

# SWMC had to suspend surgeries during recent fires

By ROBERT PIERCE  
• Leader & Times

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** This is the third story recapping the debriefing of the recent fires in the area Monday afternoon with the Seward County Commission.

This story discusses how Southwest Medical Center and the county administrator's office helped out with the response, as well as questions from Commissioner Jairo Vazquez.

A final story will discuss the recent controversy concerning Commission Chairman Steve Helm asking former Fire Chief Andrew Barkley to give Administrator April Warden a radio as well as drills the county does to help prepare for emergencies.

Following reports from county first responder department heads, Southwest Medical Center Director of Plant Operations Gregg Freelove gave a short recap of the hospital's involvement in helping with the fires that hit the area in mid-February at the March 2 debriefing.

Freelove said the hospital was taking care of some facility issues as part of its direct involvement.

"We ended up cancelling or postponing a couple of surgeries due to the amount of smoke our building was receiving and having to shut the air down, and we can't perform safe surgeries at that point," he said. "Overall at our facility, it went well."

Freelove said he had received a few phone calls stating Liberal was being evacuated during the fires, but after some research, he discovered this was false information.

"If you've got 18,000 to 20,000 people who are all worried, getting the information out to them to either alleviate that worry or get them where they need to be in a good fashion, it is a good thing," he said.

Seward County Administrator April Warden said many people reached out to her department, including those providing mutual aid and tankers and farmers, ranchers, businesses and departments who got involved with the emergency efforts.

Warden said she had composed a list of those partners she had

shared with former Emergency Management Coordinator Rosa Conley, former Fire Chief Andrew Barkley and Interim Fire Chief Braden Steckel.

Warden said her first phone call when the fires started was to Conley, who had only been on the job for a short period of time and not prepared for what Warden called "the perfect storm," and it was soon after that when phone calls started pouring in to her office.

"Unfortunately, we had some storm watchers who were saying Liberal was being evacuated, and then, the college started reaching out," Warden said. "The City of Liberal started reaching out about evacuation. I believe if we would've had the Emergency Operations Center up and running, we would've had our public information officer. We would've had the people who were helping outline where the mutual aid needed to go, and most certainly, we needed somebody who was in command at the river fire."

Assistant Administrator Brock Theiner was on both sides of the Feb. 17 fires coordinating supplies and equipment, and he praised the work of those who helped out.

"We had a great group of guys show up on the equipment," he said. "We were tasked with doing some sketchy stuff. What safety stuff we have implemented in Seward County paid off that day. Everybody arrived home safely. Equipment was safe. We did our diligence down there. I commend everybody with their attitude. There was no bickering, and there were no bad attitudes. We all had a job to do, and everybody jumped in, and we did it."

Like others, though, Theiner too said a chain of command needs to be in place when firefighters cannot make it to a scene.

"We need somebody in command here, and we need somebody in command there on the ground to deal with the resources," he said. "We need muster points. We have a trailer. We need that loaded with supplies, and with the other supplies that are coming in, centralize and locate that stuff strategically, along with



the tankers, and other equipment." In addition, Theiner said the person in command at the scene of the fire needs to have a plan in place.

"Communication was a big thing," he said. "How are we going to execute the plan and see that plan through? We made it through. We had several people who stepped up into that role. We ended up executing what we had to do. In the future, once we put all this stuff in place, we can train with that, and everybody will know their part. It will go a lot smoother, and it'll just flow like it's supposed to."

Diesel was also a heavy need at the fire scenes, and Theiner said future plans need to have a plan for getting this to mutual aid trucks on the scene.

"The tanker situation, once we got where they were going, was handled very well," he said. "We're rotating the people out and left our tanker there, and those tankers filled our tanker and ran the water to us. We also have the farmers with the tractors and the disks. Communication would've been really helpful."

Theiner said while services such as the Kansas National Guard and the Kansas Forestry Service were on hand, communication was still needed to put all the pieces in the right place.

"I feel we needed somebody in a definitive on-the-ground operations role to carry everything out as far as what mutual aid needed," he said. "Not all that meshed at every chance down there at the river fire."

Theiner said a big outpouring of support supplies, but communication needs to be better about where those supplies need to go.

"In the midst of that, there were a lot of people helping, but nothing

had any rhyme or reason to how it was going down and how the supplies were getting out to the people down in the river who a lot of times we didn't know," she said.

The debriefing was then opened to commissioners for questions and comments. Commissioner Jairo Vazquez reminded everyone of the purpose of the debriefing.

"The reason we're here is to better ourselves and to better respond next time," he said.

Vazquez asked how county officials can help with communication, particularly when dealing with mutual aid sources. Steckel said plans are in place for additional training with other counties.

"A big problem we ran into that day was everyone was dealing with their own fires, and unfortunately, if can't handle some of those situations, we might not get any help," Steckel said. "We've got to be prepared for that day we make the call for help and no one's coming. I would like to just be better organized with whether it's Road and Bridge, landfill, whoever's going to be out at these fires, some of these are moving parts already."

As emergencies are commonplace for first responders, Steckel said it sometimes is forgotten they are not normal for those who are not first responders.

"It's a way for us to control the chaos a little easier," he said. "Some of that needs to be in place. If it is Road and Bridge or whoever's running graders, there's a person in command of graders, and they run that branch. There's a person who's handling water supply. We don't have to have one person making 30 phone calls. It's a little easier span of control for everyone. It spreads

out that workload." While Seward County currently does not have an emergency manager in place, Steckel said this is not the answer to the problem either.

"He can help facilitate this, but we can't base a system off of one person," he said. "When that person's not here, our system's going to fail. It takes a working effort from everyone to get all these things place that it just automatically flows that we're bridging those gaps, and this doesn't have to be a fire event."

Steckel said plans likewise need to be in place during other emergencies such as tornadoes happen.

"We're already prepared and people are ready to setup and know how things work," he said. "We need to form a committee and start hashing out these ideas and get all this feedback from all the departments and bridge those gaps, especially the communication issue. Maybe we can help solve some of those issues."

Vazquez likewise asked about how the fire department's recruitment stands at this time.

"How can we better that, and how can we help you in that?" he said.

With the recent resignation of Barkley as fire chief, the Seward County Fire Department is down a position, but he emphasized the department did have four full-time firefighters in place throughout the days of the February fires.

Steckel added volunteers can only get three to four hours of training a year, whereas SCFD's full-time firefighters get up to 200 hours a year, and volunteers are used in a specific way.

"We train them to do everything," he said. "They run water supply very well for us, and they work out to be perfect partner for us. The long standing issue with volunteers has been I cannot force a volunteer to come to a call at 2:30 in the morning. I can force a full-time guy to do that. We've had 30 volunteers before, and that doesn't mean we had 30 people come to the fire. I have a couple volunteers right now who will drop everything."

While volunteer work is typically thought of as free, Steckel said volunteer firefighters do cost money.

"It's just not a free issue. It's a complex thing we need to solve," he said. "It's a complex situation asking someone to put their life on the line for hardly any pay. It's not for everybody."

Steckel, however, did praise the work of the volunteers who did help out with the recent fires.

"They saved Liberal, and I'm super proud of them," he said.

Steckel added even if with a good supply of volunteers, the county is still limited on how many trucks they have to fight fires.

"It's not like we can have trucks in every single spot," he said. "It is a complex issue. Over the years that's been brought up. What if you have more volunteers? It goes deeper than that."

Vazquez then asked how a command center is created.

"Is there any way we can improve that process?" he said. "What does that look like?"

Sheriff Gene Ward said any officials with the Local Emergency Planning Committee, an emergency manager, emergency preparedness officials or emergency services department heads can call for a command center.

"Many times, whenever we get on scene, we just announce on the radio we're setting up river bottom command, or the fire department would say that," he said. "Then we'd say a location and everybody who was in charge at that time. It doesn't even have to be me at the sheriff's office. It could be any of my deputies who show up to that command center until we get there."

As emergency officials became heavily involved in helping with the fires, Ward said this did not allow for time for a command center to be set up.

"I didn't even think about it truly, and I don't think anybody else did," he said. "We do train many hours on setting up a command center, and we were just so busy of thinking Liberal's going to burn and we need to get people out of the way from the fire."

## Rorabaugh ...

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"For the past four years, I've been my class's president, and we've gotten to do a lot of work and different events. For the past two years, I've served as the Student Council president and focused a lot on philanthropy, especially with local causes," Rorabaugh said. "I'm also a member of Make-A-Wish Oklahoma and serving as the social media co-chair. I've also been involved with state Student Council a lot. I was an Oklahoma Association of Student Councils Difference Maker Award nominee - I've been to a whole bunch of camps for that, and I've served as that president and vice president. I've been very involved with 4H. I'm a member of Oklahoma 4H's Key Club, and that means I'm in the top 10 percent of Oklahoma's 4H members. I've served as all of the local officers for our club and then I've served as county president a couple of times, and then as the Northwest district reporter and vice president. I've known about the award itself for a long time, I've known about it since Carson Buller got it back in 2020. Ever since then, it's been a goal of mine to be a recipient. I applied for it in December and then found out I was officially a recipient in the middle of last month."

Upon receiving the official word from OFE, Rorabaugh said she was extremely happy.

"I was really happy, and it recognizes all the hard work and

dedication I put toward it, because it does take a lot of work. I took the ACT multiple times so I could get my score up to where it needed to be, and that was probably the hardest part for me," Rorabaugh said. "This award looks at your academics, and school's always rather come pretty naturally to me, and it also looks at leadership and community service and those aspects. I was already doing a lot of that work, and I've done around 250 hours of community service while I've been in high school, so I've definitely put a lot of time and effort toward that. It was very rewarding to be recognized for all of that. They actually sent me a box with some goodies like honor cords and magnets and thank-you notes for our teachers, and it was really neat. I felt really happy and really grateful while opening the box, it was similar to the other college acceptance packages I've gotten."

Rorabaugh said she was inspired to apply while working on other college application work.

"I was starting to do college applications and really look at what I've done while I've been in school. It was kind of mind-blowing thinking about how I else I could have spent my time, and I'm very glad I decided to spend my time working and being part of the community and everything else I accomplished," Rorabaugh said. "I felt it was time to get a little recognition for all of that. Not to sound conceited or anything like that, but I've done a lot of work and been involved in a lot while I've been in

school, and I thought it was time for some of that to be recognized. I figured it would be silly to not at least try for it, so I decided to go for it."

And with her recently receiving the honor, Rorabaugh said she would love to see others from Turpin be recognized as well.

"At Turpin, we have a really big emphasis on extracurricular activities, so if you meet the ACT requirement, your extracurriculars will be more diverse compared to students at other bigger schools and help you stand out," Rorabaugh said. "You stand out to a lot of those panels if you're involved in multiple activities, and I also highly recommend studying seriously for the ACT because not only could it help with this OFE honor, but it could also get you some other scholarships and other recognitions."

And even with all of her high school accomplishments, Rorabaugh said she is not planning on slowing down.

"I'm planning to attend the University of Oklahoma, and I'm going to be majoring in psychology with a pre-med focus. I want to be a psychiatrist specifically, and I want to provide mental health care

to rural areas where there's less access. Right now, there are fewer of those providers in general, and it's something that's really important to me," Rorabaugh said. "A lot of my family has struggled with mental health issues, and there's not a lot of providers out here. Looking at those rural areas, there are a little or there are a lot of mental health problems, whether that be addiction, depression, etc. My family's a farming family, and farmers are way more likely to commit suicide than the average person, just because of how finicky their profession is, and I would say that's kind of inspired me to pick my focus and why I want to pursue mental health care in college. I've also been accepted into OU's Honors College, so I'm really excited about that, and just a few days ago, I got word I'll be in their President's Leadership Class. I'm really excited, a lot of my friends have done it. You get put with a lot of really great leaders and you make a lot of really great connections, and I believe we do a lot of community service at OU through that, so I'm just really excited to also be part of all of that. I'm also planning to rush and be in a sorority, and I'd still like to be

involved with community service through that, especially hopefully through my sorority's philanthropy, whatever that happens to entail."

Overall, Rorabaugh said, she is grateful for the recognition.

"I want to thank the teachers at Turpin, they're really supportive,

and I don't think I would have made it this far without them, whether that be leading my extracurriculars or helping me in the classroom," Rorabaugh said. "They're really understanding, and they really push you to do your best."

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