



Fiber: Important To Your City's Economic Health

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Displaced by Flooding, Des Moines' Government Access Channel Keeps On Broadcasting

By Amelia Hamilton-Morris

Like many government access TV channels, staff is slim and the budget is tight at DMTV-7 in Des Moines, Iowa. But a major disaster in that city changed the value and perception of the role a local cable broadcast channel can play in protecting and informing its public.

When the Midwest's summer floods hit, forcing rivers to overflow their banks and levees to fail, DMTV was thrust into the spotlight as a key component in keeping the community and the local media informed on daily flood-fighting efforts. The channel's daily coverage of the flood caught the eye of local media, elected officials, residents and even Mediacom Communications, the local cable provider that was inspired enough to create a promo about the channel and run it across the entire cable system to tell viewers to tune into Cable Channel 7 for information on the flood-fighting efforts.

The channel gained some press coverage of its own with a mention in the local newspaper and stories in Cable Industry Daily Fax, Library

Journal.com, Government Video Magazine, Government Technology Online Magazine and Streaming Media.com.

DMTV City of Des Moines Cable Channel 7 is managed by Amelia Hamilton-Morris who is Chief Communications Officer for the City of Des Moines and in charge of the Public Information Office (PIO). Morris, an awarding-winning veteran television producer while with KPRC-TV in Houston, Texas, works under the direct supervision of City Manager Richard A. Clark. She manages the channel, which provides the community with government news, civic information and cultural entertainment. Housed in City Hall, Channel 7 is also part of the city's emergency information system.

On Tuesday, June 10, when flooding began its crescendo in Des Moines, Channel 7 taped the first two press conferences held by the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) on the flood disaster, putting them on the air within 30 minutes of the events. These and future press conferences were staffed by city and county emergency management personnel as well as Army Corps of Engineers staff and served as the main source of information for the media and the community.

The demand on the channel skyrocketed just 24 hours later when river water began flooding the basement of City Hall. Channel 7, along with all city staff in the building, was forced to relocate.

“When I got the 6:30 a.m. call to come to City Hall right away, I knew it was not good ... My heart was racing as workers began taking apart the television control room to move it to higher ground,” Morris said. “Then the city manager turned to me saying we needed to keep DMTV on the air during the disaster and asking what I needed to make it happen.” Morris quickly answered, “I need to order a TriCaster(tm) portable live production studio and have it shipped overnight.” After a brief discussion of the cost and future uses of the equipment, it was approved. “I am fortunate to have a boss who believes that communicating to the public is very important, especially during a disaster. I got the equipment I needed and staff support from his office,” she added.

This “studio in a box,” which had long been on Morris’ wish list, would be put to the test to keep DMTV broadcasting continuously for almost a month while the disassembled control room sat idle on the second floor of City Hall.

The local vendor loaned the city a TriCaster(tm) until the order arrived. MediaCom volunteered its technicians to wire the channel’s first temporary home (Polk County Human Services Building) and connected it to the TriCaster(tm). With the flip of a

switch at the head end, in a matter of minutes, DMTV was turned off at City Hall and back on at the temporary studio. Morris, Shekinah Young, a PIO intern from Drake University and freelancer Kris Debolt, were ready to go live with the channel when the time came for the next EOC press conference that same day. The PIO crew would have to perform this type of move at least three more times before the disaster was over, and each time MediaCom assisted them free of charge.

Des Moines Mayor Frank Cownie, Public Works Director Bill Stowe, Army Corps of Engineers representatives, Polk County Supervisors, suburban mayors, Iowa congressional representatives and a host of nonprofits helping in the disaster all showed up at 10 a.m., 3p.m. and 8 p.m. for the live broadcast of the EOC press conferences. The Channel 7 crew grew from three to eight as co-workers jumped in to help. Two members of the City Manager’s staff, Marylee Woods and Kandi Reindl, took on the daily responsibility of writing press releases and coordinating internal and external communications and Des Moines’ Blank Park Zoo Director Terry Rich and Marketing Director Ryan Bickel, both of whom have media backgrounds, volunteered to assist the PIO staff. Staff was also assisted by John Jacobsen, a new student and intern that was thrown into the mix and came up to speed very quickly in order to help out.

Morris and the crew produced three live daily press conferences for 5 days in addition to broadcasting *City News Updates*, with Morris and Rich acting as anchors for the programs. The Updates aired between the EOC press conferences and contained packaged news stories, interviews on the set, a split screen of live blogging and the website. “The TriCaster gave us better graphics, special effects and transitions than we normally have with our control room. It was a very polished look for the broadcasts. It

provided us features for streaming video to the web, editing and encoding and we used it all,” Morris said.

The press conferences were well attended by reporters; some TV stations broadcasted live from the EOC press conferences, while others took feeds from DMTV for their newscasts. Even the state’s largest newspaper, the Des Moines Register, worked with the channel to post live blogs between DMTV and residents on their website, plus, the newspaper streamed live video of DMTV’s broadcasts!

Each show was followed by message boards with more detailed information on everything from evacuation areas and where to get sandbags, to a listing of telephone numbers to call for city and FEMA flood hotlines and websites for more information. For a small investment, the PIO hired two freelancer videographers for an assignment that brought in helicopter video of the damage created by the disaster and images of city employees working around the clock to fight the flood. “DMTV 7 was the only channel where viewers could turn to see the entire EOC press conferences, rather than just sound bites. Residents counted on getting that complete information,” Morris said.

“We were booked solid every day with guests—elected officials, city department heads, city council members, Polk County Supervisors, local health officials and nonprofits—were all readily available to go on the air with our little makeshift set,” Morris said. “It was a rewarding moment for me because I felt, finally, the great potential and value of the government access channel was obvious to everyone.”

Determined to keep the public informed during the flood, the PIO team worked 12- to 15-hour days including the weekend to bring images of the community devastation as well as city department information on road conditions, facilities, shelters and services. Between broadcasts the PIO

team transferred additional equipment from City Hall to the temporary studio to keep the station up and operating.

After five days, the two rivers that meet in downtown-the Des Moines and Raccoon Rivers- crested and the flooding subsided gradually, so the EOC press conferences were discontinued, however the public's information needs continued to be high. The equipment was moved to another temporary location-the City's Central Library downtown, where the City Hall staff had been relocated due to the flooding of civic buildings. Our city council and various board meetings were broadcast live from the library and we began to encode some of our regular programs into the TriCaster to create a playlist of our regular broadcast schedule," Morris said.

In spite of its displacement, Des Moines city government continued to operate- building permits were issued, garbage was collected, telephones were answered, licenses and fees were processed, and city business was

performed as usual. Because city staff had to evacuate many of their locations, they also relied on DMTV to stay current with the latest information.

Later on July 9, the channel moved yet a third time back to the City Hall headquarters. It took a week to get the control room rebuilt. The TriCaster was used to broadcast the channel until the equipment was reassembled. In all, the crew and its gear moved to three different locations in a 30-day period.

There is no doubt Des Moines' government access channel rose to the occasion. The disaster coverage was stressful but also inspiring. Since the flood, the channel is creating more local programming and receiving inquiries from the community about placing programs on DMTV. ■

Amelia Hamilton-Morris is a communications strategist with 20 years of experience in high profile public relations, broadcasting, and marketing positions. Over the years, she has built a reputation as an

aggressive professional, noted for the ability to get results, and communicate effectively with a broad range of audiences. She spent several years as a television reporter and producer for KPRC-TV in Houston, Texas where she won numerous awards for her work. Amelia has also worked for NBC Network in Washington, D.C. and WOI-TV-5 in Des Moines as well as in corporate communications for Fortune 500 companies. She managed the statewide public relations campaign of the Iowa Sesquicentennial Commission, the yearlong celebration of Iowa's 150th Anniversary of Statehood.

In her present position as Chief Communications Officer for the City of Des Moines, she manages the Public Information Office under the direct supervision of the City Manager. She directs the activities for the City's Cable Channel, DMTV-7 and the City's web site. She is also responsible for media relations, employee communications, event planning, and speech writing.

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