

MILWAUKEE COUNTY
Inter-Office Communication

Date: Aug. 29, 2025

To: Milwaukee County Board Chairwoman Marcelia Nicholson

From: Office of Emergency Management (OEM) Executive Director Cassandra Libal
Office of Strategy, Budget & Performance (SBP) Strategy Director Isaac Rowlett

Subject: A report from OEM and SBP, providing an update on the 2025 flood response and recovery efforts.

File Type: Informational Report

REQUEST

This report is submitted at the request of the County Board to provide an update on flood response and recovery activities. The board requested information regarding:

- The county's organizational approach to flood response and recovery.
- Recent activities and milestones across all Emergency Operations Center sections.
- Support provided to residents and community organizations.
- Status of county infrastructure, potential fiscal impacts, and requests for state/federal support.
- Upcoming activities and planned milestones to ensure continued response and recovery coordination.

BACKGROUND

On Aug. 9 and Aug. 10, 2025, Milwaukee County experienced a 1,000-year rainfall event, with up to 14.5 inches in 24 hours. The flooding overwhelmed local sewer systems, damaged critical infrastructure with MMSD reporting more than five billion gallons of overflow. Milwaukee County assessed 3,400 homes for flood-related damages, with over half destroyed or sustaining major damage. Tens of thousands of residents lost power for extended periods, while sewer overflows created widespread contamination. Emergency responders conducted dozens of water rescues, shelters housed displaced households, and voluntary agencies deployed food, cleanup, and mental health services. The disaster disrupted municipal services, closed businesses and schools, and created severe debris and public health hazards. Vulnerable populations, including seniors, renters, and limited-English-proficient residents, were disproportionately affected and face long recovery timelines. With potentially tens of millions in damages to homes, infrastructure, utilities, and businesses, and with under-insured households concentrated in the hardest-hit neighborhoods, Milwaukee County's recovery capacity is strained. Federal assistance is critical to stabilize housing, restore essential services, and prevent long-term displacement and economic loss.

Milwaukee County (pop. ~952,000) comprises 19 fully incorporated municipalities across ~241 square miles, with dense urban neighborhoods as well as suburban areas. Damage is countywide, with concentrated impacts on the northwest side of Milwaukee and multiple municipalities. Heavy rainfall began August 9; gauges recorded up to 7.62 inches by midnight

and a 24-hour total of 14.55 inches. The storm triggered multiple sanitary sewer overflows, a sewage treatment facility overflows at the South Shore Water Reclamation Facility, and an effluent violation. The Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewer District received over 1,100 basement backup reports during the event. Several areas were inaccessible during peak flooding due to roadway inundation.

Emergency Operations Center Activation. Milwaukee County activated an initial Emergency Operations Center (EOC) at Northshore Fire Station 82, within hours of the event, to lead a coordinated response. Primary goals for the first few hours were to directly support emergency responders still operating in the field and develop a strategy for damage assessment. Based on early reports of damage, County Executive Crowley made an emergency disaster declaration; many members of the Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors shared notice of the County Executive's declaration with constituents. Local and state incident management teams were brought in to assist with the development and management of a countywide damage assessment process. During the damage assessment process over 300 volunteers were sent into the community, over three days, to verify and document the damage that our residents were reporting via 2-1-1 Wisconsin, the state's helpline for community resources and crisis support. In all, over 3,400 properties were assessed and over 1,800 were categorized as "Destroyed" or "Major" when sent to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) for review.

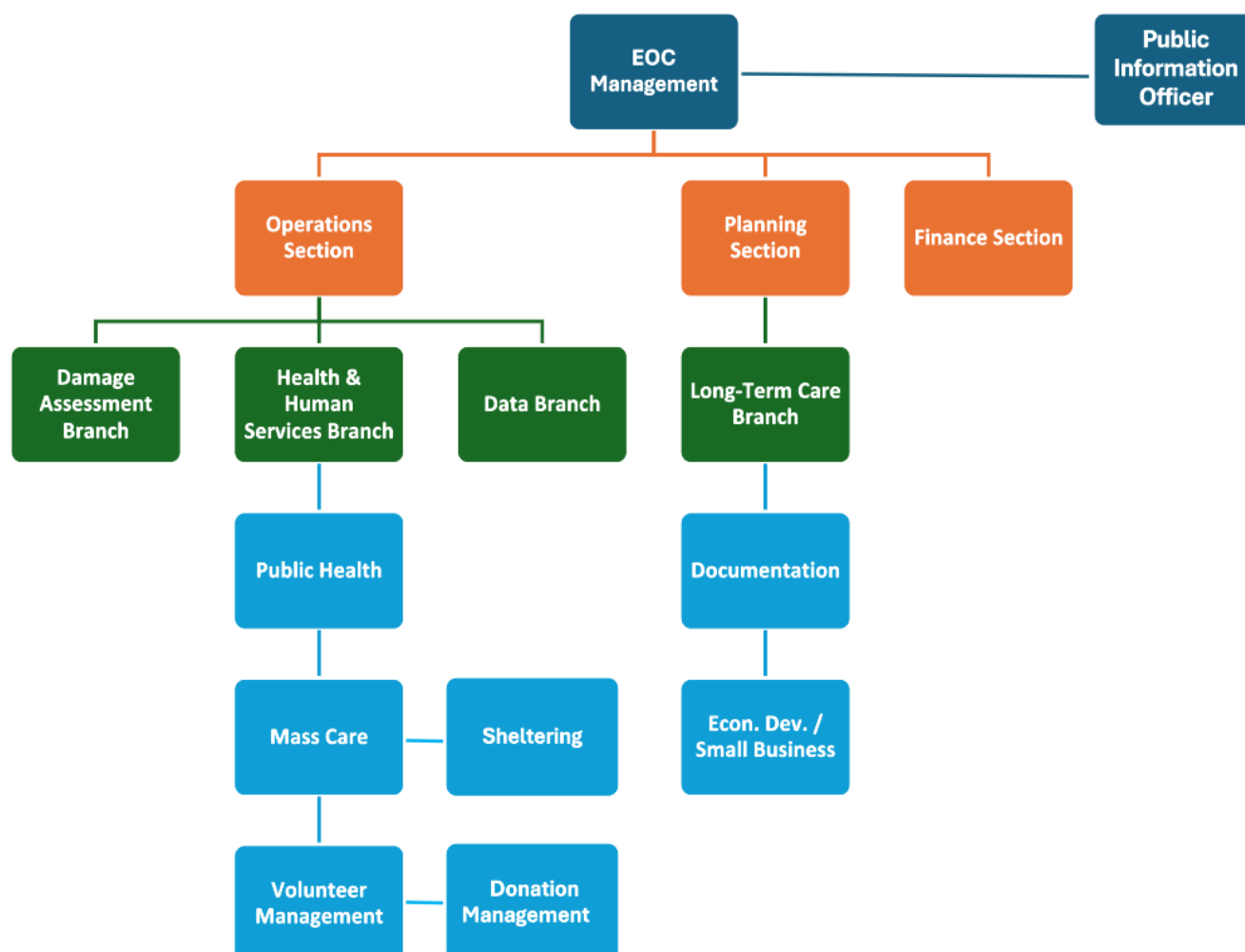
At the conclusion of the local damage assessment process on Friday, Aug. 15, the initial EOC was stood down and a more permanent EOC was established Monday, Aug. 18, at the offices of Milwaukee County Office of Emergency Management. Membership includes mostly OEM personnel, as well as individuals from the Department of Health & Human Services (DHHS), SBP, Wisconsin Emergency Management (WEM), American Red Cross, and various representatives from municipal organizations supporting the overall county effort. The Milwaukee County EOC is focused on a centralized communication, resource management, and alignment with federal and state emergency management requirements. The EOC is structured as follows:

Table A: Milwaukee County EOC Roles & Responsibilities

Roles	Responsibilities
EOC Management	Leads overall flood response and recovery operations.
Public Information Officer (PIO)	Coordinates all public messaging, media communications, and timely updates to residents and community organizations.
Operations Section	Oversees immediate response activities and resource deployment; includes Health & Human Services, Damage Assessment, and Data branches.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Health & Human Services Branch 	Supports impacted residents and community organizations, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteer management: Coordinates volunteers for cleanup and support services. • Public health: Ensures health and safety guidance is communicated; distributes medical resources. • Mass care: Manages shelters and essential services.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Data Branch 	Collects, analyzes, and shares operational data to guide response decisions.

▪ Damage Assessment Branch	Facilitates the FEMA Individual Assistance (IA) and Public Assistance (PA) program processes, from a county perspective and in support of the municipalities.
Planning Section	Coordinates short-/long-term recovery planning and resource allocation; includes Long-Term Care, Documentation, and Economic Development/Small Businesses branches.
▪ Long-Term Care Branch	Addresses ongoing needs of affected populations as they navigate the final stages of the FEMA assistance process.
▪ Documentation Branch	Maintains accurate records of expenditures, damage assessments, and operational actions for state/federal reporting.
▪ Econ. Dev. / Small Business Branch	Supports recovery efforts for affected businesses and monitors economic impacts.
Finance Section	Tracks expenditures, manages budgets, coordinates FEMA reimbursement documentation, specifically for impacts to the county as an agency (personnel, equipment, contracts).

Diagram A: Milwaukee County EOC Organizational Chart



ACTIVITIES & MILESTONES

Since activation, the EOC has worked to establish structure, assign leads, and initiate the systems necessary to manage both immediate needs and long-term recovery. The following updates summarize progress to date by section, highlighting key milestones and positioning Milwaukee County for continued coordination with state and federal partners.

Public Information Officer. The Public Information Officer (PIO) is responsible for disseminating timely and accurate information to the community and coordinating media coverage of the emergency response efforts. The PIO works collaboratively with EOC management and PIOs from other organizations, such as municipal partners, WEM, and FEMA. To ensure the public has access to regular updates, the following actions have been taken:

- **Website:** A coordinated webpage was created on the Milwaukee County website at county.milwaukee.gov/2025FloodResources to provide up-to-date information, resources, and guidance for individuals affected by the floods. The webpage is updated daily as more resources become available. Of note, the webpage includes:
 - **A situational update** at the top of the page so residents can get the most up-to-date information regarding the recovery process.
 - **Sharable resources** in English, Spanish, Hmong, and Arabic.
 - **Guidance for flood victims** including links to the 2-1-1 damage report, proactive steps to take, and public health guidance around cleanup efforts and mold remediation.
 - **Resources for flood victims** including links to financial assistance and other local and state government or nonprofit organizations offering help.
 - **Resources for volunteers and donors** to connect residents with places to offer help.
 - **Links to all Milwaukee County municipalities** and their specific flood response webpages.
- **Media Briefings:** As of Aug. 20, Milwaukee County Executive David Crowley and OEM leaders have stood up two media briefings to provide updates on recovery efforts, important new information, and public health guidance. Additionally, as of Aug. 25, County Executive Crowley, OEM Executive Director Cassandra Libal, OEM Deputy Director Christopher McGowan, and Chief Health Policy Advisor Dr. Benjamin Weston have conducted numerous interviews with media outlets, garnering nearly 100 articles or news stories about the flood response.
- **Press Releases:** As of Aug. 25, Milwaukee County has issued six press releases to provide regular updates to media to disseminate to the public. All press releases are located online [HERE](#).
- **Graphics:** Milwaukee County has created easy-to-understand graphics – such as a [flowchart to understand the FEMA process](#) – to ensure residents have access to sharable information in multiple languages. Graphics have been shared online, via social media, and printed to give to residents during damage assessments.
- **Public Service Announcements (PSAs):** PSAs ran on local English and Spanish radio stations.

Operations Section. The Operations Section spearheaded a comprehensive, multi-agency response to storm impacts across Milwaukee County, driving coordination among municipal, state, and federal partners to accelerate disaster relief efforts. Through the creation of a reporting tool, Operations enabled real-time resource requests and early detection of emerging needs. In collaboration with WEM, they streamlined damage assessment data collection, deploying survey teams that verified over 3,400 properties prior to FEMA's arrival, marking the first time in FEMA history such a large-scale data submission was completed and validated in advance. Operations also led on-the-ground efforts during preliminary damage assessments, guiding FEMA and WEM personnel through affected neighborhoods and adding several hundreds of verified damage records. Mold mitigation was tackled through a targeted dashboard that tracked vulnerable areas and coordinated volunteer response, while Public Health provided abatement guidance. To address broader human needs, the newly established Health & Human Services (HHS) Branch unified efforts in sheltering, mass care, and volunteer management, supported by daily coordination calls. HHS is also coordinating Multi-Agency Resource Centers (MARC)s – one-stop locations where residents can connect with multiple agencies for recovery assistance – on Sept. 2 at King Park, Sept. 3 at McCarty Park, and Sept. 6 at the Mary Ryan Boys & Girls Club. County staff will be available on-site to answer questions and provide guidance on available recovery programs and services.

All of these strategic actions positioned Milwaukee County for vital federal aid, prompting Governor Evers to formally request a federal disaster declaration on Aug. 10 from FEMA and the Trump Administration, which would unlock critical support for impacted households and local governments through two critical FEMA programs:

- **IA program:** Provides financial and direct support to eligible individuals and households affected by a disaster.
- **PA program:** Provides supplemental grants to state/local governments and certain nonprofits to help communities respond to and recover from disasters.

IA has been applied for, verified by FEMA, and formally requested by Governor Evers, while PA was assessed locally and will be submitted to FEMA on Sept. 2 for virtual review, with verification to begin Sept. 8.

Planning Section. This workstream established a comprehensive staffing plan to ensure resources are strategically aligned across all EOC workstreams. In parallel, this section developed streamlined documentation systems to support FEMA reimbursement eligibility and long-term recordkeeping. To strengthen coordination, the team also launched a cadence of regular cross-section communications and structured planning meetings, fostering alignment, accountability, and proactive problem-solving throughout Milwaukee County's flood response and recovery efforts.

Finance Section. This area is handling costs incurred to all 19 municipalities, MMSD, and the North Shore Fire Department in addition to internal county departments in response to the flood, tracking and securing reimbursement for personnel time and damage to county facilities and assets, as part of the Public Assistance process. In preparation, Milwaukee County has designated departmental representatives to serve as primary contacts for proactively tracking and documenting both labor and non-labor reimbursement claims. This proactive structure positions Milwaukee County to respond quickly and accurately to documentation requirements, strengthening our eligibility for federal recovery funding. As of

Aug. 29, preliminary damages reported across Milwaukee County and its municipalities for Public Assistance are estimated at \$52 million.

NEXT STEPS

While the EOC is still in the early stages of the operation, it has identified several areas of focus that will continue to guide efforts moving forward. These include ongoing assessment and documentation to ensure accurate FEMA reimbursement submissions, the launch of long-term recovery planning to address fiscal and community impacts, and the development of future mitigation strategies. These priorities will continue to evolve as more information becomes available. Please note that all information in this report is up-to-date based on the data available to us at the time.

RECOMMENDATION

The Office of Emergency Management and Office of Strategy, Budget & Performance respectfully request that this informational report be received and placed on file.

FISCAL EFFECT

This report is informational only.

PREPARED BY:

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ALIGNMENT TO STRATEGIC PLAN

Describe how the item aligns to the objectives in the **strategic plan**:

- 2A: Determine what, where, and how we deliver services to advance health equity.
- 2B: Break down silos across Milwaukee County government to maximize access to and quality of services offered.
- 3A: Invest "upstream" to address root causes of health disparities.
- 3B: Enhance Milwaukee County's fiscal health and sustainability.