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GUEST COLUMN: The long and winding road to recovery

Pamela Beckett Jul 7, 2017



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Our road to recovery from the events of Feb. 28 is shaping up to be a long and daunting one, but it is a road we are traversing and conquering together. The never-ending support our community has for each other is truly amazing, and we should all be proud to be a part of it.

More than 600 houses were affected by the tornado and related storms. Those properties are homes to our families, friends and neighbors. The physical loss can be readily seen, but the emotional damage is not quite so obvious.

Rebuilding, restoring and healing us in total is the goal of everyone working so diligently to mend our community. It's been more than four months, and it will be many more months before we begin to see significant signs of physical recovery. Emotional and spiritual recovery will likely take a bit longer.

Since the early days of March, case managers have been meeting with individuals and families who were affected by the tornado to assess the physical emotional and spiritual damage.

At the same time, many other initiatives are moving forward behind the scenes.

North Central Illinois Council of Governments (NCICG), Pastor Carolyn Lukasik of Epworth United Methodist Church, and the congregation of the Open Table Church are working together to schedule and provide hospitality to the many volunteer groups who have offered to lend a hand. Pastor Cheri Stewart of the First Ottawa United Methodist Church is focused on spiritual care.

The NCICG also is working with specific residents who may qualify for some level of state financial assistance. Construction management continues to be necessary to ensure that homeowners are receiving fair and appropriate labor bids and pricing for restoration projects. Donated materials management, led by Nik Frig, ensures that new donated building materials are matched with the best fit for home repair locations.

North Central Behavioral Health Systems provides emotional counseling to those residents suffering from the stress of the Feb. 28 event. Information regarding comforting frightened children and PTSD can be found on their website,

ncbhs.org.

Committee heads from each of these teams are part of the oversight group, the Long-Term Disaster Recovery Group, which is an all-volunteer team who accepted the responsibility to oversee the entire recovery process. The Committee meets weekly and is overseen by the LTDR Chairperson, Alexis Ferracuti of the Law Offices of Peter F. Ferracuti. The firm is working with those residents who may need assistance in negotiating with insurance companies and other vendors.

The Funders Forum, led by Jack Novotney, is comprised of specialists in many fields, who were selected by Mayor Jim Rick of Naplate and Mayor Bob Eschbach of Ottawa to review the assessments and recommendations made by case managers with respect to the restoration of damaged homes.

Case Managers, led by Rachelle May, prepare anonymous case files for referral to the Funders Forum with recommendation for payment. The recommendations are then forwarded to the Starved Rock Country Community Foundation for payment to various vendors involved in the restoration.

To date, the SRCCF has received approximately \$286,000 in donations to the Long-Term Recovery Fund, all of which will be distributed to provide for the unmet financial needs of community residents. The United Way of Eastern La Salle

County, led by Shelli Ocepek is serving as the Fiscal Agent/Fiduciary for the Long-Term Disaster Recovery Group.

We've learned just how lengthy the recovery process will be; homeowners are just now getting confirmation of insurance reimbursement information and final construction estimates. We are eager to get the dollars into the hands of those who need it most, but we understand the need for case management and the financial review process. Our first payments are being made now, and we look forward to an increased flow of requests from this point forward. Other organizations who may wish to contribute to the needs of our residents are welcome to meet with the Funders Forum.

We are truly thankful to all the donors who care so deeply for the residents of Naplate and Ottawa affected by this disaster. Contributions have arrived from across the entire country and many have included a message of prayer and encouragement. We are also grateful to the many volunteers who are donating significant amounts of time to guide our community through the long-term recovery process.

Although the response from the community and beyond has been remarkable, there is not enough money accumulated to cover the cost of the damage incurred. Nearly half of the damaged properties require significant restoration to some degree.

The SRCCF continues to welcome personal and corporate donations as we all look for other sources of revenue.

We are thankful for the work of local groups who created the various fundraisers that contributed more than \$80,000 to the Recovery Fund. We encourage everyone to continue to look for financial resources. Many companies will match an employee's donation; perhaps your church has a Sunday offering that can be contributed to the Fund. Does your employer promote charitable giving? What groups do you belong to that might contribute?

The Starved Rock Country Community Foundation is absorbing the expenses associated with managing the Long-Term Disaster Recovery Fund for the community. Credit card fees, postage, staff time and other incidental costs are at our expense. From the beginning, we promised 100 percent of the donations would be used to benefit those affected by the tornado.

We are honored by the faith donors have placed in us to make sure that the funds are spent equitably and appropriately. We applaud every volunteer, donor, and member of the community who has given of themselves to help others.

Yes, our road to recovery will be long and winding, but we can make it back home. Let's not forget the way and the joy and pride that awaits us.

PAMELA BECKETT is president of the Starved Rock Country Community Foundation. Through monthly columns, she will update readers on the many happenings with the newly established foundation. She can be reached via email at pamela@srccf.org or 815-252-2906.

