications to both inform and execute decisions was effective. That included:
 - Links between Cornell Police Department to local law enforcement agencies (e.g. IPD, Tompkins County)
 - Internal communications among Cornell professionals
 - Links with government officials

- ***Public communications...*** Most public notices to the media were sent in a timely way and websites were for the most part effectively utilized.

- ***Collaboration with TCAT/and out of county transit service providers...*** A special schedule for buses was implemented to vacate the campus on Wednesday; this initiative required close partnership with TCAT's operations department. Other transit companies were informed and Transportation Services notified riders of changes in schedules.

- ***Usage of policy...*** Inclement weather policy 2.5 and message policy 5.2 were used effectively to govern the process.

Recommended Improvements – Response Report

- ***Coordination with local educational institutions...*** Develop steps for bringing the other educational institutions into the information exchange process (e.g. Ithaca College, Wells, TC3, school districts, etc)

Response: This was addressed and notification was successfully implemented in the April 2007 snow event.

- ***Timing of decision making...*** Be aware of lead times required to implement a decision to close or delay opening. For example:
 - A 10 PM decision is required to allow buses to change schedules and supervisors to contact employees that work on early shifts.
 - Develop a set of tests for making a decision (rate of accumulation, ability to clear roads and pathways, and keep clear etc.) to support an extended decision making window.

Response: This was addressed and decisions and notification were successfully implemented in the April 2007 snow event.

- ***Weather information...*** Recommendations are as follows:
 - Monitor all available sources of weather conditions (including Earth and Atmospheric Sciences -- Steve Colucci)
 - Be aware of public information accessed by employees and its implications for communications about operating status and decisions.
 - Define alternatives to communicate with those who don't receive "local TV" channels.
 - Weather advisory language needs to be better explained and communicated to staff along with clearer guidance about when or when not to stay home, go home etc.

Response: This was addressed and decisions and notification were successfully implemented in the April 2007 snow event.

Clearer advisory language and staff expectations are being addressed in communications to faculty, staff, and students this fall.

- ***Review levels of closing...*** Develop clear levels of road advisory and closing to allow a more nuanced response.
 - ***Road Advisory*** - In this case, roads are open but dangerous and travel advisories have been issued in Tompkins County. In these cases the university remains open.
 - ***Road Closure*** - In this case the Sheriff closes the roads. In these situations the university will close. All staff not pre-determined to hold an essential role will receive paid time off.

Response: Revised definitions of road advisory and closure, and the expectations for both have been defined and will be communicated in Fall 2007 communications to faculty, staff, and students:

- ***Road Advisory*** - In this case, roads are open but dangerous and travel advisories have been issued in Tompkins County or in a surrounding county that employees must travel through. In these cases the university remains open.
 - Colleges and units should plan ahead for these times when road conditions are likely to make it difficult for all staff to come to campus.
 - Managers are asked to work with staff in advance of poor weather to determine how work will be conducted during these days of inclement weather. These plans should clarify who will plan to come onto campus and who does not believe they will be able to make it to work.
 - For those not able to come to work, paid time off should be taken unless arrangements are made in advance to work at home or to make up the time later in that pay period.
 - This should be a dynamic planning process as staff should not be permanently assigned in any one category and the need for staff may change depending on events, programs and other factors such as whether students are on campus, or there are administrative deadlines to meet (eg. payroll cutoff).
 - When the university remains open, staff will be paid regular pay for time worked (unless overtime applies) and time off will be charged to accrued time off as selected by the staff member.
 - Employees will be released from the advance notice requirement to use vacation or personal accrued time.
 - Mutually respectful communication between the managers / supervisors and their staff is key during a time of emergency.
 - Supervisors should discuss staffing needs while recognizing the primary importance of keeping staff safe.
 - Individual circumstances need to be considered in concert with organizational needs.
 - If a satisfactory plan cannot be agreed upon, managers and staff are encouraged to seek assistance through their college/unit leadership or from their local HR representative.
- ***Road Closure*** - In this case the Sheriff closes the roads. In these situations the university will suspend operations. All staff not pre-determined to perform a critical role that requires them to be at work will stay home and receive paid time off. This applies to any roads closed in surrounding counties that an employee would have to cross as part of the normal path of travel to work.
 - **Roles Essential to Critical Functions** - These are positions that must be performed, even when the university suspends operations. Anyone in one of these roles who works during an emergency will be paid time and one

half for all hours worked, and receive additional compensatory time off equal to the time they work. These are jobs that are posted with notice that the person who holds the position is expected to come in even when the university is closed during a snow emergency. Positions included in this category are: Cornell Police, emergency response personnel, snow removal staff, utilities staff etc.

- Critical Functions - In these cases a unit must remain open, however the staff in that unit may rotate the responsibility to come in during emergencies. Management is required to develop staffing plans so that each year staff understand when they are expected to come in during an inclement weather closing. Examples of such operations include: the Veterinary hospital, the Statler Hotel, the residence and dining halls, some research laboratories. At some times, this may also include offices such as the payroll office.
- **Clarify “essential operations”**... Define and differentiate "essential functions" and “essential personnel”.

Response: As part of the recently deployed emergency planning process, roles and unit responsibilities have been better defined. This will enable units to develop emergency plans focusing specifically on the mission critical functions of the unit and the staff needed to perform these functions, either in a routine setting or during an emergency event:

- ***Critical Functions...*** colleges and units are required to identify mission critical operations and/or functions that must continue even in the event that the University suspends operations.
- ***Employees Performing Roles Essential to Critical Unit/University Operations...*** Colleges and units are required to identify those employees required to report to work to ensure that certain identified critical functions continue during an emergency or when the University has suspended operations (e.g. power outage, inclement weather, influenza pandemic). These employees most often work in areas that have been pre-identified as central essential service functions, have specialized training that is required to do the work, and/or have assignments directly related to critical research. Supervisors have the responsibility of informing these employees of their role and the expectations during an emergency event.

Update Critical staff rosters... Annually, in late summer, Human Resources working with the Office of Emergency Planning and Recovery will contact colleges and units to:

- Verify employee lists pulled from the Unit Plan EPR system,
- Remind college/unit supervisors to review unit staffing plans and to communicate to all designated employees in advance of an emergency to explain expectations
- Issue identification cards in conjunction with the Cornell Police (for use in the event that roads are closed).

- ***Improve Communications...*** Develop more comprehensive communications including:
 - ***Annual reminders...*** Issue annual reminders to faculty, staff, and students about inclement policies and procedures, including who makes the pertinent decisions and how they will receive information. Remind employees of the emergency planning guide (available both in print and on the web). Improve communication to managers regarding campus policy and expectations and the need to be support employees.

Response: This process is in place. There will be two communications going out in October and November 2007 (then on an annual basis) that will highlight inclement polices and procedures, and remind managers of their roles in regard to staff in inclement weather circumstances.

- ***Map& Improve the communications process...*** Formalize and expand the communications process before, during and following each event.
- ***Improve communications infrastructure...*** Develop an integrated emergency communications e-structure (one that builds more on web releases than press releases). Elements would include:
 - Linking web pages posted with emergency information.
 - Develop a back up e-system to the university message blaster
 - Developing strong e-mail lists inside the units to facilitate internal notifications for use with new mass notification systems and processes.
 - Customize messages where appropriate by using different communications strategies for different audiences as people got their information differently
 - Acquire and use more flexible telephone tree software

Response: University Communications has made enhancements to their organization and processes to address these concerns.

- ***Infrastructure testing...*** Periodically test all communications infrastructure. This includes 1) test message blasters 2) insure pre-approved authorization, 3) cross train more people in the use of specialized systems, 4) develop more seamless URL posting processes and 5) incorporate Wireless Priority Services (WPS) and automated telephone tree tools when available.

Response: Procedures and protocols are being developed that will ensure effective use and testing of all emergency communication methods.

- ***Clarify roles & responsibilities...*** Clarify the responsibilities of academic and support operating units to communicate with their staff about whether or not they

are required to work. Remind supervisors that in these communications safety comes first.

- **Foreign Nationals...** Find effective means to communicate with foreign national students
- **Logistical refinements...**
 - **Community involvement...** Define appropriate vehicles to better inform and engage the academic community.
 - **Managing messages...** Ensure coordination of messages on the Inclement Weather hotline (255-3377), CUINFO recording matches, details shown on the Operating Status and Special Conditions web pages.
 - **Formally assign the incident management team...** Formalize the assignment and charge to the incident management team for primary emergency categories.
 - **Improve the contact system...** Ensure that the emergency contact system is current, complete, understood, and accessible.
 - **Develop a play book for primary emergency categories...** Develop a half dozen scenario plans and processes to take off the shelf when needed to address primary incident types (i.e., snow or ice storm, loss of power). Include process flows. Practice drills as appropriate.
 - **Refine check in schedules...** Conference call check-ins should be frequent (perhaps every four hours) to enable updated information to be adequately considered.
 - **Color code system...** Consider a color coded system that describes the nature of risk-conditions and links to a set of policy and recommendations for the traveler...

Response: Most of these refinements have either taken place or underway. Many were in place prior to the next snow storm that happened in April 2007

- **Standardize emergency plans...** Weather management is a subset of this broader emergency management process and must be consistent with it.

Response: Efforts are underway to upgrade unit emergency plans in colleges and major administrative units

- **Update policy 2.5 – Inclement Weather...** To incorporate the changes suggested above.

Response: Changes to Policy 2.5 will be made to incorporate many of the recommendations discussed above.

E-petition

Dear President Skorton, Vice-President Golding, and Provost Martin:

We are writing you because we believe that the University's policies concerning extreme-weather closures, and the way it carries out those policies, unnecessarily place University employees at risk. A particular concern is that those earning the lowest wages may be the worst affected. We believe that, with some effort and study, the University can greatly reduce these risks.

1) We suspect, though we do not know for certain, that there is a harmful relationship between income, status within the University, and willingness to assume unnecessary risk in the face of bad weather. Cornell's lowest-status, lowest-paid employees tend to live furthest from campus. They must travel the greatest distances to work when road conditions are dangerous. Many live in thinly populated rural areas where services like snow-plowing are minimal, or are slow to be delivered. They are least able to afford the loss of a day's pay. They are more sensitive to pressure from supervisors. They have more incentives to run greater risks.

2) Closing notices are phrased in a way that gives maximum discretion to individual units when determining who should and should not report for work. This is a two-edged sword. No doubt flexibility is needed in an enterprise as large and diverse as ours. We believe, however, that the present policies and the way in which they are stated embed an assumption that employees will travel to work at a time when weather conditions are marginal or dangerous.

The presumption should instead be that they will not report for work unless they are in uniformly limited categories of essential personnel. Those who do not report should not be penalized. We recognize that students must be housed, fed, and taught - but those activities can occur without many who currently report for work by default. And the determination of who is and is not essential can be made in a way that is uniform and equitable across the enterprise. We can create policies that leave adequate discretion to program managers while counteracting a natural tendency to call on more people than are really needed.

3) Our present practices are most objectionable when they are accompanied by misplaced bravado. Like most local school districts, the University could, if it so chose, plan to proceed with a 'minimal operations' status on the day before an extreme weather event. There is no reason to require employees to drive in unsafe conditions to report for work, only to be sent home a few hours later. Significant snowfalls, for example, are usually predicted at least a day in advance.

We make assumptions here that can be tested. It would not be hard to determine whether income and distance of residence are correlated. And a map of residences by income might well serve as a basic planning document for the provision of safe, public transportation for essential personnel during bad weather. We do not know how units decide who is essential during bad weather and who is not. There may be uniformity in the existing formal and informal policies or there may not be. It should not be difficult to find out how many times (in, say, the last decade) the University has remained open in the face of predicted extreme weather only to close at midday, or indeed how many times weather has been extreme enough to justify closure -- and if

closures could, under a more liberal policy, happen often enough to collide with external requirements concerning days of instruction.

We do know that with some study, minimal effort, and more concern for all those who work at the University we can make things a great deal safer for everyone.