

Local resident on front lines of tornado disaster

Written by Elizabeth Barrett
Thursday, 16 June 2011 19:25 -



FEMA employs Herb Doering in Joplin, MO.

When Herb Doering arrived in Joplin, MO, he was shocked by the devastation caused by a May 22 tornado.

“American flags are flying everywhere—on the sites where you only see rubble to the trucks hauling the debris,” he said.

As an employee of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Gothenburg resident is temporary.

“I’m called for disasters, work the disaster and then go home,” Doering said.

Doering is a human resource specialist who insures that all FEMA employees are properly accounted for at the disaster site. He also hires local people to supplement FEMA employees and to process payroll.

“Words cannot adequately describe how catastrophic it really is,” he said. “You cannot be here and not feel the aftermath and the impact and tragedies the people of Joplin have encountered.”

Because the tornado was a mile wide and six miles long, Doering said it destroyed block after block of homes down to foundations and businesses, including a hospital, and five school buildings.

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The death toll was 151.

“The cars left in the hospital parking lot look like they were in a demolition derby and simply left there,” he said, noting that a Home Depot facility was also destroyed but brought in a huge tent for temporary operation.

Doering said FEMA recently participated in a job fair to hire local people to supplement its staff and to provide local employment since so many businesses are either gone or closed.

“I talked to over 200 residents and heard heart-breaking story after heart-breaking story—people who literally lost all their possessions, homes, automobiles, clothing, food, etc.,” he said. “I met a young man who was physically injured in the tornado and also lost his wife.”

However Doering said the people he’s met have amazing attitudes and spirit and were genuinely appreciative for any employment opportunities.

The greatest need now, he said, is to clean up debris “which appears to be a daunting task in and of itself, and then to start rebuilding homes, businesses, schools and a hospital.”

Multiple organizations are in Joplin like the Red Cross which Doering said have been a tremendous help in providing both support and material assistance.

“It’s going to take time, a long time, but the attitude of the people is that we will rebuild and be better for it,” he said.

Doering said he’s been in blizzards and earthquakes but never witnessed anything of the magnitude of the tornado.

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During his first week in Joplin, he worked 12-hour days, seven days a week. Now he works 10-hour days, six days a week, and half a day on Sunday.

“The days are long but rewarding,” he said.

While in Joplin, Doering works in half of a Holiday Inn convention center FEMA rents.

“The working conditions are crowded and offer little privacy but in light of the losses others have suffered, we are working in a palace,” he said.

Doering spends nights in a Comfort Suites in Joplin.

Before retiring and moving to Gothenburg in 2007, Doering worked for the Veterans Administration in Hot Springs, SD, where he frequently traveled for a few days at a time and was home on weekends.

Employment with FEMA means having no idea where he'll be sent or when he'll return home.

He said he couldn't do it without a supportive spouse, family and others who “make it possible for many of us to be here.”

In Gothenburg, Doering works at Monsanto Learning Center, where has a part-time safety position. Officials there allowed him to take a leave of absence.

“It just goes to show that it takes a village to rebuild a village,” he said.

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Based on the size of the Joplin disaster, he said FEMA will have a presence there for months and possibly years. Doering will not since retired federal employees can only serve four months at a disaster unless the U.S. president signs an extension.

FEMA employees are initially given 30-day assignments which may be extended, he said.

Doering applied for a job with FEMA after hearing about his brother's experiences with the agency.

He and his wife JoAnn applied and she was accepted but is unavailable because of family obligations.

Doering was accepted in 2010 and he traveled to Columbia, MO, in April for five weeks where there was damage from snow storms.

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