



COLBY
FREE PRESS

The days after

Senator's office, local officials review response to snowstorm

By Tisha Cox
Colby Free Press

Help from the federal government may be on the way soon.

Harold A. Stones, Kansas Special Projects Director, with the office of Sen. Pat Roberts, was in Colby Monday to find out the needs in the county after the Dec. 29-31 snowstorm.

"We got general reports on the storm," Stones said. "We really felt like we lacked specific information."

Stones was to report his findings to Roberts Monday evening.

He said Sen. Roberts was talking with the head of FEMA Monday, as well as headed to the White House as what could be done to help western Kansas recover from the storm.

"We're hoping to arm him with very specific information," Stones said about the FEMA chairman.

The three biggest concerns discussed were snow removal, damage to the Colby fire station and livestock.

Stones said roads and bridges funding has not been addressed yet. Damage assessments are technical and time consuming, and he said people need to be patient.

"We'd like to make an early determination on this," he said.

Stones asked about the impact of the storm on the community and county.

Colby Fire Chief Bob McLemore said the fire department is still operating out of the National Guard armory.

The department's rural pumper and rescue truck were trapped inside the fire department after a portion of the roof buckled Dec. 31, from the weight of snow.

"We're able to perform basic car accidents," McLemore said.

There have been no rural fires since the roof collapse, which has proved to be a benefit because the department had no four-wheel drive available.

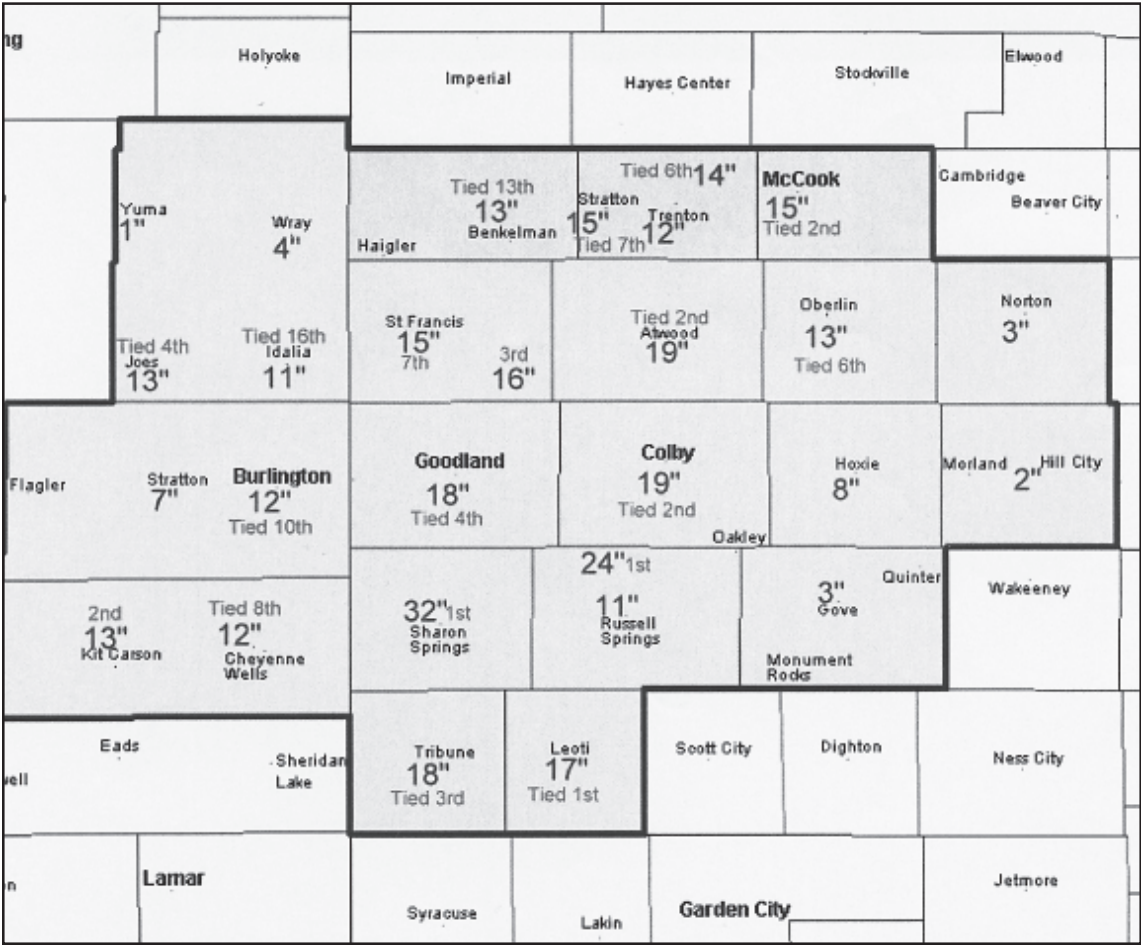
Colby City Manager Carolyn Armstrong said snow removal is an ongoing and the city has racked up a bill using contractors at a cumulative \$700 an hour. They have been used to clear snow at Colby Airport and streets.

"It won't take long to eat up my budget," she said.

Les Loker, energy analyst and account manager with Midwest Energy, said power was back on in all of Thomas County.

The company had 318 linemen in northwest Kansas, at an estimated cost of \$750,000 a day.

Many of the repairs in the area were a "band-aid" fix, and Loker



The debriefing held Tuesday included a map that showed the snowfall totals for the New Year's Day weekend snowstorm. The information was presented by Scott Mentzer and Dave Floyd from the National Weather Service in Goodland.

said there are now several years of work in the aftermath of the storm.

Stones assured the group northwest Kansas is on Roberts' radar, and the senator is "committed and concerned."

Stones emphasized farmers should document cattle losses with photos, rendering receipts or veterinarian statements.

"Senator Roberts is working with agencies to get specific help," he said.

Since President George W. Bush declared a 44-county area in western Kansas a federal disaster area, information is being compiled to decide what assistance the region

will receive.

Thomas County qualified for assistance from FEMA for debris removal and emergency protective measures.

"We don't have approval on those areas that are important to us," Stones said. "I'm not here to raise expectations."

City shovels out the money

By Tisha Cox
Colby Free Press

Piles of snow equates to pile of bills for the city of Colby.

During a meeting Monday with Harold A. Stones, Kansas special projects director in the office of Sen. Pat Roberts, city of Colby Manager Carolyn Armstrong said hiring contractors to remove snow has cost the city up to \$700 an hour.

As of Monday, one or two contractors were still helping move snow off city streets.

The city had hired Tarbet Construction, Hutfles Construction and Sporer Land Development, as well as renting equipment from Martin Tractor for snow removal operations.

Armstrong said a total of 10 pieces of equipment, including

trucks loaders were leased.

"They have helped us all over town," she said.

Besides moving snow from the streets, the equipment was used to clear the runways at the Colby Airport.

She estimated the total cost for the contracted services at \$40,000-\$50,000, and will give the city council a better idea of the total costs at their meeting Tuesday.

The city does not have a budget for snow removal.

Besides the contractor costs, overtime for the period between Dec. 29 and Jan. 27 was 630 hours. That does not include a normal 40-hour work week.

Some of the city's overtime has hit \$30 an hour because it included a holiday weekend. The city street department had \$10,000 budgeted

for overtime, but because of the storm, overtime cost is already more than \$19,000.

However, if the city can get assistance from FEMA, it will help offset some of the expenses from the storm.

"It will not cover the city's normal hours," Armstrong said.

The Thanksgiving Day weekend snowstorm in 2005 resulted in the city receiving help with paying contractors costs and some overtime, which is what she is hoping for this time. Amounts were not available.

While the city is recovering from the New Year's snowstorm, snow is expected again this weekend. If the city gets as much as is forecast — up to six inches, it could be a problem.

"I don't know where we'll put it all," she said.

By Patty Decker
Free Press Editor

Colby and Thomas County officials met Tuesday to review emergency procedures in the aftermath of the crippling snowstorm.

With 19 inches of snow in the Colby area between Dec. 29-31, the National Weather Service office in Goodland ranked it as second most snow, only to the Oct. 26, 1997, storm in which 20 inches of snowfall was reported.

As part of the debriefing, Jim Engel, Thomas County Emergency Management director, invited county commissioners, county health, Emergency Medical Services, Red Cross, city officials, including the fire department and public works, National Guard, hospital administrators, and Goodland weather service personnel to review the response to the storm.

The county will continue to be under a disaster declaration through Friday because of snow removal efforts and to cover any possible gross negligence claims, Engel said.

Others talked about what went well and what could have been improved.

One of the biggest concerns by Citizens Medical Center Administrator Janice McCart was the airport runways.

"Time is important," she said, "and my concern is the safety of people in the community."

Carolyn Armstrong, city of Colby manager, explained emergency routes needed to be cleared first. She also noted private contractors were scarce — which would have helped complement city crews in clearing snow.

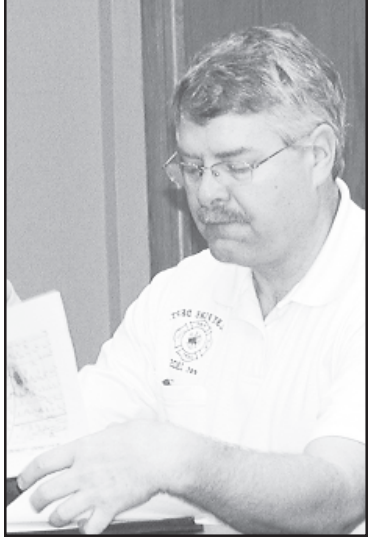
Marty Rinehart, Thomas County EMS assistant director, said his only concern was snow made it impossible to remove the ambulance from the EMS garage on Franklin Avenue.

"My concern was that we couldn't get the truck out of the garage," he said.

In response, Clair Schrock, county roads supervisor, said he would make sure to put the EMS garage on the priority list in the event of another major storm.

Engel talked about emergency shelters and a request to open one surfaced during the weekend. After going to great lengths to get the facility ready, nobody took advantage of it. In the future, Engel said he will be more careful about requests.

The emergency management office has four generators available for use, but Engel said he will not consider loaning any of these to in-



Bob McLemore, Colby fire chief, reviewed information at at debriefing Tuesday.

dividual homes, but would consider if three or more families are in need and could create a "coordinated shelter."

Lisa Molstad with the health department said her office did not have any major problems; however, she did have questions about possible scenarios during this snowstorm: how home health care patients were dealt with and the impact on those who lost power.

Another concern involved residents needing medicine or other medical attention.

Engel explained between the police department and his office, anyone in need of prescriptions or other assistance were helped.

Sherry White with the Red Cross said she oversees seven area counties and, for some of those residents, many are still without power. She queried as to whether the federal government could help individuals with fuel expenses or other monetary support.

Engel said no money was available as yet for private individuals, but suggested Salvation Army and other charitable groups that could assist rural families still battling power outages and other issues.

Other impacts from the recent storm, said Scott Mentzer, meteorologist in charge at the Goodland National Weather Service office, were closing of Interstate 70, along with U.S. Highways 36, 24, and 40.

In addition, the roof collapsed at the fire station, cattle were needed to be fed by National Guard helicopters and traffic emergency messages were used within the city.

Those in attendance came to a consensus considering the magnitude of the storm all went well and agreed the debriefing was a good way to go over weaknesses in this type of situation.

Thomas County rape suspect found not guilty; Oklahoma charges remain

By Jan Katz Ackerman
Colby Free Press

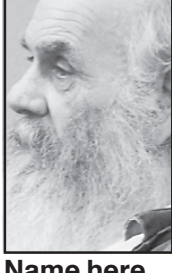
After two hours of deliberation, eight men and four women handed down a not guilty verdict for the 60-year-old man charged with sexually abusing an 8-year-old child.

"God bless the truth," Melvin W. Meyers said leaving the courtroom Wednesday. "The truth will overcome."

Charged in Thomas County District Court with one count of aggravated indecent liberties with a child and two counts of aggravated criminal sodomy, Meyers had denied guilt since arrested in July.

Meyers took the stand Wednesday and explained why he used Peter W. Helt as an alias. He said rejection by various family members forced him at a very young age to use be called Helt, and that it was not until arrested and asked to sign a fingerprint card that he admitted his real name is Melvin W. Meyers.

Meyers' attorney, Doug Spencer of Oakley, told jurors during closing arguments the case was a difficult one.



Name here

“God bless the truth.”

Melvin W. Meyers, rape suspect

"The mother said in 2002 her daughter alleged the same thing of someone, but nothing came of it," he said.

On Tuesday, the young girl alleging Meyers touched her "private parts" testified in person and videotape. The girl's mother, Bonnie Belstein of Bartley, Neb., testified Meyers had played a grandfatherly role in her daughter's life since they met in 2005.

Meyers said he was down to his last \$50 when Belstein and her ex-husband, Kyle Belstein, befriended him and offered him room and board in exchange for work. He said his duties included housekeeping, cooking, yard work, animal care and general maintenance around the rural Thomas County residence. Meyers said an abusive relationship between the couple prompted him to assume a nurturing role in Bonnie Belstein's daughter's life.

Court records state Kyle Bilstein was charged with battery against his wife in July 2004, and was sentenced to six months pro-

bation. Saying on more than one occasion he told the couple to stop arguing in front of the girl, Meyers said at one point Bonnie Bilstein moved into the basement bedroom, leaving her daughter to sleep in one of only two bedrooms on the main floor of the house, the one in which her step-father slept.

Meyers said the afternoon of July 13, 2006, while taking a nap in his room, he was awakened by loud voices coming from outside of it.

"I took off the shorts, put my britches back on because God knows with the past history I didn't know what I'd find," he said.

Meyers said upon exiting his bedroom he found the girl's grandmother, Linda O'Kane, in the bedroom vacated by Kyle Bilstein after the couple's divorce days earlier. Although a prosecution witness, O'Kane on Tuesday said prior to July 13 when her granddaughter told her Meyers

inappropriately touched her, she saw no evidence of sexual abuse.

Meyers said he went to look for the girl, he found her on the front steps of the house "almost in tears." He said he urged her go inside the house and that it was the girl's suggestion that she and he go into his bedroom for a guitar lesson. Meyers denied touching the girl in anyway other than to position her hands on a guitar.

Kelly Robbins, director of the Western Kansas Child Advocacy Center in Colby also testified Wednesday. Robbins said it is not uncommon for an abused child not to report the first incident. She said most abuse is disclosed by accident, such as the child telling a friend or writing in a journal.

"Most of the cases we see are that the child has a family or friend relationship and trusts that person and wants love from that person," Robbins said. "They want the abuse to end, but not the love to end."

Meyers testified failure to take care of himself most of his life and medication he takes for deteriorating health conditions is why the Kansas Bureau of Investigation detected body fluid on clothing taken from his bedroom at the time of his arrest. Spencer told jurors discrepancies in testimony should prove him innocent. The girl testified Meyers was wearing gray shorts, but her mother testified he was wearing white

with orange stripes on them. Shorts found in Meyers' room were navy blue.

"There is just no connection with Mr. Meyers and this child to convict him of these crimes," Spencer said. "You sit here today as guardians of our judicial system. If you find any reasonable doubt that this man committed these crimes it is your obligation to find this man not guilty and let him go about his business."

Assistant Attorney General Nola Wright, who helped Thomas County Attorney Andrea Wyrick prosecute the case, disagreed. "She was descriptive of the sex act," Wright said in closing arguments to the jury about the young girl.

Meyers remains in the custody of Thomas County Sheriff Mike Baughn. According to a spokesman for the Sequoyah County Oklahoma Clerk of the District Court office in Sallisaw, Okla., Meyers is wanted on a probation violation.

Meyers served time in prison for a 1999 conviction on one count of sexual abuse of a minor child and one count of lewd molestation, but violated the terms of his post-release probation and is awaiting transport back to Oklahoma.

"If I'd have fought them in Oklahoma in the first place I wouldn't have this hanging over my head," Meyers said. "I'm going to fight them like I fought these."