

**Montgomery County, Maryland**  
**Office of the County Executive**  
**Office of Internal Audit**



**Silver Spring Apartment Fire:**  
**County Response/Recovery Effort and Lessons Learned**

**December 9, 2016**

# Highlights

## Why MCIA Did this Review

Montgomery County's Office of Internal Audit (MCIA) conducted this review to identify lessons learned from the County's response and recovery effort in addressing the human and social service needs following the fire that occurred at the Flower Branch Apartment complex in Silver Spring on August 10, 2016. These lessons learned are designed to assist and strengthen the County's response to future similar incidents. The explosion and fire directly impacted 63 families (168 individuals). Beyond the immediate response by Montgomery County Fire and Rescue Service and Police Department personnel to the incident, the human and social service response and recovery effort by the County, in coordination with non-profits and other organizations who assisted, was unprecedented for the County. This was the largest such incident Montgomery County ever had dealt with and posed unique challenges in meeting the immediate and longer-term needs of the impacted residents. One related challenge was managing expectations from among various community organizations and public officials regarding the scope of services to be provided during the response/recovery effort.

## What MCIA Recommends

MCIA is making fourteen recommendations to the County for actions designed to enhance the County's management of similar (i.e., involving large numbers of impacted residents and extended sheltering operations) emergencies in the future.

**December 2016**

## Silver Spring Apartment Fire: County Response/Recovery Effort and Lessons Learned

### What MCIA Found

The longer-term recovery efforts continue for the residents impacted by the Silver Spring apartment fire. The review found that the County's response immediately following the fire to address the essential human service needs (housing/shelter, food, mental health/crisis counseling services, etc.) of the impacted residents was a concerted effort involving community and non-profit organizations, and other state and federal agencies. County staff and management, as well as the community and non-profit partners (including the American Red Cross, CASA de Maryland, IMPACT Silver Spring, Montgomery Housing Partnership, Mary's Center, and several foundations – to name just a few) who played such vital roles in the response/recovery effort are to be applauded for their demonstrated commitment to provide needed assistance to the impacted residents/families. One overall observation that became evident during the review was that there were differing expectation levels among community partners, some public officials, and County government regarding the level and scope of services to be provided to impacted residents. As with any incident of this magnitude and impact, a thorough review has provided the County with the opportunity to improve and enhance (lessons learned) the County's preparation for, and subsequent response to, similar or even larger-scale emergency incidents. These lessons learned, discussed in greater detail in the report, generally involve the following:

- Incident command and management processes;
- Coordination of non-profit/community organizations;
- Planning and preparation for similar emergencies.

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## **Background**

The Flower Branch Apartment complex is located in the Long Branch neighborhood of Silver Spring, Maryland, at the intersection of Arliss Street and Piney Branch Road. The complex was comprised of 26 buildings totaling 362 (1-, 2- or 3-bedroom) apartments, and is managed by Kay Apartment Communities.

At 11:51pm on August 10, 2016, an explosion occurred in the utility room at the 8701 Arliss Street building. After the explosion, a natural gas-fed three-alarm fire rapidly consumed significant portions of the 8701 and 8703 Arliss Street buildings. Montgomery County Fire and Rescue Service (MCFRS) and Montgomery County Police Department (MCPD) were first-responders to the incident, supporting fire and emergency medical service response. These departments, along with other County, State and Federal agencies were also involved in managing ongoing scene security, traffic management, decedent recovery and identification, investigation of the incident and evidence collection/maintenance, and identification of missing persons.

The federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms and the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) also responded, with the NTSB assuming control of the incident investigation on August 19. Other County departments (notably the Department of Permitting Services (DPS), Department of Housing and Community Affairs (DHCA), and Office of Emergency Management and Homeland Security (OEMHS)) played key roles in on-site response. Their efforts included conducting on-site inspections of adjacent apartment buildings; working with Kay Management, Washington Gas and the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission to review post-incident testing of gas delivery systems at the Flower Branch Apartment complex, and working with Kay Management and its fire recovery support contractor to conduct air quality sampling and testing in the apartments surrounding the explosion site.

As the County's response began to shift from rescue to human service assistance and recovery efforts, the emphasis also shifted from the County's first-responders to addressing human-service needs of impacted residents. The County immediately began to mobilize, in coordination with numerous non-profit (including the Red Cross) and community organizations, the human-services response to address resident concerns and needs – both residents who were directly impacted by the explosion/fire and resulting apartment damage/destruction, as well as residents in adjacent apartment buildings.

The County's role in addressing these needs was multi-dimensional, including the following:

- Direct service provision (such as the opening up of the temporary shelter at 1:30am on August 11 at the nearby Long Branch Recreation Center; and ongoing case management and mental health service support at the temporary shelter and through the Takoma-

East Silver Spring (TESS) Community Service Center<sup>1</sup> following closure of the shelter on August 21),

- Identifying and/or triaging resident needs to the appropriate organization(s) for action,
- Coordination with non-profit partners and other organizations, and
- Providing information regarding the recovery efforts to multiple parties: impacted residents, Council members, public, media/press, and community organizations.

Sixty-three (63) families/households were directly impacted by the fire, including two families who suffered loss of all family members<sup>2</sup>. Serving the diverse and multiple needs of the impacted residents involved the coordinated efforts of multiple County departments – including the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Department of General Services (DGS), DHCA, Department of Recreation, Department of Permitting Services, MCPD, OEMHS, Office of Community Partnerships, Public Information Office, and the Sheriff’s Office – in addition to multiple non-profit and community organizations, and Federal and State agencies.

## Objectives

The human-service response was unprecedented for the County, in both magnitude and scope. The challenges presented and the actions taken by the County offer a valuable opportunity to identify lessons learned: both those actions taken by the County that worked well and those efforts that could be improved should another, similar incident occur in the future. This “lessons learned” review had the following objectives:

- Identify the actions taken by the County to address the human-service needs of the impacted residents;
- Identify those actions and approaches that were most effective in supporting the response; and
- Identify opportunities for improvements in the County’s response to such incidents in the future.

This report summarizes the investigative approach followed in conducting the review of the County’s recovery efforts, and the challenges identified and lessons learned for future County actions in response to similar events.

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<sup>1</sup>The Community Action Agency's TESS Center is a walk-in site serving Montgomery County residents. Its information and referrals, social service assistance, interpretation and translation, education, Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) and legal services are delivered in partnership with nonprofits, public agencies and community groups. As one of the Neighborhood Opportunity Network sites in the community, the TESS Center aims to bring County programs and services to residents in a convenient, easy-to-find location. The TESS Center served as a centralized point of contact for all affected residents to obtain services during the response/recovery effort.

<sup>2</sup> A total of seven residents perished. The two families/households mentioned here lost all family members: one individual and two individuals, respectively. The other 4 decedents were individuals from separate families.

## **Methodology and Approach**

Information and observations were collected from County government personnel directly involved in the County's response, County Council members, and representatives of non-profit and community organizations involved during the recovery effort, including the following:

- American Red Cross
- Montgomery Housing Partnership
- CASA
- IMPACT Silver Spring
- Mary's Center
- St. Camillus Parish

The following organizations, while not interviewed as part of this review, were also identified by HHS as being key partners in the response/recovery effort. Information concerning the role and support/services provided by these organizations was provided by HHS.

- Foundations: Montgomery County Community Foundation, Healthcare Initiatives Foundation, Meyer Foundation, and Cafritz Foundation for their financial support of continuing human-services operations
- Adventist Healthcare

More than 25 interviews were conducted, and the process included a review of pertinent documents and reports, and relevant County policies and procedures. This information was used to create an overview of the human-services "quilt" that was created to provide support to the impacted residents, as well as the identification of lessons learned for the future.

## **Overview of Response/Recovery Effort and Lessons Learned**

The information in this section is designed to provide an overall understanding and context for how the County managed the response/recovery effort, as well as some of the most important lessons learned. The lessons learned are not intended to criticize individuals or organizations involved in the County's effort; rather, they are intended to highlight specific opportunities for the County to improve its emergency response/recovery efforts in the future. An inherent principle in a "Responsive and Accountable Government" is to learn and improve. Specific recommendations for action are identified below, and summarized in the following section.

### **Montgomery County Emergency Operations Plan – Background**

Montgomery County established an Emergency Operations Plan (EOP; November 2013) to provide a comprehensive framework for the County's management of major emergencies and disasters. The purpose of the EOP, as set forth in the November 2013 document, is as follows:

"[The] Emergency Operations Plan (EOP) defines actions taken by Montgomery County government department, agencies and municipal representatives mobilized as the

Emergency Management Group (EMG) to provide coordinated support, resources and public information and to coordinate with state and federal agencies and other non-government organizations in the event of a significant disaster or emergency.”

The EOP defines the emergency management roles and responsibilities of the County Executive, County Council, Chief Administrative Officer, and Emergency Management Group (EMG) in the overall management of the County’s response and recovery efforts; as well as the responsibilities of individual County departments in executing specific emergency support functions (ESFs; see Appendix A) most commonly required during response/recovery efforts – such as mass care and sheltering, communications, and emergency management.

The purpose of providing the context of the EOP is to establish the overarching framework within which the County’s response and recovery efforts following the Silver Spring apartment fire were conducted (or, in some cases, should be conducted in the future). The three ESFs that were most prominent during the County’s recovery effort were:

- **ESF #5: Emergency Management – Primary Department: Office of Emergency Management and Homeland Security**
- **ESF #6 – Mass Care, Emergency Assistance, Housing and Human Services – Primary Department: Department of Health and Human Services**
- **ESF #16 – Volunteer and Donations Management – Primary Department: Office of Emergency Management and Homeland Security**

These ESFs do not represent distinct/segregable phases of effort, but rather often overlapping and intertwined areas of effort, collectively designed to plan/manage/coordinate the County’s response to an emergency, to coordinate the provision of necessary human service needs to County residents, to assist County residents and communities towards longer-term recovery and stabilization following an emergency or disaster event, and to provide timely and accurate information to organizations (including the press/media). Each ESF has a “Primary Department” with overall responsibility for coordinating the functions of all “Supporting Agencies” within County government, as well as “Coordinating Organizations” (such as the American Red Cross, Washington Gas and Light, and the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission) outside of County government.

The EOP also establishes broadly defined roles and responsibilities of specific departments during emergency operations. Specific (excerpted) roles relevant to the Silver Spring apartment fire response/recovery effort are the following:

Agency	Roles and Responsibilities
<b>Department of General Services</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Acquire, store, and distribute resources in support of response and recovery operations.</li> </ul>
<b>Department of Health and Human Services</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Provide human services such as temporary housing and mental health assistance to individuals and families impacted by disasters.</li> </ul>
<b>Department of Housing and Community Affairs</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Provide information on housing resources for use as emergency and/or long-term temporary housing.</li> <li>- Provide temporary housing for displaced public housing and rental program residents.</li> </ul>
<b>Department of Housing Opportunities Commission</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Provide available staff, resources, and facilities to support emergency operations</li> </ul>
<b>Office of Emergency Management and Homeland Security</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Coordinate the county response and recovery operations during an emergency operation.</li> <li>- Manage the EOC and implement the EOP.</li> <li>- Establish and maintain the county's Corrective Action Program (CAP) and coordinate an after-action assessment of disaster/emergency incidents to determine what actions can be taken to mitigate future disaster effects. Maintain a database to identify "lessons learned" and "corrective actions" by agency.</li> <li>- Assist agencies by providing supplemental emergency training, simulations, and exercises necessary to prepare first responders, county agencies, and cooperating organizations and agencies to perform identified roles and responsibilities.</li> <li>- Coordinate emergency management mutual aid agreements dealing with adjacent jurisdictions and non-government organizations, such as the American Red Cross of the National Capital Area.</li> </ul>
<b>Department of Permitting Services</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Provide available staff, resources, and facilities to support emergency operations.</li> <li>- Coordinate damage assessment operations and inspections in support of emergency operations.</li> </ul>
<b>Public Information Office</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Serve as the "single voice" of county government for the coordinated release of information to county employees, the public and the media during emergencies.</li> </ul>
<b>Recreation Department</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Provide professional staff to organize and supervise recreational activities in shelters.</li> <li>- Provide community recreation and senior centers for shelters as needed.</li> </ul>

Agency	Roles and Responsibilities
<b>Regional Services Centers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Provide support to the Donations Management Coordinator (DMC) in the management of volunteers and distribution of donated goods and services.</li> </ul>
<b>Volunteer Center</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Coordinate and activate affiliated volunteer groups managed by the Volunteer Center.</li> <li>- Establish and manage a physical or web-based/virtual Volunteer Mobilization Center to manage spontaneous volunteers and send them to areas of need as directed by the OEMHS Manager.</li> <li>- Coordinate with non-profit organizations, businesses, Regional Services Centers, state and federal agencies to implement the donations management system.</li> <li>- Coordinate with other volunteer organizations (VOADs and Volunteer Centers) in the NCR to obtain additional resources when necessary.</li> </ul>

The challenge in any emergency response situation is to timely and effectively integrate and coordinate efforts across these ESFs into a cohesive and responsive effort, particularly during a crisis/stressful environment and (unlike weather-related emergencies) without advance notice.

## Overview of County Response/Recovery Management and Lessons Learned

### ESF #5: EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

*PURPOSE:* Under the EOP, Emergency Management, in relevant part, “is responsible for coordinating the support to incident/unified command responding to emergencies that warrant EOC [Emergency Operations Center] activation.... Planning functions involve preparedness.”

OEMHS staff deployed to the fire scene shortly after being notified by County Fire and Rescue staff around 12:10am of the fire and its scope. OEMHS staff were subsequently on-site at the temporary shelter opened by the County at the Long Branch Community Center at 1:30am on Thursday, August 11, between 12-16 hours each day until the shelter closed operations on August 21. OEMHS characterized its role during this period as generally providing coordination across the County departments involved in the response/recovery effort. OEMHS also conducted a “hotwash” effort on September 9 to review the course of events with County and partner personnel to discuss challenges and lessons learned. Several of the results of the OEMHS-conducted hotwash are incorporated in this report.

### **Observations and Lessons Learned (ESF #5):**

1. **Activation of the EOC.** Information provided by OEMHS indicated that “EOC activation” under the EOP may either be “on-site” activation – with department representatives physically deploying to the EOC site in Gaithersburg – or remotely via conference calls – with EOC department representatives (comprising the Emergency Management Group – EMG) participating in conference calls (usually twice each day the EOC is activated)<sup>3</sup>. Activation of the EOC (either on-site or remotely) facilitates more effective awareness of the current state of the response/recovery effort (including what each of the departments is doing), response/recovery issues and need for assistance (current and anticipated), and coordination across the County, including between the County government and County Council. While one EMG conference call took place on Friday, August 12, additional conference calls were not conducted. As a result, the normal opportunities for awareness, coordination and planning that the EOC activation (particularly the conference calls for the EMG) were missing, or were replaced with well-intended but *ad hoc* efforts to fill the gaps (e.g., the PIO preparing situation reports (“sitreps”) that were sent to a limited group of individuals) as a means to update current status. While it is unclear why full remote activation of the EOC – with the (twice) daily conference calls – did not occur, one key difference between other situations where the EOC was activated and this event was that in most instances, the EOC has been activated due to impending weather-related events (e.g., snowstorms, heavy rainfall), where the event and the need for EOC activation can be anticipated and planned. The Silver Spring fire was obviously an unforeseen and unplanned emergency.

#### **Lesson Learned**

Nonetheless, the lesson learned is that for all emergency events of such scope – given the large number of residents impacted and the scope (in terms of types and duration of services needed) of the response/recovery effort – OEMHS should activate the EOC (or comparable process) and ensure that regular (at least daily or twice daily) conference calls are conducted to facilitate improved awareness, coordination and planning across the County.

2. **EOP ‘Scenario-Based’ Drills/Exercises.** The EOP is a robust document (nearly 500 pages). As with any emergency response plan, the effectiveness of translating the plan into execution is improved with appropriate drills/exercises involving the partners who are most likely to be involved in an emergency response/recovery effort. Such regularly-conducted, scenario-based drills/exercises (at a minimum, table-top drills; but if possible, active drills) help identify gaps in planning and additional areas where advance pre-planning and coordination would improve actual emergency-response efforts. Such drills require their own advance planning, commitment of adequate resources, and involvement

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<sup>3</sup>The County also uses a web-based platform “WebEOC” to support information updates and sharing when the EOC is activated.

of relevant partners – including community and non-profit organizations, and potentially state and federal agencies.

#### Lesson Learned

The lesson learned is that the County, under the guidance of OEMHS, should develop and conduct appropriate scenario-based drills using the Silver Spring apartment fire scenario, bringing in appropriate outside expertise to plan and facilitate the drills, and engaging appropriate partners, including non-profit and community organizations. While the County has conducted other scenario-based drills in the past (e.g., weather-event, active shooter), the challenges associated with the Silver Spring incident presented some different circumstances from these previous drills' scenarios; and, therefore, the County would benefit by taking these challenges and developing specific protocols for how to handle similar (i.e., involving large number of residents, and extended sheltering operations) incidents in the future.

#### **ESF #6 – MASS CARE, EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE, HOUSING AND HUMAN SERVICES – PRIMARY DEPARTMENT: DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES**

*PURPOSE (ESF #6):* Under the EOP, Mass Care, Emergency Assistance, Housing and Human services, is responsible, in relevant part, for “mass care and sheltering operations following a disaster or emergency.”

and

#### **ESF #16 – VOLUNTEER AND DONATIONS MANAGEMENT – PRIMARY DEPARTMENT: OFFICE OF EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AND HOMELAND SECURITY**

*PURPOSE (ESF #16):* Under the EOP, Volunteer and Donations Management, is responsible, in relevant part, for “volunteer and donations management operations following a disaster or emergency.”

#### Sheltering Operations

The impacted residents whose apartments were damaged or destroyed by the explosion/fire experienced both immediate shelter needs and mental health/crisis and grief counseling needs, and longer-term housing and mental health counseling needs. Numerous challenges faced the County in responding to these needs, including the following:

- Adequate numbers of bi-lingual professionals, particularly mental health and housing case managers, and other shelter personnel. [NOTE: The largest number of the impacted residents were from the Spanish-speaking (more specifically Mayan languages) countries of Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. There were also families who spoke Mandarin, Amharic (Ethiopian), Vietnamese, and French.]
- Coordinating the response efforts of non-County, non-profit and community organizations.
- Managing the large outpouring from the community of donations: funding, food, goods.

To address the immediate shelter needs, the County opened the nearby Long Branch Community Center at 1:30am (within an hour and 40 minutes after the explosion) on August 11 as a temporary shelter. The intent was to create for the impacted residents a safe and secure “shelter” (both physically and emotionally) where residents could have their basic human needs (such as food, bathing, etc.) addressed, and where the need for other services (including emotional and counseling services, document replacement, etc.) could be assessed and/or provided. The County contacted the American Red Cross (Regional Disaster Officer) and partnered with the Red Cross in establishing and supporting the shelter. More than 150 County personnel (HHS, Recreation, DGS, OEMHS, Sheriff’s Office), 175 Red Cross staff/volunteers, and other volunteers assisted in supporting the shelter operations and services, including the provision of more than 5,500 meals to 168 impacted residents who sought temporary housing or services at the shelter. Included in the County’s direct provision of services were crisis/mental health therapists, community health nurses, clinical social workers and others – a number of whom were bilingual. The shelter operation was designed to both address immediate resident needs and plans for housing, counseling, and other resident requirements following their departure from the shelter.

HHS stated that, at approximately 6:00am on Thursday, August 11, DHHS staffing consisting of 6-8 personnel trained in emergency shelter response – including licensed clinical social workers, mental health crisis therapists, and other HHS professionals – staffed the shelter 24/7, and that on any given shift there were generally at least three, and at times up to 13, bi-lingual (primarily Spanish-speaking) HHS staff. Partnering with the American Red Cross (ARC), a case management approach was followed in addressing the residents’ needs; starting with the ARC initial registration of individuals entering the shelter, certifying that they were victims of the fire and conducting preliminary assessments of the residents’ basic needs. Following this initial assessment, families were informed about the range of health and social services available, with the nearby TESS Center being the “hub” of service support. Two Mental Health Therapists (initially Behavioral Health and Crisis Center Therapists later replaced by contract therapists) provided adult and child crisis counseling at TESS. Also, a Housing Case Manager (initially a contract employee on staff in the Special Needs Housing Service Area, later replaced by a contract housing case manager) staff worked with all residents who had housing concerns—primarily those that had been placed in temporary Housing Opportunities Commission Units with a 90-day voucher. Linkages to Learning<sup>4</sup> staff also assisted – focusing on the needs of children. Residents’ needs included medical (e.g., inhalers to treat asthma and other respiratory distresses exacerbated by the smoke/fire), trauma counseling, grief and bereavement support, emotional/psychological/ spiritual health services, economic, housing, replacement of documents (e.g., immigration/residency status, driver’s license, vehicle registration) and possessions (e.g., car keys, cell phones, clothing).

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<sup>4</sup> The Linkages to Learning program provides accessible services to at-risk children and their families to improve adjustment to and performance in school, home, and community. Prevention and early intervention services include health, mental health, social services and educational support (including academic tutoring for students, mentoring and adult education classes, such as ESOL and literacy) to improve the well-being of children and their families through a collaborative delivery of school-based services that address the social, economic, health, and emotional issues that interfere with the academic success of a child.

In addition, the County established a “Family Reunification Center” on August 11 to assist in the collection of information about missing family members and to link family members with residents displaced by the fire. Initially the Center operated at the Linkages to Learning site at the nearby Rolling Terrace Elementary School, but was moved on August 12 to the Long Branch Community Center (shelter) for the convenience of family members who were staying at the shelter and to enhance effectiveness. The Family Reunification Center was staffed with HHS mental health staff, emotional and spiritual care volunteers trained in pastoral care/support, and OEMHS staff. This was the first such Family Reunification Center activated/supported by the County; and the Center served primarily as a source of information and support for families of the deceased residents.

The shelter remained open until Sunday, August 21 – the longest sheltering activation in memory for Montgomery County. HHS continued to coordinate services to the victims following shelter closure, with services at the TESS Center, Linkages to Learning consultation with parents, mental health counseling for adults/families/children, and other social services support.

#### Housing Stabilization

The County’s Department of Housing and Community Affairs (DHCA) served as the primary liaison to Kay Apartments following the fire, and during the County’s response/recovery effort. DHCA worked with Kay to facilitate Kay’s providing information and (financial and housing) support to the leaseholders (See Appendix B for fact sheet provided by Kay), including identification of alternative housing opportunities at the Flower Branch Apartments and other nearby Kay properties. DHCA also brought together Kay, CASA and IMPACT representatives, and residents to address initial resident concerns and questions. For the non-leaseholder families, alternative housing accommodations were identified, with 6 of these families being provided 90-day housing through the State’s Disaster Housing Assistance Program. When the shelter closed on August 21, placement in medium- or long-term housing was completed for the impacted families, with short-term hoteling options being used to bridge the housing gap until a family’s unit was available.

#### Critical Role of Partners: Community and Non-Profit Organizations

It cannot be overemphasized how important the response of community and non-profit organizations was to the response/recovery effort. The organizations (not intended to be all-inclusive, either in identifying all organizations, or the breadth of services these organizations provided) discussed below were essential partners to the response/recovery effort.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The discussion that follows does not include the financial package that the property manager, Kay Apartment Communities, offered to leaseholders impacted by the fire, including refunding August rent payments, stopping new rental activity at several other apartment communities to free up housing for impacted residents, foregoing payment of security deposits and three month’s rental payments if the resident went to another Kay property. Since this financial package was not the result of County efforts, we have chosen not to discuss it here.

American Red Cross (ARC): The ARC was the major partner in operating the shelter during the 11 days it was open. The ARC provided cots, meals, initial assessment and ongoing counseling and emotional support, financial assistance via gift cards, and coordination with area hospitals regarding those victims who sought medical treatment. The ARC also supported initial identification of victims at the shelter, and access control at the shelter to ensure only authorized individuals were allowed access into the shelter.

Montgomery Housing Partnership (MHP)<sup>6</sup>: MHP stepped forward to manage the financial donation/distribution effort. Recognizing the multiple economic needs the impacted residents were facing, as well as the interest already being expressed by individuals and organizations to donate funds to help address these needs, MHP played a crucial (and for them, an unprecedented) role in managing this effort. Working in coordination with the County and other organizations, and leveraging the experience learned<sup>7</sup> from other victim response efforts, MHP received over \$827,000<sup>8</sup> in contributions, and used these funds to provide financial assistance to impacted residents, including the following:

- Cellphone chargers and cellphones;
- \$100/person gift cards to residents at 8701/8703, and \$100/unit to the residents in the adjacent three apartment buildings;
- \$15 food vouchers (available to all five buildings) for area restaurants;
- \$100/household in gift cards to various stores (Target, Giant, etc.);
- Payments for replacement documents (passports, car titles, etc.);
- \$500 in gift cards – distributed by HHS – to households for temporary assistance (e.g., hotel expenses or to offset costs if staying with family/friends) to households waiting for their apartment unit to become available;
- Cash assistance payments to the 63 families certified by the ARC, including the two families where all family members perished:
  - To assist with funeral and other expenses, \$24,000 to families who lost a family member.

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<sup>6</sup> MHP's stated mission: "MHP serves more than 1,400 families in Montgomery County. We house people, empower families, and strengthen neighborhoods.

Since 1989, Montgomery Housing Partnership's mission is to preserve and expand quality affordable housing in Montgomery County. We advance our mission through three key strategies:

- By acquiring, rehabilitating, building and managing quality affordable housing.
- By developing and implementing community life programs to improve the quality of life and increase opportunities for our residents.
- By collaborating with concerned citizens and businesses, public officials and community organizations to build strong, vital neighborhoods."

[ <http://mhpartners.org/mhp-mission/> ]

<sup>7</sup> From insights provided by Kenneth Feinberg, who, among other responsibilities, was appointed Special Master of the U.S. Government's September 11<sup>th</sup> Victim Compensation Fund and appointed by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to administer the One Fund – the victim assistance fund established in the wake of the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings.

<sup>8</sup> Over \$200,000 had been received by August 15 (5 days after the fire). The Fund closed on September 17.

- For other (61) impacted households, initial cash assistance payments<sup>9</sup> to help in re-establishing residences were issued on August 31:
  - \$3,453 – Households of 1 – 2 individuals
  - \$7,143 – Households of 3 – 5 individuals
  - \$9,603 – Households of more than 6 individuals
- Additional cash assistance payments were made by MHP on October 20, once all funds were received. [See Appendix C for a fact sheet provided by MHP.]

CASA de Maryland<sup>10</sup>: CASA performed multiple roles following the fire, including serving (at the County's request) as a donation drop-off point and leading donation management for clothes, shoes, and small household items for the impacted residents. CASA also triaged cash donations they received to MHP, helped (by going door-to-door in the Long Branch community) to "map" impacted residents who had chosen not to go to the shelter, volunteering at the shelter and providing Spanish-speaking interpretation services to resident, and helping to provide social support services to the Flower Branch apartment/Long Branch community – particularly the Spanish-speaking residents of the community.

IMPACT Silver Spring<sup>11</sup>: IMPACT's primary role following the fire was connecting with impacted families/resident to assist them in connecting with and receiving services essentially providing similar social support services (as CASA) to members of the Flower Branch apartment community and the broader Long Branch community. They filled a unique role for the Ethiopian families who spoke Amharic, because of the one of the IMPACT staff being Ethiopian and proficient in Amharic.

Mary's Center<sup>12</sup>: Mary's Center provided mental health/trauma counseling and treatment of ongoing respiratory/asthma conditions (particularly among children) for about 50 impacted residents. They also assisted residents in connecting with organizations to replace household goods and other assets lost in the fire, and following up with residents on questions concerning insurance benefits and replacement of documents lost in the fire.

The County convened an early morning meeting of community/non-profit organizations on Friday, August 12, the purpose of which was to better coordinate the efforts of these organizations and to identify lead roles going forward. The County also convened a Resource Fair for the impacted residents on Sunday, August 14 to bring in organizations who could provide support and services to assist the residents.

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<sup>9</sup> MHP based these initial payment amounts on their own experience in costs to establish residences (when families are temporarily displaced during period of housing re-development).

<sup>10</sup> CASA's stated mission is "To create a more just society by building power and improving the quality of life in low-income immigrant communities." [<http://wearecasa.org/>]

<sup>11</sup> IMPACT's stated mission is "To build and sustain community-based networks that ignite local inclusive economies and vibrant communities." [<https://impactsilverspring.org/about>]

<sup>12</sup> Mary's Center's stated mission: "Our mission is to build better futures through the delivery of health care, education, and social services. We embrace culturally diverse communities to provide them with the highest quality of care, regardless of ability to pay." [<http://www.maryscenter.org/mission>]

### **Observations and Lessons Learned – ESF #6:**

3. Overall Management of Sheltering Operation: Coordination within County, between County and Red Cross, and with Community/Non-Profit Organizations. The effectiveness of the response to an emergency impacting this many residents necessarily requires a coordinated effort across County government and among non-profit and community partners. One of the major challenges evident during the response to the Silver Spring apartment fire was the need for increased planning and preparation for similar emergency response incidents in the future. It was clear that there were differing levels of expectations between some community organizations and the County regarding the comprehensiveness and level of services that impacted residents would be provided following the fire. While the County has activated sheltering operations previously, the duration, scope of services, and number of residents using the services during this sheltering event created some unique challenges and opportunities for improvement in managing similar-scale sheltering operations in the future. Such challenges and working towards a more common understanding of such issues as the examples provided below are best managed in advance of an emergency, rather than during an emergency:

- The scope and breadth of human services impacted residents should expect from the County;
- The roles the County will directly perform, and the roles specific community/non-profit organizations need to be prepared to perform;
- How concerns and problems should be raised to the County, and how the residents and community organizations should expect the County to coordinate and address these concerns.

The Red Cross was primarily responsible for initial intake and assessment, and providing food services and cots at the shelter, and in coordination with HHS providing necessary counseling and support services. County departments actively involved with supporting the shelter indicated that several coordination meetings between County personnel and the ARC took place; however, some non-profit/community organizations expressed confusion over who was leading the County's response/recovery effort and who was in charge of the sheltering operations (DHSS or ARC), and to whom concerns/issues should be raised. This perceived lack of clarity combined with different levels of expectations between some community organizations and the County regarding the level of services that impacted residents would be provided, contributed to ongoing frustration and concerns being expressed by representatives of community organizations about the comprehensiveness of the County's response/recovery effort.

One clear manifestation of this can be seen in the concerns raised regarding the County's effectiveness in addressing the language challenges at the shelter and in providing services to the impacted residents. While the County made concerted efforts to ensure that there were adequate bi-lingual staff (primarily Spanish-speaking) providing services to the impacted residents, perceptions were still very prevalent among some community partners

that there were inadequate bi-lingual staff from the County to support shelter operations, including case management services. HHS provided the following information regarding the number of bi-lingual (predominantly Spanish-English) HHS staff providing services at the shelter during the period of August 11 – 21, when the shelter was open:

Date	Morning - Afternoon/Evening				Afternoon - Evening (nursing/translator/support staff overnight)			
	Crisis Center Staff	Nursing Staff	Translators/Support Staff	Total Bi-Lingual HHS Staff	Crisis Center Staff	Nursing Staff	Translators/Support Staff	Total Bi-Lingual HHS Staff
Thursday, 8/11	2	0	2	4	3	3	4	10
Friday, 8/12	2	2	9	13	2	2	4	8
Saturday, 8/13	0	1	5	6	1	1	0	2
Sunday, 8/14	1	3	1	5	1	2	5	8
Monday, 8/15	1	1	2	4	1	1	1	3
Tuesday, 8/16	1	3	2	6	1	1	1	3
Wednesday, 8/17	1	3	1	5	2	1	1	4
Thursday, 8/18	1	1	1	3	2	1	2	5
Friday, 8/19	2	2	2	6	2	0	1	3
Saturday, 8/20	1	2	1	4	1	0	0	1
Sunday, 8/21	0	2	1	3	CLOSED			

In addition, the ARC stated that when the shelter initially opened they were short of bi-lingual Spanish-English staff; but for most of the time the shelter was in operation, ARC had 2-3 bi-lingual Spanish-English volunteers per shift at the shelter, as well as one volunteer on call who spoke Amharic.

Despite these attempts by the County and the ARC to address the obvious language challenges, a some community partners expressed concerns that there were insufficient numbers of bi-lingual case management and mental health support professionals in evidence at the shelter.<sup>13</sup>

#### Lesson Learned

Many interviewees, both from the County and the partner organizations, stated that it would have been helpful to have had a clear statement/understanding of what the incident command/management chain of command was: who (by name) was in overall command, and who below this person was responsible for which activities. Several suggested that having a list of these people (and their back-ups) with their contact information could have helped facilitate clearer lines of authority/accountability and improved timely coordination when needs or questions arose.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, having regular (for example, twice daily) coordination meetings among the County and its

<sup>13</sup> We noted that some community organizations raised concerns about the lack of County staff with physical characteristics that would have reflected a Spanish cultural competency – making them more approachable by the residents, and more sensitive to the needs of the residents. We note this for full reporting; not to give confirmation to the concerns.

<sup>14</sup> While we believe that HHS may have such a list for internal use, no incident command list was made available to community partners.

partners was identified as an improvement the County could address in the future to facilitate ongoing coordination and resolution of issues/needs.<sup>15</sup> Using the regular “tactical” meetings to both identify issues that need to be addressed (and assigning responsibility/lead for such issues), as well as identifying planned visitors/events occurring at the shelter the next day/several days would facilitate improved planning (including supporting access by authorized visitors) and operations. It was also identified as a best practice that such meetings should have a designated “scribe” (a person who does not have program accountability for shelter operations) to document actions/decisions/issues and share the document with the responsible parties. Finally, as reflected in Lesson Learned #2, above, improved pre-planning and emergency response exercises for the type of emergency and the types of challenges (e.g., language challenges) experienced in the Silver Spring apartment fire could facilitate improved coordination and potentially enhanced response/recovery efforts.

4. Shelter Operations: Conducting Press Conferences at Shelter. Conducting press/media events at the shelter location created additional challenges for managing access by non-shelter residents and staff (i.e., press/media/others), as well as creating additional disruption for the residents when the intent of the shelter was to provide a safe and stable environment following the crisis the residents had experienced. Such events also created additional security/access control challenges at the shelter. As one person observed: “Allowing the press and others inside the shelter was like inviting the press/public inside people’s homes.”

#### Lesson Learned

The County should avoid, as a matter of protocol, conducting press conferences at shelter sites, when there are large-scale sheltering operations underway at the site.

5. Shelter Operations: Planning and Preparation. Certain issues at the shelter could have benefitted from better advance preparation at the County level, including the following:
  - Wi-Fi and cell phone reception at the shelter were a challenge. While ultimately addressed, if Community Centers are the most likely sheltering facilities<sup>16</sup>, the County may want to take steps to assess and, as necessary, improve such capabilities at each Center.
  - Shelter Logistics – Preparation for expanded services/needs at the shelter (vs. normal Center services). The shelter had limited shower facilities for the number of residents. When the decision was made to open up the adjacent Long Branch Community Center pool to provide additional showering facilities, there were inadequate towels and toiletries initially available. Similarly, the ability to handle

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<sup>15</sup> It was emphasized that such meetings should not involve large numbers of people; but rather, a lead representative from the major programs supporting shelter operations, and a representative from each external partner.

<sup>16</sup> We believe there is a clear advantage to using the Community Centers for such sheltering operations: residents are often familiar with the Center and the County personnel at the Center from having used services there. This familiarity among the residents and the Center staff is important to creating an overall welcoming and safe environment following the disruption and personal impact experienced by the residents.

refuse collections in the midst of heavier traffic blocking access to the dumpster became an issue.

**Lesson Learned**

Neither of these issues were major, and both were ultimately addressed; but both are indicative of the benefits of improved advanced planning/preparation to support shelter operations across the County.

6. **On-Scene Coordination/Triaging for Victims/Residents.** While MCPD and MCFRS personnel were attending to impacted residents at the fire scene, there was a parallel need to triage and provide coordination for impacted residents to assist/direct them to the nearby shelter. Although MCFRS called in Ride-On buses and three medical ambulance buses (which arrived starting at 12:30am), concerns were expressed that it was unclear where residents should go for further information and support at the scene, with groups of residents (and neighbors) gathering at several different locations (including several areas of the shopping center parking lot and across Piney Branch Road. While these buses were intended to serving as a triaging point (by MCFRS), there was no visible (or audible) way for the impacted residents to know this.

**Lesson Learned**

This clear and visible bridge between first responders and shelter operations was identified as an area for improvement in current emergency response processes. The County should review its current emergency response protocols and create more visible means for this on-scene triaging capability to be easily identified for impacted residents. For example, the use of appropriate signage (in multiple languages) identifying an area as the “aid station” could be considered.

7. **Information Sharing with Shelter Residents.** The ARC, in conjunction with the County, conducted daily/twice daily information-sharing sessions with the shelter residents. The concern was expressed that all residents were not at the shelter during these sessions – due to job or medical commitments – and that information should have been available through another means.

**Lesson Learned**

It has been strongly suggested that having a “bulletin” board or information desk available to the shelter residents with information posted/available, in languages appropriate for the shelter residents, regarding resources available to the residents, events planned at the shelter (e.g., the Resource Fair conducted), or other information of use to the residents would also be helpful.

**Observations and Lessons Learned – ESF #16:**

8. **Financial Assistance to Victims: Model the Lessons Learned from the “Victims’ Fund”.** The MHP-managed victim/resident fund was generally acknowledged to have been a fair and

effectively managed mechanism to receive and distribute financial donations to victims of the fire.

### Lesson Learned

The MHP “Victims’ Fund” should be leveraged as a model in future response/recovery efforts. Specifically, the following principles<sup>17</sup> should serve as principles to guide management of future “victim funds:”

- All donated funds should go to the victims as certified by the America Red Cross; i.e., no use of funds for “administrative/overhead costs.”<sup>18</sup>
- Distributions to victims should be made as “lump sums” – i.e., do not make distinctions between “long term sustainability” and “emergency funds.” There probably should be two such lump sum distributions: an initial one (within 2-3 weeks following incident) to provide assistance to the victims, and then a second one (at the close of the fund) as additional donations are received.<sup>19</sup>
- Keep the period of time that the “fund” is open to a minimum: no more than 3-6 months should be sufficient time for the collection and distribution of all funds.
- Offer *pro bono* financial assistance from “approved providers” – not as a requirement to receive the fund distribution, but as a service to assist victims in managing such funds.
- Provide a list of recommended financial institutions – again, not to force use of these institutions, but as a support to the victims, some of whom may not currently have existing accounts with a financial institution.
- Ensure appropriate accountability in the disbursement of funds, by (a) requiring the managing organization to provide an accounting of donations received and funds disbursed, and (b) requiring victims receiving disbursements to sign an initial application (using the ARC ID number as a reference) certifying that they were a former resident impacted by the incident and designating where cash payments should be deposited or checks mailed to (or picked up).
- Designate the allocation of funds based on the following priorities:
  - i. For families who lost family members, to cover funeral and other costs; using Maryland’s intestate succession and statutory shares as the

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<sup>17</sup> Many of the “forms” created and used by MHP could be used as templates for future similar victims’ funds efforts.

<sup>18</sup> This raises a challenge the County should consider the most appropriate way to address – both for the Silver Spring incident response/recovery effort and for future such efforts: the non-profit/community organizations who stepped up and played major roles in the response/recovery effort almost assuredly incurred additional costs, or at a minimum, delayed/reduced other normal program efforts – many of which are supported in part by County funding. The County should consider how these additional costs should most appropriately be addressed: either through augmentation of existing County-funding to specific organizations to offset the costs (with appropriate accountability for the work performed during the response/recovery effort), or a determination that any such costs should be offset within existing funds.

<sup>19</sup> There is an administrative effort associated with distribution of funds to the impacted residents. The effort should not be minimized in a situation similar to the current incident – where a door-to-door distribution effort was frequently required; hence, a recommendation of no more than two distributions to the victims.

- guideline for distribution, unless an alternative distribution is agreed to by all family members;
  - ii. For cash assistance to assist families in recovering (including housing) from the disaster, use size of the family to designate amounts (e.g., 1-2 person households; 3-5 person household; 6+ person households).
  - The County should attempt to offset the recovery costs for victims by (a) working with the property management company to offer its own financial package to victims (e.g., waiving security deposits and first month's rent), and (b) coordinating with other community/non-profit organizations to assist with other needs (furniture, clothes, food)<sup>20</sup>.
9. **Volunteer and Non-Financial Donation Management.** Managing donations and goods needed (food, furniture, clothing) of the magnitude involved in an incident similar to the Silver Spring fire is a challenge unless appropriate pre-planning and preparation occurs. Similarly, managing the offers of and need for volunteers to help support shelter operations for a sustained period and for the numbers of people using shelter services can be a logistical challenge, that if not managed effectively can leave a bad impression in the minds of the individual volunteering (e.g., “my offer to provide services was either not valued or wanted”) and can result in not taking full advantage of graciously-offered and needed services (including translation services for non-English speaking residents, and literacy-support services for illiterate residents).

#### Lesson Learned

Having “activation agreements” with non-profit/community organizations who are capable and willing to take the lead on specific categories of donation management for incidents similar to the Silver Spring fire could help facilitate more effective activation of and clarity on the roles these organizations will play in incident response/recovery efforts, and also help to build the capacity for these organizations to activate quickly in response to similar future emergencies. Examples of such activation agreements might include one for each of the following areas of need: victim funds, clothes, non-perishable food, furniture/ mattresses. For perishable food (e.g., food prepared by neighborhood residents or businesses and brought to the shelter), the Red Cross’ policy is not to accept/serve food to shelter residents from outside organizations not contracted with by the ARC (because of liability issues). As such, the County should have an alternate plan for how to manage such food donations at the site; e.g., setting up an area/tent and allowing shelter residents to voluntarily partake of the food donated, but making clear that the food is separate from that being provided by the ARC.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> In the case of the Silver Spring fire, the County designated the following non-profit partners for this type of assistance: A Wider Circle – furniture, mattresses, etc.; CASA – clothes, shoes, small household items, and document replacement; MANNA – food.

<sup>21</sup> We understand that the ARC ultimately did this at the shelter, allowing a tent to be set up on the circle in front of the Community Center. However, we were advised that, initially, prepared food being brought to the shelter was being discarded.

### Lesson Learned

While the County's (Office of Community Partnership) Volunteer Center was consulted during the response/recovery effort and created a Google form to assist volunteers to sign up to provide volunteer services, the actual creation of the list was an *ad hoc* effort. Having a robust and visible volunteer management program could facilitate a more active and effective mobilization of volunteer services when needed. Such a program/system<sup>22</sup> would optimally identify volunteer services the County might need as part of a response/recovery of this magnitude and would similarly allow individuals to register (and identify specific skills/experience), as volunteers in these areas in advance of (preferably) or at the time of (if specific service needs are identified for a specific emergency) the County's need for services during an emergency.

10. Perceived Gaps in “Case Management” and Social Support Network. While the case management approach used by the County was very effective in identifying the need for services by the impacted residents, several community partners identified perceived gaps in the case management approach: i.e., the approach may not have provided a seamless solution to identifying resident needs and ensuring that these needs were appropriately being triaged and addressed, and could be improved by the inclusion of licensed social workers as part of the case management team used by the County. The major gaps being identified were often not mental health services, but rather “social net” gaps. For example, discussing with the residents whether they had a means of transportation (public or other) to service locations – the Crisis Center in Rockville, the furniture warehouse supported by A Wider Circle, and medical appointments – were identified as gaps not identified through the County’s case management approach, and where the community organizations (either themselves or working through volunteers) needed to step in and work with the impacted residents to identify and address these gaps.

### Lesson Learned

At a minimum, these perceived gaps may be reflective of (a) the benefit of pre-planning with the community/non-profit organizations discussed above, so that the scope of the County-provided services would be clear, versus the services the community organizations need to be prepared to address; and (b) the benefit to the County conducting continuing coordination meetings after the shelter closes – see next lesson learned.

11. Ongoing Coordination Meetings between County and Community Partner Organizations Following Shelter Closure. Some community partner organizations stated that there were ongoing issues and service concerns after the shelter closed, such as the concerns about

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<sup>22</sup> For example, similar to the Fairfax Volunteer Center; <http://www.volunteerfairfax.org/individuals/mobilization-leadership-team.php> and <http://www.volunteerfairfax.org/individuals/emergency-response.php>

gaps in case management, mental health services, and “social net” services; and that there was no continuing forum to raise and have these concerns addressed.

#### Lesson Learned

When the County’s emergency response/recovery effort requires close and ongoing coordination with community partner organizations, it is important that the County establish and continue ongoing coordination meetings with representatives of the community partner organizations to facilitate identification and resolution of concerns and potential service needs.

## **Long-Term Recovery**

As mentioned previously, the County’s TESS Center is serving as the centralized point of contact for ongoing services and long-term support services operations. HHS stated that the increased resources for supporting mental health services will continue for at least the next 6 months, through a combination of County and foundation funding. HHS will continue to provide long-term case management support for impacted families. HHS acknowledged the challenges associated with this long-term recovery effort, because each family situation is unique and requires individualized case management and support.

## **Lessons Learned: Summary of Recommendations**

As stated at the outset, the review found that the County’s overall response/recovery effort following the Silver Spring apartment fire, in partnership with community and non-profit organizations, and other state and federal agencies, effectively addressed the human service needs (housing/shelter, food, mental health/crisis counseling services, document replacement) of the residents impacted by the apartment fire. The County staff and management, as well as the community and non-profit partners (including the American Red Cross, CASA de Maryland, IMPACT Silver Spring, Montgomery Housing Partnership, Mary’s Center, several foundations – to name just a few) who played such vital roles in the recovery effort are to be applauded for their passionate and committed efforts to provide needed assistance to the residents/families impacted by the fire. Many people cancelled planned vacations, put in extra hours, and otherwise rose to the occasion with one focus: helping the victims in the aftermath of a devastating incident.

As with any incident of this magnitude and impact, an after-the-incident review and investigation affords the County and its partners with the opportunity (lessons learned) to improve the County’s preparation for, and subsequent response to, similar (i.e., emergency events involving large numbers of impacted residents and extended sheltering operations) or even larger-scale emergency incidents. These lessons learned are discussed above, and specific recommendations associated with them are presented in the table below. These lessons learned and recommendations are in no way intended to criticize or take away from the

commitment and determination modeled by the County and its partners. Rather, the recommendations are intended to “learn and improve,” and to enhance the County’s future emergency response/recovery capabilities.

Lesson Learned	Recommendation
1. Activation of the EOC	For all emergency events where large numbers of residents are impacted and the scope (in terms of types and duration of services needed) of the response/recovery effort is extensive, OEMHS should activate (at a minimum, full remote activation) the EOC (or other comparable process) and ensure that regular (at least daily or twice daily) conference calls are conducted to facilitate improved awareness, coordination and planning across the County. (Lead: OEMHS)
2. EOP ‘Scenario-Based’ Drills/Exercises	<p>The County should develop and conduct a future table-top exercise (1) based on a scenario the same as or similar to the Silver Spring apartment fire, (2) involve appropriate County and non-profit/community partners that would be involved in the response/recovery effort, and (3) include the challenges identified in this report. As part of this exercise, the following issues should be explicitly discussed and worked through with the community organizations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The scope and breadth of human services impacted residents should expect from the County;</li> <li>• The roles the County will directly perform, and the roles specific community/non-profit organizations need to be prepared to perform;</li> <li>• How concerns and problems should be raised to the County, and how the residents and community organizations should expect the County to coordinate and address these concerns.</li> </ul> <p>(Leads: OEMHS and HHS)</p>
3. Overall Management of Sheltering Operation: Incident Command Structure	HHS, as the Primary Department for ESF #6, should revise their internal emergency response procedures to require that a clear incident command/management chain of command be established and documented in the event of an emergency, to include: who (by name) is in overall command of incident management, and who below this person has primary responsibility for specific response activities. The documented incident management list

Lesson Learned	Recommendation
	should also identify the back-ups to the primary leads, and provide contact information to provide clearer lines of authority/accountability and improved timely coordination when needs or questions arose. (Lead: HHS)
4. Overall Management of Sheltering Operation: Coordination within County, between County and Red Cross, and with Community/Non-profit Organizations	HHS should ensure that their internal emergency response procedures require conducting regular (for example, twice daily) coordination meetings among the County and the external partners to facilitate ongoing coordination and resolution of issues/needs. Such meetings should also identify planned visitors/events occurring the next day/several days to ensure any appropriate planning (including support access by visitors) occurs. The meetings should have a designated "scribe" (a person who does not have program accountability for shelter operations) to document actions/decisions/issues. (Lead: HHS)
5. Shelter Operations: Conducting Press Conferences at Shelter	The County should avoid, as a matter of protocol, conducting press conferences at shelter sites, when there are large-scale sheltering operations underway at the site. (Lead: PIO)
6. Shelter Operations: Planning and Preparation	Drawing on the lessons learned from this incident, Recreation in coordination with the Department of Technology Services should develop a plan to address telecommunications and logistics issues at each of the Community Centers (and other facilities that are identified as potential shelter facilities) that impacted or could impact sheltering operations. (Lead: Recreation)
7. On-Scene Coordination/ Triaging for Victims/Residents	The County should review its current emergency response protocols and plan, and consider having a more visible "triaging" or "aid station" operation (tent, mobile unit, etc.) to help triage people who did not need medical care to the shelter operations. (Lead: OEMHS)
8. Information Sharing with Shelter Residents	HHS should examine its current sheltering protocol and consider having a "bulletin" board available to the shelter residents with information posted in appropriate languages regarding resources available to them, events planned at the shelter (e.g., the Resource Fair conducted), or other information of use to the residents. (Lead: HHS)

Lesson Learned	Recommendation
9. Financial Assistance to Victims: Model the Lessons Learned from the Victims' Fund	Using the guidelines/principles developed by MHP in its management of the victim fund for the Silver Spring apartment fire, the County should model this approach in the management of future “victim funds.” (Lead: OEMHS)
10. Non-Financial Donation Management	The County should develop “activation agreements” – with non-profit organizations who are capable and willing to take the lead on specific categories of donation management for incidents similar to the Silver Spring fire, including an activation agreement for each of the following areas of need: victim funds, clothes, food, furniture/mattresses. (Lead: HHS)
11. Volunteer Management	The County should assess potential enhancements to the volunteer management capacity (previously available through the Volunteer Center) to facilitate a more active and effective mobilization of volunteer services when needed in an emergency response. Such a program/system would optimally identify volunteer services the County might need as part of a response/recovery of this magnitude, and would similarly allow individuals to register (and identify specific skills/experience) as volunteers in these areas in advance of (preferably) or at the time of (if specific service needs are identified for a specific emergency) the County’s need for services during an emergency. (Lead: OEMHS)
12. Potential Gaps in “Case Management” and Social Support Network	HHS should review the case management approach followed in response to the Silver Spring fire, and determine whether modifications to the approach should be made for the future to address some of the perceived “gaps” identified by several community partners. (Lead: HHS)
13. Post-Shelter Operations: Coordination	The County should consider conducting regular (e.g., weekly, or more or less frequently as appropriate) coordination meetings between the County and the community partner organizations after the shelter closes to facilitate identification and resolution of ongoing recovery and service delivery concerns. (Lead: HHS)

## Final Observations

In addition to the findings and recommendations identified above, one additional observation was identified during the course of conducting this review and is discussed below. This observation is not so much a “lesson learned” as it is an issue the County should determine how it wants to address, both in the wake of the Silver Spring fire response/recovery effort and in the future.

Observation	Recommendation
14. Some non-profit/community organizations that receive community grant funding from the County and played major roles in the response/recovery effort stated they had to divert funding from other program efforts for which they are held accountable by their funding organization(s) – including the County – in order to effectively support the response/recovery effort; with consequential impacts on their ability to support these other programs (i.e., services being delayed/reduced).	The County should establish a process to consider a request for additional funding from a non-profit community organization receiving County community grant funding if that organization believes the response/recovery efforts they provided during this incident cannot be supported under existing funding sources (either County or other organizations, such as foundations) without causing significant adverse impacts to other programs/services specifically supported under the County’s community grant funding. Such a process should be sufficiently robust (i.e., requiring appropriate documentation of: additional costs incurred, response/recovery services performed, funding being requested/received from other sources, and impacts on other programs supported by the County’s existing community grant funding) to support consideration of the request/need. (Lead: HHS, with support from the County’s Office of Management and Budget and the Department of Finance, as appropriate, to develop this process and make recommendations on specific funding requests to be considered through the existing County budget/supplemental funding process.)

Finally, this report would be remiss if it did not highlight the efforts, both at an individual and an organizational level, to help the victims of the fire. The response/recovery effort brought out the best efforts of people to help those impacted by the fire. We applaud these individuals for their demonstrated commitment to provide needed assistance to the impacted residents/families. While we do not minimize the opportunities for the County and its partners, collectively, to improve the response/recovery effort following future emergencies on the scale of, or larger than, the Silver Spring apartment fire, the recommendations noted above should not overshadow the recognition due the individuals who went the extra mile to help their neighbors during a time of crisis and need. As noted by the representative from the American Red Cross, “This was the best coordination among the various partners [including the County] I have ever seen.”

## **Department Comments and MCIA Evaluation**

MCIA provided a draft of this report to the Office of Emergency Management and Homeland Security (OEMHS), the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), the Public Information Office (PIO), and the Department of Recreation for their review and comment. We received a response from each of these office/departments. PIO expressed appreciation for the quality of the work conducted during the review, and had no specific comments. OEMHS stated they concurred with each of the recommendations identifying OEMHS as the lead, and expressed appreciation for the careful consideration of the facts in developing the recommendations. DHHS stated that they concurred with the recommendations identifying HHS as the lead, and expressed appreciation for the thoughtfulness in assembling a thorough report on a complicated response effort involving multiple entities and partners. The Department of Recreation stated they concurred with the recommendation identifying Recreation as the lead.

A copy of the OEMHS and DHHS memorandum responses appear as Appendix D; PIO and Recreation responses were communicated by email or orally.

## Appendix A – Montgomery County Emergency Support Functions

ESF #	Title	Primary Agency
1	Transportation	Department of Transportation
2	Communications	Technology Services
3	Public Works and Engineering	Department of Environmental Protection
4	Firefighting	Fire and Rescue Services
5	Emergency Management	Office of Emergency Management and Homeland Security
6	Mass Care, Emergency Assistance, Housing and Human Services	Department of Health and Human Services
7	Logistics Management and Resource Support	Department of General Services
8	Public Health and Medical	Department of Health and Human Services / Public Health Services
9	Urban Search and Rescue	Fire and Rescue Services
10	Oil and Hazardous Materials Response	Fire and Rescue Services
11	Agriculture and Natural Resources	Department of Health and Human Services
12	Energy	Department of General Services
13	Public Safety and Security	Montgomery County Police Department
14	Long-Term Community Recovery	Office of Emergency Management and Homeland Security
15	External Affairs	Public Information Office
16	Volunteer and Donations Management	Office of Emergency Management and Homeland Security

## Appendix B – Kay Apartment Communities: Flower Branch Apartment Community Fact Sheet (October 10, 2016)



### Flower Branch Apartment Community

#### Fact Sheet

October 10, 2016

Kay Apartment Communities (Kay) is the management company for the Flower Branch Apartment Community, which sustained a catastrophic natural gas explosion on August 10, 2016, that claimed the lives of seven people, injured dozens and displaced many more.

In the 50+ years Kay has owned and operated workforce rental housing in Montgomery County and the other markets we serve we have never experienced a tragedy of this magnitude. In this explosion, we not only lost residents, but one of our managers lost a family member. Our grief is genuine as we work to aid all of the individuals affected, and cooperate with authorities to determine the cause of this horrific explosion.

We recognize and sincerely thank the numerous government and community authorities, agencies and organizations, plus the countless generous individuals, who immediately responded to this tragedy with overwhelming financial, material and personal support. It is a true testament to the goodwill of many in our community, and beyond.

Kay would also like people to know that immediately following the fire, our primary focus has been assisting our displaced leaseholder households (leaseholders and authorized occupants) and the other people directly affected. In less than 24 hours after the explosion, we were working collaboratively with the community based organizations CASA de Maryland and IMPACT Silver Spring. We have worked tirelessly with our displaced leaseholder households to help them quickly find new homes, either directly, or if they were more comfortable, with the assistance of CASA or IMPACT. We immediately began contacting the displaced leaseholder households to distribute a substantial aid and relocation package (see details below). We also made a financial donation to the Montgomery County Housing Partnership to contribute to their Herculean efforts to assist all displaced residents, including our leaseholder households. On August 16, 2016, our management team met with the displaced resident households for more than 2.5 hours at Clifton Park Baptist Church to listen to and answer their questions, and to continue to distribute relocation assistance packages. For residents not displaced, we greatly relaxed our lease termination requirements for those who wanted to move.

Our Flower Branch leasing office was destroyed, so we immediately setup a satellite office across the street at Goodacre Apartments to assist with in-person inquiries and work to provide normal resident service operations during a time of extraordinary circumstances.

Specifics about our efforts to help our displaced leaseholder households:

- Return of security deposits with interest;

- A refund of August rent payments;
- An additional \$1,800 check per apartment;
- A debit card in the amount of \$200 per apartment;
- Assistance with relocation to an available, nearby Kay-managed apartment community with three months of free rent, plus a \$2,000 credit to their Kay Apartment Communities' account to assist with future rent payments;
- After the 3-month rent-free period, the leaseholder's current rent at Flower Branch will be extended for additional 9 months even if they have moved to another Kay Apartment Communities' apartment with higher rent;
- New furniture and housewares for the displaced residents, living room and dining room furniture, beds and bedroom furniture, as well as linens, dinnerware, silverware, and other household goods.

As of October 10, 2016:

- 19 of the 23 leaseholders and authorized occupants have accepted homes within Kay Apartment Communities.
- 2 displaced households have moved to non-Kay communities.
- 1 displaced household has found a new residence with the assistance of HOC.
- 1 is in the hospital for unknown reasons.

Contact:

Donna Cellini, [dcellini@kayapartments.com](mailto:dcellini@kayapartments.com) or 301-562-4405

## Appendix C – Montgomery Housing Partnership – Victims’ Fund

### MHP Fund Update (November 30, 2016)

Within a week after the explosion, MHP:

- Provided cellphone chargers for use at the Shelter
- Replaced 48 cellphones that had been lost in the fire
- Provided \$100/person in VISA giftcards to residents of 8701/8703 Arliss
- Provided \$100/unit to the adjacent three buildings
- Issued almost 300 \$15 food vouchers for area restaurants, of which 153 were redeemed (available to all 5 impacted buildings)

Within two weeks after the explosion, MHP:

- Received applications from residents for additional cash assistance
- Provided an additional \$100/household in gift cards to various stores (Target, Giant, etc.)
- Paid for the replacement of car keys for more than 15 residents/cars
- Initiated payments for replacement documents (passports, car titles, etc.)
- Provided temporary assistance to households to cover costs as they wait for their new unit to become available. This was done as \$500 in VISA giftcards for those able to stay with family/friends or hotel expenses for those that needed that option.

Within three weeks after the explosion, MHP:

- Issued checks to all 61 Red Cross certified households, per the following breakdown:

Household Size	Payment Amount	# of Households
1 -2 individuals	\$3,453	43
3-5 individuals	\$7,143	14
6+ individuals	\$9,603	4

- Continued to pay for replacement documents
- Raffled off additional store specific gift cards at the Comptroller Resource Fair

Within four weeks after the explosion, MHP:

- Reached out to all families who lost a family member to offer \$24,000/deceased to support funeral/repatriation costs, and any additional costs the family might occur. As of 9/30/16, all families had received this benefit.

Within eight weeks after the explosion, MHP:

- Conducted a final reconciliation of the fund, and collected all outstanding pledges, resulting in a total fund of \$827,320.54.

Within 10 weeks after the explosion, MHP:

- Closed out the fund, through issuance of a second round of cash assistance to all 61 Red Cross certified households. The base amount of the checks were as follows:

Household Size	Payment Amount	# of Households
1 -2 individuals	\$3,903	43
3-5 individuals	\$7,616	14
6+ individuals	\$10,101	4

- At the time of initial application, all households had been asked to list out all replacement documents needed. Additional funds were included with the above amounts for those

households that had not already submitted receipts for reimbursement, or where MHP had not been billed directly by the various consulates/agencies.

- As of 11/30/2016, MHP is still awaiting for one of the checks to be picked up (due to the family being out of the country).

#### **Other MHP-Provided Support**

MHP has also assisted in procuring private support for additional case management and trauma counselors. We are currently holding \$45,000 for HHS for this purpose (separate from the community fund), that will be released immediately, upon receipt of invoice from HHS.

MHP has also assisted with housing. We have rehoused one household at The Bonifant, and a second household at Greenwood Terrace.

## Appendix D – Department Responses



### OFFICE OF EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AND HOMELAND SECURITY

Isiah Leggett  
*County Executive*

Earl Stoddard, Ph.D., M.P.H.  
*Director*

### MEMORANDUM

December 5, 2016

TO: William Broglie, Internal Audit Manager  
Office of Internal Audit

FROM: Earl Stoddard III, Director Office of Emergency Management & Homeland Security

Subject: Silver Spring Apartment Fire Response/Recovery Audit

The Office has reviewed the report entitled *Silver Spring Apartment Fire: County Response/Recovery Effort and Lessons Learned* prepared by your office. The Office concurs with the enumerated recommendations (below) where OEMHS is defined as the lead.

I thank the Office of Internal Audit for their careful consideration of the facts and thoughtful recommendations to improve Montgomery County's response and recovery efforts to tragic events like the Silver Spring Explosion and Fire.

#### **Recommendation 1: Activation of the EOC**

For all emergency events where large numbers of residents are impacted and the scope (in terms of types and duration of services needed) of the response/ recovery effort is extensive, OEMHS should activate (at a minimum, full remote activation) the EOC (or other comparable process) and ensure that regular (at least daily or twice daily) conference calls are conducted to facilitate improved awareness, coordination and planning across the County.

#### **OEMHS Response:**

The Office of Emergency Management and Homeland Security (OEMHS) concurs with this recommendation.

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**Recommendation 2: EOP ‘Scenario-Based’ Drills/Exercises**

The County should develop and conduct a future table-top exercise (1) based on a scenario the same as or similar to the Silver Spring apartment fire, (2) involve appropriate County and non-profit/community partners that would be involved in the response/recovery effort, and (3) include the challenges identified in this report. As part of this exercise, the following issues should be explicitly discussed and worked through with the community organizations:

- The scope and breadth of human services impacted residents should expect from the County;
- The roles the County will directly perform, and the roles specific community/non-profit organizations need to be prepared to perform;
- How concerns and problems should be raised to the County, and how the residents and community organizations should expect the County to coordinate and address these concerns.

**OEMHS Response:**

The Office of Emergency Management and Homeland Security (OEMHS) concurs with this recommendation.

**Recommendation 7: On-Scene Coordination/ Triaging for Victims/Residents**

The County should review its current emergency response protocols and plan for having a more visible “triaging” or “aid station” operation (tent, mobile unit, etc.) to help triage people who did not need medical care to the shelter operations.

**OEMHS Response:**

The Office of Emergency Management and Homeland Security (OEMHS) concurs with this recommendation. The appropriate solution(s) may vary based upon the nature of the incident, its duration, location(s) and other factors. OEMHS will lead the review of current practices to determine appropriate corrective measures across the span of potential events.

**Recommendation 9: Financial Assistance to Victims: Model the Lessons Learned from the Victims' Fund**

Using the guidelines/principles developed by MHP in its management of the victim fund for the Silver Spring apartment fire, the County should model this approach in the management of future "victim funds."

**OEMHS Response:**

The Office of Emergency Management and Homeland Security (OEMHS) concurs with this recommendation.

**Recommendation 11: Volunteer Management**

The County should assess potential enhancements to the volunteer management capacity (previously available through the Volunteer Center) to facilitate a more active and effective mobilization of volunteer services when needed in an emergency response. Such a program/system would optimally identify volunteer services the County might need as part of a response/recovery of this magnitude and would similarly allow individuals to register (and identify specific skills/experience), as volunteers in these areas in advance of (preferably) or at the time of (if specific service needs are identified for a specific emergency) the County's need for services during an emergency.

**OEMHS Response:**

The Office of Emergency Management and Homeland Security (OEMHS) concurs with this recommendation.



## DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

Isiah Leggett  
County Executive

Uma S. Ahluwalia  
Director

## MEMORANDUM

December 6, 2016

**To:** William Broglie, Internal Audit Manager  
Office of Internal Audit

**From:** Uma Ahluwalia, Director *Uma*

**Subject:** Sheltering Response to the Silver Spring Apartment Fire: County Response Recovery Effort and Lessons Learned

The Department of Health and Human Services has reviewed the Draft Final Report entitled "*Silver Spring Apartment Fire: County Response/Recovery Effort and Lessons Learned.*" I would like to thank you for your thoughtfulness in assembling such a thorough report to a very complicated response, that involved multiple entities and partners and for the opportunity to respond to these recommendations.

We have reviewed the recommendations and would like to offer the following comments on the recommendations.

Lesson Learned	Response to Recommendation
2. EOP "Scenario-Based" Drills Exercises	The department concurs with this recommendation and will collaborate with OEMHS to continue to jointly develop the scenarios for drills and exercises.
3. Overall Management of Sheltering Operation: Incident Command Structure	The Department concurs in part with this recommendation. There are two shifts daily two (typically 8a — 8p and 8p — 8a) in every sheltering operation with multiple staff present. The Department agrees to identify one Departmental sheltering lead and to publish promote that lead name but not really release names of all staff on the sheltering roster three times a day.
4. Overall Management of Sheltering Operation: Coordination within County, between County and Red Cross, and with Community Non-Profit Organizations	The Departments concurs with this recommendation and will begin work with the Red Cross and our other external partners to develop protocols to respond to this concern.
8. Information Sharing with Shelter Residents	The Department concurs with this recommendation and will build these expectations within our sheltering protocols.

## Office of the Director

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William Broglie, Internal Audit Manager  
December 6, 2016  
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Lesson Learned	Response to Recommendation
10. Non-Financial Donation Management	This recommendation while useful will be challenging to implement. The Long Branch community has a surfeit of non-profit organizations with deep roots in community organizing and tenant empowerment. This is not true for other parts of Montgomery County. If such a tragedy were to occur elsewhere the non-profit response could look very different. We will attempt to initiate conversations with at least three or four non-profits serving county-wide to identify lead agencies for some of these needed areas of support.
12. Potential Gaps in "Case Management" and Social Support Network	The department concurs with this recommendation and have already conducted two hot washes one with OEMHS and one within HHS and will implement necessary protocols to support this recommendation.
13. Post-Shelter Operations: Coordination	The Departments concurs and will host post-shelter coordination activities as appropriate.
14. Some non-profit/community organizations who stepped up and played major roles in the response/recovery effort stated that they had incurred (and were continuing to incur) additional costs, and that other program efforts which they are held accountable by their funding organization(s) – including the County-were also being delayed/reduced.	The Department will work with the Office of Management and Budget and Office of Finance to put protocols in place.

We appreciate the opportunity to comment on the Report.

USA:tjk