

Situation Brief

Between January 24th and 26th, Smith County experienced a prolonged winter weather event involving freezing rain, sleet, significant ice accumulation, and extended sub-freezing temperatures, with wind chills near zero. These conditions posed serious life-safety risks, created hazardous travel conditions countywide, and threatened power, water, and critical infrastructure.

To manage these risks, the Emergency Operations Center was activated at Level II, Operating under Unified Command, and operated across multiple operational periods to coordinate countywide response and maintain situational awareness.

Constantly in the EOC were myself, representatives from ESD 2, and the Sheriff's Office. Precinct 4 Constable also checked in routinely and was in communication with the EOC. The EOC was in routine communication with all first responders and volunteer groups.

Overall, there were 29 Road Hazard, 39 Minor MVA, 46 major MVA, 122 medical assists, and 29 motorist assist calls.

Transportation

Transportation became our biggest burden. The interstate, state highways, and local roads were all heavily affected. Through TDEM, we were able to utilize a Texas Military Department wrecker to assist on I-20 recovering tractor trailer units. This proved to be vital to keeping the interstate open and preventing further congestion and ultimately more motor vehicle accidents.

Road conditions deteriorated rapidly across major highways, farm-to-market roads, and county roads due to icing and repeated freeze-thaw cycles. Multiple motor vehicle accidents and stranded vehicles occurred. The County coordinated with TxDOT, law enforcement, and heavy-duty wreckers to clear major corridors, and also leveraged local Jeep clubs, coordinated through the EOC, to assist stranded motorists and transport essential personnel—helping reduce secondary emergencies.

Life Safety

Life safety, aside from that on roadways, was always a key concern. Though power outages were manageable and were fixed very quickly, the chance of needing warming centers, sheltering, or distribution operations was always a concern. We had pre-identified warming centers and distribution locations. We were also concerned about the chance of

water utilities shutting down due to hard freezing. Luckily, again, that did not happen. We had volunteer groups on standby to utilize STEAR call downs if needed.

Prolonged cold created risks of hypothermia, carbon monoxide exposure, and medical emergencies, particularly for elderly residents and oxygen-dependent populations. Hospitals, EMS, and the Piney Woods Regional Advisory Council increased staffing, and planning focused on keeping medically vulnerable residents safe without overwhelming hospital systems.

Power outages occurred but remained relatively limited and stable given conditions. Electric providers increased staffing, and the County closely monitored water systems in case generator support or fuel resupply became necessary.

Mass care operations were prepared but deliberately scaled.

Warming centers were identified and coordinated with the Red Cross, placed on standby, and selectively opened where needed. This approach balanced public safety while minimizing unnecessary travel during hazardous conditions.

Public Communication and Information

Our Communication Director did a great job keeping the citizens of Smith County informed via social media throughout the incident. IPAWS was utilized four times in various locations through geofence capability. We had minimal fake distractions or counter-productive/conflicting messaging from outside sources

The County issued targeted IPAWS alerts warning residents of extremely dangerous driving conditions at specific locations and coordinated messaging across jurisdictions to avoid conflicting information. This helped keep people off the roads and reduced preventable incidents.

Overall, this incident required sustained coordination, frequent decision-making, and extended operational hours over several days. Early activation, unified messaging, strong interagency coordination, and proactive mitigation actions helped protect life safety, limit infrastructure impacts, and stabilize conditions as the event progressed.