

## Mistakes Made and Lessons Learned

The best teachers urged us to keep in mind that mistakes offered wonderful opportunities for learning. As I grew up I confirmed the promise but I sometimes wondered if it was the pain and humiliation I suffered as a result of the public arena watching the discovery of my mistakes, that actually conditioned me to study harder and avoid those painful moments; ah, I mean learn from those mistakes.

Now, as an adult, I know that, absolutely, we do learn from our mistakes. It hits home like no other bit of knowledge. We may not be spared moments of cringing with “Oops” or “Oh darn”, but we not only recognize our “error”, if you will, but we also have been given the opportunity to ask, “How can I improve this? And that is a fantastic opportunity to take theoretical ideas, apply real life experience and transform it into practical solutions.

A couple years ago I thought that I learned a lesson about offering assistance. When I had reason to believe that my fire and police chiefs might be overly busy with a situation, especially an environmental one, I wondered if it was O.K. to call and ask, “Could you use any assistance? Do you want me to call CERT members?” I later found out that the answer was a definite, “Yes!” The Chiefs admitted, that under pressure and being short staffed, it might be automatic to turn to routine decisions and fall into the we-will-take-of-this-ourselves-mode and it might be difficult to take the time to consider other sources of help.

While I thought I would recognize and respond to the sight of others in need, I do not have much experience with requesting assistance. All the more delighted I was when last week, my fairly new administrative assistant, Peggy, saw me calling daycares and principals and coaches and the superintendent’s office, updating them on EEE and WNV and asking for emails so that I could contact them more quickly and as a group.

Peggy observed this and she whipped up an excel chart for emergency contacts with sheets for daycares, coaches and schools. When I saw it I was so excited! I’ve needed it for years but never had the time to put it together. I did have one comment, though. I said, “There’s a group missing. We would never want to make the mistake of announcing something to the world and not let our own town hall and main infrastructure departments know. We need the department heads and the selectmen added to this.” “Ok, I’ll get right on that.” Peggy cheerfully responded.

Who would know that only a day later, before we had completed or practiced our new emergency contact list, it would be put to the test?

On Wednesday, August 22, in late afternoon, I participated in a conference call initiated from DPH and it included participants from all over the state. At that time, I learned that Halifax, Plympton and Kingston were one of only three “hubs” of high-risk activity for EEE and WNV in the whole state. I also learned from Dr. Al DeMaria, Director of Epidemiology, that all human cases of EEE and WNV last year were contracted between mid-August and mid-September.

We were in a high-risk area and in a high-risk time period. How should I respond?

I updated my press release and distributed it throughout the town Hall. By the time I had contacted day cares, schools, coaches and the superintendent’s office again, it was late Thursday and I got to wondering, “Is there else anything I can do to save a life?”

I called WATD and was interviewed on the topic. I called our local ComCast. Bob Gohl was busy that day but he said I could come down to the studio on Monday morning to give a public service announcement.

Recalling that Kingston curtailed outdoor activities last year and upon hearing that they would be discussing the same issue on Monday, August 27, 2007, I called my Board on this issue. We were not scheduled to meet until September 5 and I wanted to know if they were in favor of a similar ban.

By phone and in special meeting, the board was in favor of being proactive. Yes. Send out the message. Be in by dusk.

Friday was consumed with a variety of group emails and phone calls. I also handed to key personnel in the town hall the latest news release regarding the dusk-related restrictions. In the midst of all that, there were the unforeseen but usual interruptions of phone calls, complaints and internal discussions of such things as the landfill and accounting questions and updates pertaining to it.

By the time three o'clock was approaching, when I promised to watch two of my grandchildren, I received a call about the "car show" (Cruise Night) held at Wal\*Mart each Friday evening during the summer. I hadn't even thought about it. I was thinking of children and students on sports teams. Members of sports teams don't have much choice about practices and participation. Adults attending a car show can choose to go or choose not to. I wanted them to have the information, though, because West Nile virus is back in the area and anyone over fifty is at risk of dying from it.

I ran around town to the convenience stores with the latest dog food recall, leaving Wal\*Mart for last so that we could talk about mosquitoes.

I had a lovely chat with assistant Manager, Chris and he agreed to make the information available to the public.

I left Halifax with some sense of accomplishment thinking I had done the best I could. I did not realize that the Selectmen did not know about evening curtailment of organized outdoor activities. I did not I did not foresee that television news channels would find it so fascinating and news worthy that a car show might possibly be affected by the board of health curtailment. They were not interested in my explanation that this is not our intention. We wanted people to have accurate information about EEE and WNV and have a choice about preventing mosquito bites. The lower your choices, the higher your risk is of contracting these diseases.

So, it is time for a department head meeting where we can talk about the lessons learned. It is important to update our emergency contact lists. Email addresses and faxes are useful for their ability to contact groups of people. In cases where the information is extremely important, "reverse 911" can be used to contact residents. Make your message as clear as possible. If it feels like you could use some assistance, you probably do. Apologize when you get it wrong and be determined to improve your response.