

Enhancing Relationships Between Emergency Management and Extension During Disaster Recovery

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Introduction:

Oklahoma is known for having severe weather events such as droughts, wildfires, tornados, etc. Between 2003-2023, there were 115-billion-dollar disaster events in the state. In fact, in 2025 there were 16 disaster declarations in the state. Oklahoma is third in the nation for disaster declarations.

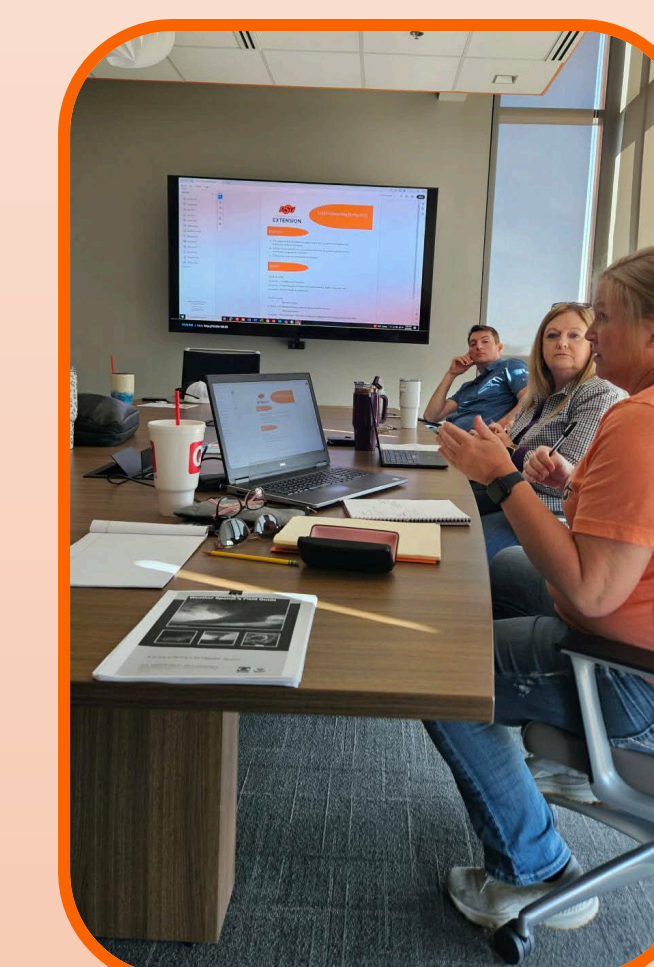
Extension can play a major role in disaster recovery. Since Oklahoma Cooperative Extension has offices in all 77 counties, recovery education can reach all corners of the state. However, educators need training on disaster recovery and relationship building with county emergency management offices.

Goals:

- Provide guidelines for establishing working relationships between extension offices and emergency management.
- Prepare county extension offices guidance on how they can respond to disasters in their communities.
- Facilitate a state-wide tabletop exercises for educators and administrators.
- Recruit new DART (Disaster Assistance Response Team) members.



Left: 2026 Statewide Extension Disaster Exercise



Right: DART onboarding meeting to plan activities

Methodology:

In 2025, the OSU Extension Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) conducted in-service trainings focused on strengthening relationships with county emergency management officials. As part of this effort, DART facilitated joint tabletop exercises in two regions: the Oklahoma Panhandle and the Northeast Oklahoma Regional Emergency Management Association. Participants included county Extension educators, County and City Emergency Managers, and representatives from the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food, and Forestry. Due to the success of these regional exercises, DART planned a statewide Extension exercise for all County Extension Educators.

In January 2026, DART hosted a Statewide Disaster Preparedness Exercise immediately prior to the Statewide Extension Biennial Conference. Participants included county educators, state specialists, OSU Extension faculty, and administrators. The program began with an overview of a statewide survey examining perceptions of disasters and Extension's role in response and recovery. A county emergency manager then discussed opportunities for Extension to partner with local communities during disaster response and recovery.

For the exercise, participants received an overview of the exercise structure and scenario parameters before being divided into nine groups, including one administrator-only group. Scenarios addressed fire, flood, tornado, economic disruption, and animal disease, with discussion prompts at 12, 24, and 72 hours post-disaster. Each group presented their proposed actions and insights. The exercise concluded with a presentation by Oklahoma Farm Bureau on insurance trends and strategies for helping clientele manage disaster-related risk.

Conclusion:

Two of the biggest challenges many educators voiced was developing relationships with emergency managers and understanding Extension's roles during the disaster.

Overall Satisfaction: Very positive, with participants highly likely to recommend a similar training to a colleague. In addition, most participants reported feeling more prepared.

Biggest Participant Takeaways:

- Participants valued the realistic scenarios and the ability to brainstorm and learn in the groups.
- They heard about a diversity of experiences and learned from DART members who have served communities in a disaster.
- They appreciated practical preparedness tools gained from the program, i.e. volunteer management, emergency communication, and donation center planning ideas.
- Participants enjoyed the opportunity to build relationships with other county educators and to visit with emergency managers.

Participants were asked "how well did the aspects of the event meet your expectations (0 not at all to 100 fully met my expectations)?" Results are shown in the graph below.

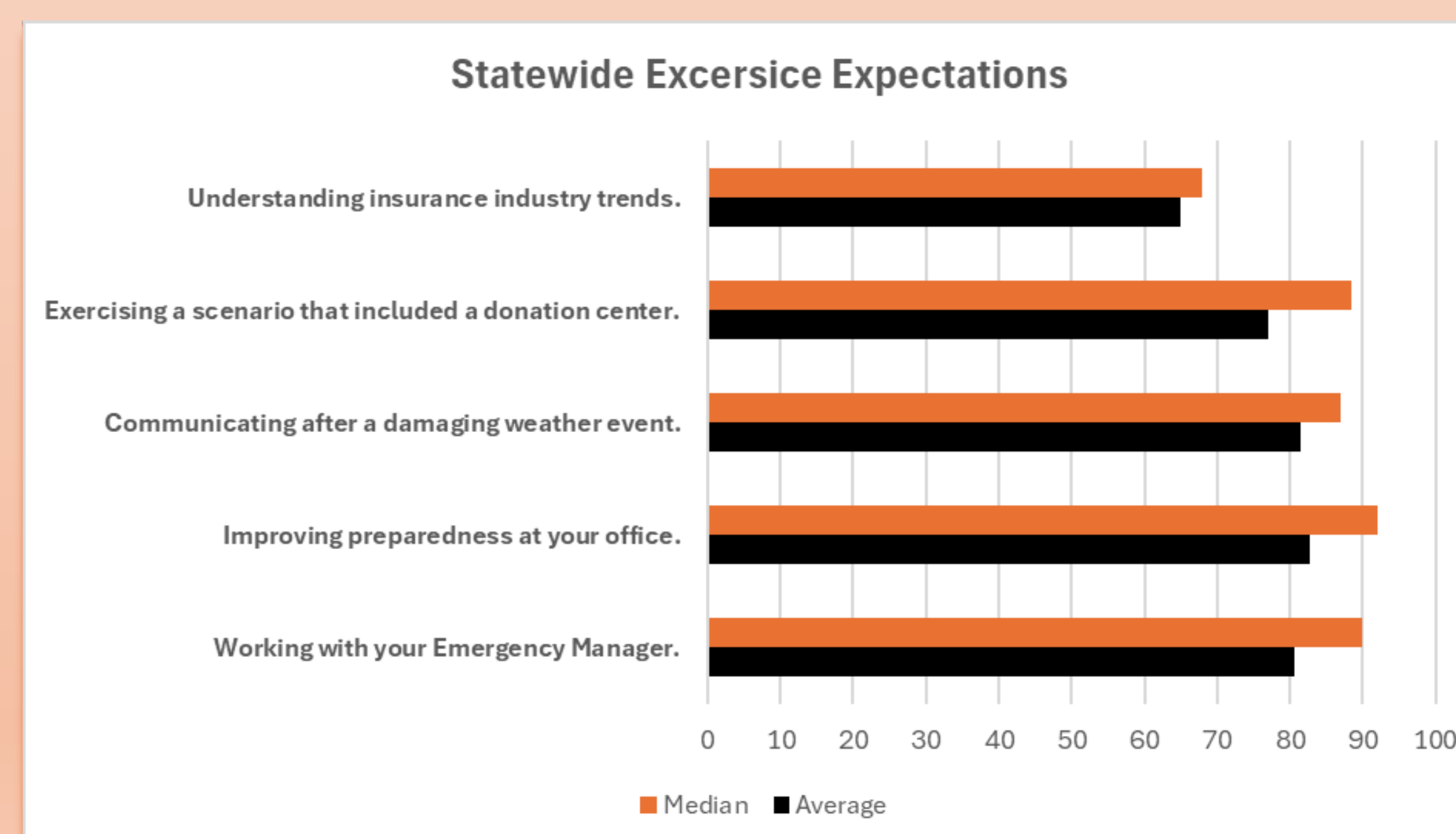


Figure 1. Participant satisfaction with preparedness event aspects.

Source: Post-Conference Evaluation Summary

Next Steps:

- Provide additional hands-on, practical tools through tabletop exercises.
- Provide opportunities to work with emergency managers and county officials.
- Provide critical emergency communication protocols for extension offices.



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